

FAM Futures MYSTERY

Tales of Crime and Intrigue
Anthology Magazine

STORIES, COLUMNS, POETRY,
and FABULOUS ARTWORK



DEATH OF THE MALLORY QUEEN
by GUEST AUTHOR Lawrence Block



YOUR BLOOD IS SWEET - A Tobías Talmo Tale
by Rus Morgan



STUFFED SHIRT
by Barry Ergang

CARTOONS!
you'll DIE laughing

...and much more...

Jan. - Feb. 2006

Futures MYSTERY Anthology Magazine carries on!

FMAM is a bi-monthly magazine and available in PDF format and Print Digest format
Copies of these issues are available to order at: <http://twilightitmesbooks.com/fmam/>

Cover artwork copyright © Gin E.L. Fenton (GinELF)



May
June 2005



July
August 2005



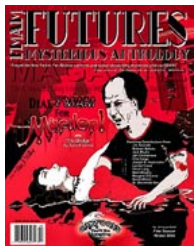
September
October 2005



November
December 2005

Available from Babs Lakey:

Back issues of the print magazine are still available. There are EIGHT YEARS of incredible talent packed within these pages, folks. Don't miss out. You can purchase by PayPal, check or money order. FMAM's anthology, DIME, is available, too. Order a copy today at www.fmam.biz or email Babs at babs@fmam.biz!



<<<<<<

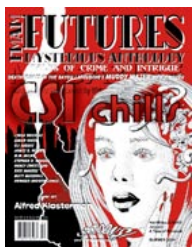
Issue #36
Dial FMAM for Murder!
WINTER 2004

Cover artwork copyright © Pete Welling

Issue #35
Feel Lucky?
FALL 2004

>>>>>>

Cover artwork copyright © Dustin Evans



<<<<<<

Issue #34
CSI Chills!
SUMMER 2004

Cover artwork copyright © Alfred Klosterman

Issue #32
Predators At Play!
WINTER 2003

>>>>>>

Cover artwork copyright © James "Toonman" Oddie



FMAM

Futures MYSTERY Anthology Magazine

JANUARY - FEBRUARY 2006

INSIDE

ISSN 1521-5318

PUBLISHER: LIDA E. QUILLEN

Co-PUBLISHER: ARDY M. SCOTT

FOUNDER & EXECUTIVE EDITOR: BABS LAKEY

ART DIRECTOR: GIN E.L. FENTON (GINELF)

MANAGING EDITOR: BARRY ERGANG

EDITORIAL STAFF: VIRGINIA LO MONACO, MARLENE SATTER,
CHICK LANG, MARY SCHENTEN, ALFIE

EDITORIAL CONSULTANT: EARL STAGGS

ARTISTS: GIN E.L. FENTON, TERESA TUNALEY, KEVIN DUNCAN,
GAVIN O'KEEFE, LAURA GIVENS, TERI SANTITORO, VIVIAN PRINCE,
PAUL CAMPBELL

CARTOONISTS: KEVIN DUNCAN, GEORIANN BALDINO,
DAN ROSANDICH

SPOT ILLUSTRATIONS: GIN E.L. FENTON

COVER ARTIST FOR THIS ISSUE

GIN E.L. FENTON (GINELF)

FMAM WEBSITE: WWW.FMAM.BIZ

WEBMASTER & REVIEW CO-ORDINATOR: CATHERINE CHANT

FAME PRODUCTION MANAGER: ARDY SCOTT

FMAM LIST MANAGER: KIMBERLY BROWN

FMAM MASTHEAD LAYOUT & DESIGN:

GIN E.L. FENTON (GINELF)

FMAM

KINGSPORT, TENNESSEE

COPYRIGHT © 2005

LIDA E. QUILLEN AND

FUTURES MYSTERY ANTHOLOGY MAGAZINE

STORIES AND ARTWORK © AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

EMAIL: PUBLISHER@FMAM.BIZ OR ARDY@FMAM.BIZ

FMAM PDF ADVERTISING RATES

BETWEEN THE COVERS

FULL PAGE: \$30.00 1/4 PAGE: \$7.50
1/2 PAGE: \$15.00 BUSINESS CARD SIZE: \$5.00.

MYSTERY FICTION

Featured Authors...

DEATH OF THE MALLORY QUEEN	
<i>Lawrence Block</i>	2
YOUR BLOOD IS SWEET: A TOBIAS TALMO TALE	
<i>Rus Morgan</i>	11
STUFFED SHIRT	21
<i>Barry Ergang</i>	

GNAWING SUSPICION	<i>Chick Lang</i>	30
HOW I LEARNED TO PLAY THE HARMON CON		
<i>Robert L. Iles</i>		34
BLOOD SECRETS	<i>R. B. Swets</i>	42
THE PERFECT MARRIAGE	<i>Neil Davies</i>	45
THE FRISCO FRAME	<i>Arthur C. Carey</i>	48
THE HIT MAN	<i>Nancy Sweetland</i>	58
CAPTAIN SQUARE AND THE TURK'S HEAD		
<i>Charles G. Mossop</i>		63
THE PENITENTIARY SON	<i>Timmy Waldron</i>	77
NO STRINGS ATTACHED	<i>Mark SaFranko</i>	84
THE DEEP SIX	<i>Lox Crabtree</i>	92
THE LOOKDOWN	<i>Frank Foster</i>	99
MINOR FEAR	<i>John Hawfield</i>	108
HER EYE IN THE SKY	<i>Ron Savage</i>	124
THE SAMARITAN	<i>Tom Brennan</i>	129
BRAINSTORM	<i>Telett Lyketes</i>	133
THE ENVELOPE, PLEASE	<i>Charles Schaeffer</i>	139

LITERARY, POETRY, MAINSTREAM...

SIMPLIFY, UNITE, DELIGHT	
<i>Kristin R. Masterton</i>	127

COLUMNS - INTERVIEWS - REVIEWS

THE INFORMANT	<i>Bret Wright</i>	27
MORAL JUDGMENTS	<i>G. Miki Hayden</i>	56
THE CRIME LAB GUY	<i>John L. French</i>	61
WEBMASTER & REVIEW CO-ORDINATOR		
<i>Catherine Chant</i>		83
STARFIRE	<i>Mary O'Gara</i>	96
MURDER-GO-ROUND	<i>Harriet Klausner</i>	116
SPOTLIGHT ON TERESA TUNALEY	<i>Bret Wright</i>	132

FMAM SPECIAL GUEST AUTHOR...



>>

Alfie recommends: paws over this one—a Chip Harrison story by the superb Lawrence Block, it's an affectionate send-up of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe tales, the traditional detective story, and luminaries in the mystery field.

Eccentric detective Leo Haig and his assistant, Chip Harrison, take on the bizarre case of a woman who doesn't object to being murdered

Death of the Mallory Queen

Lawrence Block

Illustration Copyright © 2006 Gin E.L. Fenton



© 2005 GinElf

"I am going to be murdered," Mavis Mallory said, "and I want you to do something about it."

Haig did something, all right. He spun around in his swivel chair and stared into the fish tank.

There's a whole roomful of tanks on the top floor, and other aquariums, which he wishes I would call aquaria, scattered throughout the house.

(Well, not the whole house. The whole house

is a carriage house on West Twentieth Street, and on the top two floors live Leo Haig and Wong Fat and more tropical fish than you could shake a jar of tubifex worms at, but the lower two floors are still occupied by Madam Juana and her girls. How do you say *filles de joie* in Spanish, anyway? Never mind. If all of this sounds a little like a cut-rate, low-rent version of Nero Wolfe's establishment on West Thirty-Fifth Street, the similarity is not accidental. Haig, you see, was a lifelong reader of detective fiction, and a penny-ante breeder of tropical fish until a legacy made him financially independent. And he was a special fan of the Wolfe canon, and he thinks that Wolfe really exists, and that if he, Leo Haig, does a good enough job with the cases that come his way, sooner or later he might get invited to dine at the master's table.)

"Mr. Haig—"

"Huff," Haig said.

Except that he didn't exactly *say* huff. He *went* huff. He's been reading books lately by Sondra Ray and Leonard Orr and Phil Laut, books on rebirthing and physical immortality, and the gist of it seems to be that if you do enough deep circular breathing and clear out your limiting deathist thoughts, you can live forever. I don't know how he's doing with his deathist thoughts, but he's been breathing up a storm lately, as if air were going to be rationed any moment and he wants to get the jump on it.

He huffed again and studied the rasboras, which were the fish that were to-and-froing it in the ten-gallon tank behind his desk. Their little gills never stopped working, so I figured they'd live forever, too, unless their deathist thoughts were lurking to do them in. Haig gave another huff and turned around to look at our client.

She was worth looking at. Tall, willowy, richly curved, with a mane of incredible red hair. Last August I went up to Vermont, toward the end of the month, and all the trees were green except here and there you'd see one in the midst of all that green had been touched by an early frost and turned an absolutely flaming scarlet, and that was the color of Mavis Mallory's hair.

Haig's been quoting a lot of lines lately about the rich abundance of the universe we live in, especially when I suggest he's spending too much on fish and equipment, and looking at our client I had to agree with him. We live in an abundant world, all right.

"Murdered," he said.

She nodded.

"By whom?"

"I don't know."

"For what reason?"

"I don't know."

"And you want me to prevent it."

"No."

His eyes widened. "I beg your pardon?"

"How could you prevent it?" She wrinkled her nose at him. "I understand you're a genius, but what defense could you provide against a determined killer? You're not exactly the physical type."

Haig, who has been described as looking like a basketball with an Afro, huffed in reply. "My own efforts are largely in the cerebral sphere," he admitted. "But my associate, Mr. Harrison, is physically resourceful as well, and—" he made a tent of his fingertips—"still, your point is well taken. Neither Mr. Harrison nor I are bodyguards. If you wish a bodyguard, there are larger agencies which—"

But she was shaking her head. "A waste of time," she said. "The whole Secret Service can't protect a president from a lone deranged assassin. If I'm destined to be murdered, I'm willing to accede to my destiny."

"Huff," Haig huffed.

"What I want you to do," she said, "and Mr. Harrison, of course, except that he's so young I feel odd calling him by his last name." She smiled winningly at me. "Unless you object to the familiarity?"

"Call me Chip," I said.

"I'm delighted. And you must call me Mavis."

"Huff."

"Who wants to murder you?" I asked.

"Oh, dear," she said. "It sometimes seems to me that everyone does. It's been four years since I took over as publisher of *Mallory's Mystery Magazine* upon my father's death, and

you'd be amazed how many enemies you can make in a business like this."

Haig asked if she could name some of them.

"Well, there's Abner Jenks. He'd been editor for years and thought he'd have a freer hand with my father out of the picture. When I reshuffled the corporate structure and created Mavis Publications, Inc., I found out he'd been taking kickbacks from authors and agents in return for buying their stories. I got rid of him and took over the editorial duties myself."

"And what became of Jenks?"

"I pay him fifty cents a manuscript to read slush pile submissions. And he picks up some freelance work for other magazines as well, and he has plenty of time to work on his own historical novel about the Venerable Bede. Actually," she said, "he ought to be grateful to me."

"Indeed," Haig said.

"And there's Darrell Crenna. He's the owner of Mysterious Ink, the mystery bookshop on upper Madison Avenue. He wanted Dorothea Trill, the Englishwoman who writes those marvelous gardening mysteries, to do a signing at his store. In fact he'd advertised the appearance, and I had to remind him that Miss Trill's contract with Mavis Publications forbids her from making any appearances in the States without our authorization."

"Which you refused to give."

"I felt it would cheapen the value of Dorothea's personal appearances to have her make too many of them. After all, Crenna talked an author out of giving a story to *Mallory's* on the same grounds, so you could say he was merely hoist with his own petard. Or strangled by his own clematis vine, like the woman in Dorothea's latest." Her face clouded. "I hope I haven't spoiled the ending for you?"

"I've already read it," Haig said.

"I'm glad of that. Or I should have to add you to the list of persons with a motive for murdering me, shouldn't I? Let me see now. Lotte Benzler belongs on the list. You must know her shop. The Murder Store?"

Haig knew it well, and said so. "And I trust you've supplied Ms. Benzler with an equally strong motive? Kept an author from her door?"

Refused her permission to reprint a story from *Mallory's* in one of the anthologies she edits?"

"Actually," our client said, "I fear I did something rather more dramatic than that. You know Bart Halloran?"

"The creator of Rocky Sledge, who's so hard-boiled he makes Mike Hammer seem poached? I've read him, of course, but I don't know him."

"Poor Lotte came to know him very well," Mavis Mallory purred, "and then I met dear Bart, and then it was I who came to know him very well." She sighed. "I don't think Lotte has ever forgiven me. All's fair in love and publishing, but some people don't seem to realize it."

"So there are three people with a motive for murdering you."

"Oh, I'm sure there are more than three. Let's not forget Bart, shall we? He was able to shrug it off when I dropped him, but he took it harder when his latest got a bad review in *Mallory's*. But I thought *Kiss My Gat* was a bad book, and why should I say otherwise?" She sighed again. "Poor Bart," she said. "I understand his sales are slipping. Still, he's still a name, isn't he? And he'll be there Friday night."

"Indeed?" Haig raised his eyebrows. He's been practicing in front of the mirror, trying to raise just one eyebrow, but so far he hasn't got the knack of it. "And just where will Mr. Halloran be Friday night?"

"Where they'll all be," Mavis Mallory said. "At Town Hall, for the panel discussion and reception to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Mallory's Mystery Magazine*. Do you know, I believe everyone with a motive to murder me will be gathered together in one room?" She shivered happily. "What more could a mystery fan ask for?"

"Don't attend," Haig said.

"Don't be ridiculous," she told him. "I'm Mavis Mallory of Mavis Publications. I *am* Mallory's—in fact I've been called the Mallory Queen. I'll be chairing the panel discussion and hosting the celebration. How could I possibly fail to be present?"

"Then get bodyguards."

"They'd put such a damper on the festivities. And I already told you they'd be powerless against a determined killer."

"Miss Mallory—"

"And please don't tell me to wear a bullet-proof vest. They haven't yet designed one that flatters the full-figured woman."

I swallowed, reminded again that we live in an abundant universe. "You'll be killed," Haig said flatly.

"Yes," said our client, "I rather suspect I shall. I'm paying you a five thousand dollar retainer now, in cash, because you might have a problem cashing a check if I were killed before it cleared. And I've added a codicil to my will calling for payment to you of an additional twenty thousand dollars upon your solving the circumstances of my death. And I do trust you and Chip will attend the reception Friday night? Even if I'm not killed, it should be an interesting evening."

"I have read of a tribe of Africans," Haig said dreamily, "who know for certain that gunshot wounds are fatal. When one of their number is wounded by gunfire, he falls immediately to the ground and lies still, waiting for death. He does this even if he's only been nicked in the finger, and, by the following morning, death will have inevitably claimed him."

"That's interesting," I said. "Has it got anything to do with the Mallory Queen?"

"It has everything to do with her. The woman—" he huffed again, and I don't think it had much to do with circular breathing—"the damnable woman is convinced she will be murdered. It would profoundly disappoint her to be proved wrong. She *wants* to be murdered, Chip, and her thoughts are creative, even as yours and mine. In all likelihood she will die on Friday night. She would have it no other way."

"If she stayed home," I said. "If she hired bodyguards—"

"She will do neither. But it would not matter if she did. The woman is entirely under the influence of her own death urge. Her death urge is stronger than her life urge. How could she live in such circumstances?"

"If that's how you feel, why did you take her money?"

"Because all abundance is a gift from the uni-

verse," he said loftily. "Further, she engaged us not to protect her but to avenge her, to solve her murder. I am perfectly willing to undertake to do that." Huff. "You'll attend the reception Friday night, of course."

"To watch our client get the ax?"

"Or the dart from the blowpipe, or the poisoned cocktail, or the bullet, or the bite from the coral snake, or what you will. Perhaps you'll see something that will enable us to solve her murder on the spot and earn the balance of our fee."

"Won't you be there? I thought you'd planned to go."

"I had," he said. "But that was before Miss Mallory transformed the occasion from pleasure to business. Nero Wolfe never leaves his house on business, and I think the practice a sound one. You will attend in my stead, Chip. You will be my eyes and my legs. Huff."

I was still saying things like *Yes, but* when he swept out of the room and left for an appointment with his rebirther. Once a week he goes all the way up to Washington Heights, where a woman named Lori Schneiderman gets sixty dollars for letting him stretch out on her floor and watching him breathe. It seems to me that for that kind of money he could do his huffing in a bed at the Plaza Hotel, but what do I know?

He'd left a page full of scribbling on his desk and I cleared it off to keep any further clients from spotting it. *I, Leo, am safe and immortal right now*, he'd written five times. *You, Leo, are safe and immortal right now*, he'd written another five times. *Leo is safe and immortal right now*, he'd written a final five times. This was how he was working through his unconscious death urge and strengthening his life urge. I tell you, a person has to go through a lot of crap if he wants to live forever.

Friday night found me at Town Hall, predictably enough. I wore my suit for the occasion and got there early enough to snag a seat down front, where I could keep a private eye on things.

There were plenty of things to keep an eye on. The audience swarmed with readers and writers

of mystery and detective fiction, and if you want an idea of who was in the house, just write out a list of your twenty-five favorite authors and be sure that seventeen or eighteen of them were in the house. I saw some familiar faces, a woman who'd had a long run as the imperiled heroine of a Broadway suspense melodrama, a man who'd played a police officer for three years on network television, and others whom I recognized from films or television but couldn't place out of context.

On stage, our client Mavis Mallory occupied the moderator's chair. She was wearing a strapless and backless floor-length black dress, and in combination with her creamy skin and fiery hair, its effect was dramatic. If I could have changed one thing it would have been the color of the dress. I suppose Haig would have said it was the color of her unconscious death urge.

Her panelists were arranged in a semicircle around her. I recognized some but not others, but before I could extend my knowledge through subtle investigative technique, the entire panel was introduced. The members included Darrell Crenna of *Mysterious Ink* and Lotte Benzler of *The Murder Store*. The two sat on either side of our client, and I just hoped she'd be safe from the daggers they were looking at each other.

Rocky Sledge's creator, dressed in his standard outfit of chinos and a tee shirt with the sleeve rolled to contain a pack of unfiltered Camels, was introduced as Bartholomew Halloran. "Make that Bart," he snapped. *If you know what's good for you*, he might have added.

Halloran was sitting at Mavis Mallory's left. A tall and very slender woman with elaborately coiffed hair and a lorgnette sat between him and Darrell Crenna. She turned out to be Dorothea Trill, the Englishwoman who wrote gardening mysteries. I always figured the chief gardening mystery was what to do with all the zucchini. Miss Trill seemed a little looped, but maybe it was the lorgnette.

On our client's other side, next to Lotte Benzler, sat a man named Austin Porterfield. He was a Distinguished Professor of English Literature at New York University, and he'd recently published a rather learned obituary of the mys-

tery story in the *New York Review of Books*. According to him, mystery fiction had drawn its strength over the years from the broad base of its popular appeal. Now other genres had more readers, and thus mystery writers were missing the mark. If they wanted to be artistically important, he advised them, then get busy producing Harlequin romances and books about nurses and stewardesses.

On Mr. Porterfield's other side was Janice Cowan, perhaps the most prominent book editor in the mystery field. For years she had moved from one important publishing house to another, and at each of them she had her own private imprint. "A Jan Cowan Novel of Suspense" was a good guarantee of literary excellence, whoever happened to be Miss Cowan's employer that year.

After the last of the panelists had been introduced, a thin, weedy man in a dark suit passed quickly among the group with a beverage tray, then scurried off the stage. Mavis Mallory took a sip of her drink, something colorless in a stemmed glass, and leaned toward the microphone. "What Happens Next?" she intoned. "That's the title of our little discussion tonight, and it's a suitable title for a discussion on this occasion. A credo of *Mallory's Mystery Magazine* has always been that our sort of fiction is only effective insofar as the reader cares deeply what happens next, what takes place on the page he or she has yet to read. Tonight, though, we are here to discuss what happens next in mystery and suspense fiction. What trends have reached their peaks, and what trends are swelling just beyond the horizon."

She cleared her throat, took another sip of her drink. "Has the tough private eye passed his prime? Is the lineal descendant of Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe just a tedious outmoded macho sap?" She paused to smile pleasantly at Bart Halloran, who glowered back at her. "Conversely, has the American reader lost interest forever in the mannered English mystery? Are we ready to bid adieu to the body in the library, or—" she paused for an amiable nod at the slightly cockeyed Miss Trill—"the corpse in the formal gardens?"

"Is the mystery, if you'll pardon the expres-

sion, *dead* as a literary genre? One of our number—" and a cheerless smile for Professor Porterfield "—would have us all turn to writing *Love's Saccharine Savagery* and *Penny Wyse, Stockyard Nurse*. Is the mystery bookshop, a store specializing in our brand of fiction, an idea whose time has come—and gone? And what do book publishers have to say on this subject? One of our number has worked for so many of them; she should be unusually qualified to comment."

Mavis certainly had the full attention of her fellow panelists. Now, to make sure she held the attention of the audience as well, she leaned forward, a particularly arresting move given the nature of the strapless, backless black number she was more or less wearing. Her hands tightened on the microphone.

"Please help me give our panel members full attention," she said, "as we turn the page to find out—" she paused dramatically "—What Happens Next!"

What happened next was that the lights went out. All of them, all at once, with a great crackling noise of electrical failure. Somebody screamed, and then so did somebody else, and then screaming became kind of popular. A shot rang out. There were more screams, and then another shot, and then everybody was shouting at once, and then some lights came on.

Guess who was dead.

That was Friday night. Tuesday afternoon, Haig was sitting back in his chair on his side of our huge old partners' desk. He didn't have his feet up—I'd broken him of that habit—but I could see he wanted to. Instead he contented himself with taking a pipe apart and putting it back together again. He had tried smoking pipes, thinking it a good mannerism for a detective, but it never took, so now he fiddles with them. It looks pretty dumb, but it's better than putting his feet up on the desk.

"I don't suppose you're wondering why I summoned you all here," he said.

They weren't wondering. They all knew, all of the panelists from the other night, plus two old friends of ours, a cop named Gregorio who wears clothes that could never be purchased

on a policeman's salary, and another cop named Seidenwall, who wears clothes that could. They knew they'd been gathered together to watch Leo Haig pull a rabbit out of a hat, and it was going to be a neat trick because it looked as though he didn't even have the hat.

"We're here to clear up the mysterious circumstances of the death of Mavis Mallory. All of you assembled here, except for the two gentlemen of the law, had a motive for her murder. All of you had the opportunity. All of you thus exist under a cloud of suspicion. As a result, you should all be happy to learn that you have nothing to fear from my investigation. Mavis Mallory committed suicide."

"Suicide!" Gregorio exploded. "I've heard you make some ridiculous statements in your time, but that one grabs the *gâteau*. You have the nerve to sit there like a toad on a lily pad and tell me the redheaded dame killed herself?"

"Nerve?" Haig mused. "Is nerve ever required to tell the truth?"

"Truth? You wouldn't recognize the truth if it dove into one of your fish tanks and swam around eating up all the brine shrimp. The Mallory woman got hit by everything short of tactical nuclear weapons. There were two bullets in her from different guns. She had a wavy-bladed knife stuck in her back and a short dagger in her chest, or maybe it was the other way around. The back of her skull was dented by a blow from a blunt instrument. There was enough rat poison in her system to put the Pied Piper out of business, and there were traces of curare, a South American arrow poison, in her martini glass. Did I leave something out?"

"Her heart had stopped beating," Haig said.

"Is that a fact? If you ask me, it had its reasons. And you sit there and call it suicide. That's some suicide."

Haig sat there and breathed, in and out, in and out, in the relaxed, connected breathing rhythm that Lori Schneiderman had taught him. Meanwhile they all watched him, and I in turn watched them. We had them arranged just the way they'd been on the panel, with Detective Vincent Gregorio sitting in the middle where Mavis Mallory had been. Reading left to

right, I was looking at Bart Halloran, Dorothea Trill, Darrell Crenna, Gregorio, Lotte Benzler, Austin Porterfield and Janice Cowan. Detective Wallace Seidenwall sat behind the others, sort of off to the side and next to the wall. If this were novel length I'd say what each of them was wearing and who scowled and who looked interested, but Haig says there's not enough plot here for a novel and that you have to be more concise in short stories, so just figure they were all feeling about the way you'd feel if you were sitting around watching a fat little detective practice rhythmic breathing.

"Some suicide," Haig said. "Indeed. Some years ago a reporter went to a remote county in Texas to investigate the death of a man who'd been trying to expose irregularities in election procedures. The coroner had recorded the death as suicide, and the reporter checked the autopsy and discovered that the deceased had been shot six times in the back with a high-powered rifle. He confronted the coroner with this fact and demanded to know how the man had dared call the death suicide.

" 'Yep,' drawled the coroner. 'Worst case of suicide I ever saw in my life.' "

Gregorio just stared at him.

"So it is with Miss Mallory," Haig continued. "Hers is the worst case of suicide in my experience. Miss Mallory was helplessly under the influence of her own unconscious death urge. She came to me, knowing that she was being drawn toward death, and yet she had not the slightest impulse to gain protection. She wished only that I contract to investigate her demise and see to its resolution. She deliberately assembled seven persons who had reason to rejoice in her death, and enacted a little drama in front of an audience. She—"

"Six persons," Gregorio said, gesturing to the three on either side of him. "Unless you're counting her, or unless all of a sudden I got to be a suspect."

Haig rang a little bell on his desk top, and that was Wong Fat's cue to usher in a skinny guy in a dark suit. "Mr. Abner Jenks," Haig announced. "Former editor of *Mallory's Mystery Magazine*, demoted to slush reader and part-time assistant."

"He passed the drinks," Dorothea Trill remembered. "So that's how she got the rat poison."

"I certainly didn't poison her," Jenks whined. "Nor did I shoot her or stab her or hit her over the head or—"

Haig held up a hand. There was a pipe stem in it, but it still silenced everybody. "You all had motives," he said. "None of you intended to act on them. None of you planned to make an attempt on Miss Mallory's life. Yet thought is creative and Mavis Mallory's thoughts were powerful. Some people attract money to them, or love, or fame. Miss Mallory attracted violent death."

"You're making a big deal out of nothing," Gregorio said. "You're saying she wanted to die, and that's fine, but it's still a crime to give her a hand with it, and that's what every single one of them did. What's that movie, something about the Orient Express, and they all stab the guy? That's what we got here, and I think what I gotta do is book 'em all on a conspiracy charge."

"That would be the act of a witling," Haig said. "First of all, there was no conspiracy. Perhaps more important, there was no murder."

"Just a suicide."

"Precisely," said Haig. *Huff*. "In a real sense, all death is suicide. As long as a man's life urge is stronger than his death urge, he is immortal and invulnerable. Once the balance shifts, he has an unbreakable appointment in Samarra. But Miss Mallory's death is suicide in a much stricter sense of the word. No one else tried to kill her, and no one else succeeded. She unquestionably created her own death."

"And shot herself?" Gregorio demanded. "And stuck knives in herself, and bopped herself over the head? And—"

"No," Haig said. *Huff*. "I could tell you that she drew the bullets and knives to herself by the force of her thoughts, but I would be wasting my—" *huff!* "—breath. The point is metaphysical, and in the present context immaterial. The bullets were not aimed at her, nor did they kill her. Neither did the stabbings, the blow to the head, the poison."

"Then what did?"

"The stopping of her heart."

"Well, that's what kills everyone," Gregorio

said, as if explaining something to a child. "That's how you know someone's dead. The heart stops."

Haig sighed heavily, and I don't know if it was circular breathing or resignation. Then he started telling them how it happened.

"Miss Mallory's death urge created a powerful impulse toward violence," he said. "All seven of you, the six panelists and Mr. Jenks, had motives for killing the woman. But you are not murderous people, and you had no intention of committing acts of violence. Quite without conscious intent, you found yourselves bringing weapons to the Town Hall event. Perhaps you thought to display them to an audience of mystery fans. Perhaps you felt a need for a self-defense capability. It hardly matters what went through your minds.

"All of you, as I said, had reason to hate Miss Mallory. In addition, each of you had reason to hate one or more of your fellow panel members. Miss Benzler and Mr. Crenna are rival booksellers; their cordial loathing for one another is legendary. Mr. Halloran was romantically involved with the panel's female members, while Mr. Porterfield and Mr. Jenks were briefly, uh, closeted together in friendship. Miss Trill had been very harshly dealt with in some writings of Mr. Porterfield. Miss Cowan had bought books by Mr. Halloran and Miss Trill, then left the books stranded when she moved on to another employer. I could go on, but what's the point? Each and every one of you may be said to have had a sound desire to murder each and every one of your fellows, but in the ordinary course of things nothing would have come of any of these desires. We all commit dozens of mental murders a day, yet few of us dream of acting on any of them."

"I'm sure there's a point to this," Austin Porterfield said.

"Indeed there is, sir, and I am fast approaching it. Miss Mallory leaned forward, grasping her microphone, pausing for full dramatic value, and the lights went out. And it was then that knives and guns and blunt instruments and poison came into play."

The office lights dimmed as Wong Fat operated a wall switch. There was a sharp intake of

breath, although the room didn't get all that dark, and there was a balancing *huff* from Haig. "The room went dark," he said. "That was Miss Mallory's doing. She chose the moment, not just unconsciously, but with knowing purpose. She wanted to make a dramatic point, and she succeeded beyond her wildest dreams.

"As soon as those lights went out, everyone's murderous impulses, already stirred up by Mavis Mallory's death urge, were immeasurably augmented. Mr. Crenna drew a Malayan kris and moved to stab it into the heart of his competitor, Miss Benzler. At the same time, Miss Benzler drew a poniard of her own and circled around to direct it at Mr. Crenna's back. Neither could see. Neither was well oriented. And Mavis Mallory's unconscious death urge drew both blades to her own body, even as it drew the bullet Mr. Porterfield meant for Mr. Jenks, the deadly blow Mr. Halloran meant for Cowan, the bullet Miss Cowan intended for Miss Trill, and the curare Miss Trill had meant to place in Mr. Halloran's glass.

"Curare, incidentally, works only if introduced into the bloodstream; it would have been quite ineffective if ingested. The rat poison Miss Mallory did ingest was warfarin, which would ultimately have caused her death by internal bleeding; it was in the glass when Abner Jenks served it to her."

"Then Jenks tried to kill her," Gregorio said.

Haig shook his head. "Jenks did not put the poison in the glass," he said. "Miss Lotte Benzler had placed the poison in the glass before Miss Mallory picked it up."

"Then Miss Benzler—"

"Was not trying to kill Miss Mallory either," Haig said, "because she placed the poison in the glass she intended to take for herself. She had previously ingested a massive dose of Vitamin K, a coagulant which is the standard antidote for warfarin, and intended to survive a phony murder attempt on stage, both to publicize The Murder Store and to discredit her competitor, Mr. Crenna. At the time, of course, she'd had no conscious intention of sticking a poniard into the same Mr. Crenna, the very poniard that wound up in Miss Mallory."

"You're saying they all tried to kill each other,"

Gregorio said. "And they all killed her instead."

"But they didn't succeed."

"They didn't? How do you figure that? She's dead as a bent doornail."

"She was already dead."

"How?"

"Dead of electrocution," Haig told him. "Mavis Mallory put out all the lights in Town Hall by short-circuiting the microphone. She got more than she bargained for, although in a sense it was precisely what she'd bargained for. In the course of shorting out the building's electrical system, she herself was subjected to an electrical charge that induced immediate and permanent cardiac arrest. The warfarin had not yet had time to begin inducing fatal internal bleeding. The knives and bullets pierced the skin of a woman who was already dead. The bludgeon crushed a dead woman's skull. Miss Mallory killed herself."

Wong Fat brought the lights up. Gregorio blinked at the brightness. "That's a pretty uncertain way to do yourself in," he said. "It's not like she had her foot in a pail of water. You don't necessarily get a shock shorting out a line that way, and the shock's not necessarily a fatal one."

"The woman did not consciously plan her own death," Haig told him. "An official verdict of suicide would be of dubious validity. Accidental death, I suppose, is what the certificate would properly read." He huffed mightily. "Accidental death! As that Texas sheriff would say, it's quite the worst case of accidental death I've ever witnessed."

And that's what it went down as, accidental death. No charges were ever pressed against any of the seven, although it drove Gregorio crazy that they all walked out of there untouched. But what could you get them for? Mutilating a corpse? It would be hard to prove who did what, and it would be even harder to prove that they'd been trying to kill each other. As far as Haig was concerned, they were all acting under the influence of Mavis Mallory's death urge, and were only faintly responsible for their actions.

"The woman was ready to die, Chip," he said,

"and die she did. She wanted me to solve her death and I've solved it, I trust to the satisfaction of the lawyers for her estate. And you've got a good case to write up. It won't make a novel, and there's not nearly enough sex in it to satisfy the book-buying public, but I shouldn't wonder that it will make a good short story. Perhaps for *Mallory's Mystery Magazine*, or a publication of equal stature."

He stood up. "I'm going uptown," he announced, "to get rebirthed. I suggest you come along. I think Wolfe must have been a devotee of rebirthing, and Archie as well."

I asked him how he figured that.

"Rebirthing reverses the aging process," he explained. "How else do you suppose the great detectives manage to endure for generations without getting a day older? Archie Goodwin was a brash young man in *Fer-de-lance* in nineteen thirty-four. He was still the same youthful wisenheimer forty years later. I told you once, Chip, that your association with me would make it possible for you to remain eighteen years old forever. Now it seems that I can lead you not only to the immortality of ink and paper but to genuine physical immortality. If you and I work to purge ourselves of the effects of birth trauma, and if we use our breath to cleanse our cells, and if we stamp out deathist thoughts once and forever—"

"Huh," I said. But wouldn't you know it? It came out *huff*.

This story was originally published in Mr. Block's collection Like a Lamb to Slaughter (Arbor House, 1984).

*Lawrence Block was given the Grand Master Award by the Mystery Writers of America in 1994. He has won Edgar and Shamus awards four times each, and the Japanese Maltese Falcon Award twice. His newest best sellers are **All the Flowers are Dying** and **The Burglar on the Prowl**. He and his wife Lynne are enthusiastic New Yorkers and relentless world travelers. For more info, visit his web site:*

<http://www.lawrenceblock.com>

FMAM FEATURE AUTHOR...

>>



Alfie recommends: paws over this one—another case for the perspicacious Dr. Talmo, a forensic specialist who combines modern science with old-fashioned deduction.

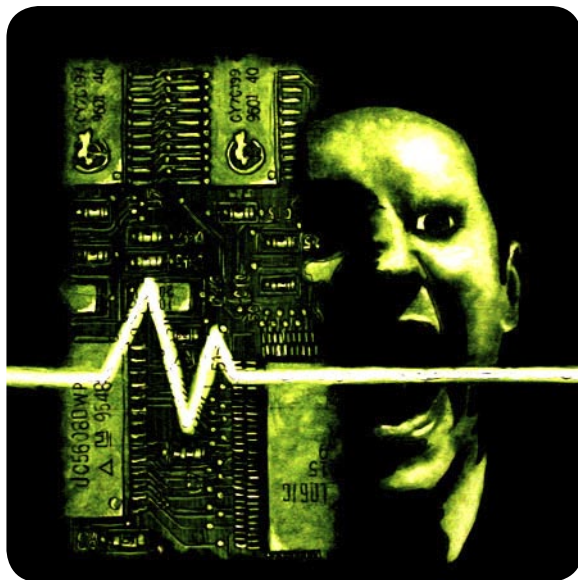
A unique and bizarre murder leads Dr. Talmo to grim revelations—and a solution he'd rather not reach.

Your Blood Is Sweet

A Tobias Talmo Tale

Rus Morgan

Illustration Copyright © 2006 Paul Campbell



The first and only time I saw Leonard Barsky was through the window of the Magnetic Resonance Imaging Laboratory in the Kansas City General Neurology ward. He was dead.

Uniquely so.

The victim of a gruesome murder—he had been murdered from the inside out. How? By whose hand and for what reason?

All we had was a note which read, "Your blood is sweet."

Was this written by a vampire or was it a macabre clue?

I am a Forensic Anthropologist by profession and spend my time in teaching and counseling.

Kansas City General had commissioned me to give three lectures over three days, and I was on the third day.

The hospital gave me an executive suite in the building. My contact at the hospital, Dr. Carl Martin, Head of Cardiology, called me as soon as the body was discovered and explained the circumstances. He added, "Dr. Talmo, I am sorry to bother you at this time in the morning, but I consider it most opportune to have someone with your experience on the premises when we've been subjected to this horrible event."

I had spent a couple of pleasant hours with my colleagues at a local bistro the night before,

and this phone call came well before my intended rising time. I yawned. "An interesting way to die, Dr. Martin. Give me the particulars."

"Leonard has been with us about seven years. Everybody liked him. He is—was—our Electronics Technician. A genial, well-liked bachelor, one of his duties was the care and feeding of the two Magnetic Resonance Imaging machines we recently installed in the Neurology Lab. They are expensive, state-of-the-art, and very powerful. They were his children, and he allowed no one else to service them."

Martin was audibly shaken but he continued, "In the nature of this business he does—did—much of his work at night. The unit he was working on had slipped slightly in its calibrations. Not enough to distort the results, but we pride ourselves on our accuracy. Last night he shut everything down in that department and worked under portable lights to recalibrate."

"Why such rigid precautions?"

"He himself was a cardiac patient. Four days ago he was forced to take time away from his charges long enough to have two steel stents lodged in the arteries leading to his heart. They were inserted in a routine procedure right next door in the Catheter Lab. He rested for a day and then went happily back to work."

"And it is common medical knowledge that there is at least a two-week waiting period after stents are inserted before submitting to an MRI."

"Yes."

"Who found him?"

"The duty guard discovered him this morning at five minutes to five. Just thirty minutes ago."

"Did the guard go into the room?"

"No. He recognized it as a crime scene so did not open the door, since Barsky was obviously beyond help."

"How do you know it was murder and not an accident or suicide?"

"A note was found on the console in the control room. Initial supposition is that the murderer wrote it."

I digested that for a moment. "Are the police here yet?"

"As we speak."

"I will need your clearance with them to sit in on the investigation."

"I will tell them—and please, please try to keep this out of the media."

"I'll do what I can, Dr. Martin, but I do not control the police. Oh yes, I will need clearance into your personnel records and with your head of security and your IT Manager. We will also need your permission to search this wing from top to bottom."

"You have it. I'll give my people a call. Do you think it might be an inside job?"

"Everybody but me is a suspect until proven innocent, Dr. Martin—even you."

He giggled nervously. It rang oddly from a man of his stature. "I suppose so, but I can give you an ironclad alibi for my time this morning."

"I assume so, but that remains to be seen for the rest of the staff."

It was easy to tell Kansas City Police Lieutenant Udem Okomolu was an ex-basketball player. I am six feet tall but I could easily walk under his outstretched arm. As big as he was, if he put both arms out at the same time, the Nigerian would look like a surprised praying mantis—all long arms and large head on the end of an elongated neck. He looked down at me in the hallway with that big, easy smile that very large people reserve for the rest of us. I introduced myself, and his handshake extended halfway up to my elbow. He gave me his name and handed me a pair of plastic footies and waited patiently for me to put them on. When I was finished, he motioned me to follow and stooped slightly to lead me through the door into the control room.

A number of criminalists were dusting, photographing and cataloguing. Okomolu turned to me. His manner was easy but quite formal. "Please don't touch anything, Dr. Talmo. We are not finished detailing in here yet."

He paused for a moment while he assessed the progress of his team, then spoke to me while his eyes traveled around the room. "Dr. Martin filled me in on your background, including your ongoing consulting for the FBI. My captain also said some favorable things about your past successes in the private sector. I welcome your interest, but it is only fair to tell you

that my tolerance will disappear if you discover anything on this case and do not share it with me first."

I smiled in return and tried to placate the giant. "Point taken, Lieutenant. What do you have so far?"

He pointed through the window at the MRI. We could see the late Leonard Barsky lying on his back. Even from where we were, you could see his face locked in pain. Rigid scarecrow legs extended from his waist. With his right arm extended begging heaven and his left hand flattened across the front of his bloody lab coat, he was a study in terminal terror.

Okomolu had a gallon plastic zip bag in his left hand. He waved it at the crime scene. "I've never seen anything like this in my twenty years on the force. I didn't realize those huge magnets were that strong. He was evidently leaning toward the machine when the power came on. The magnets were on just long enough to suck the stents right out through his chest wall. The stents stuck inside the tube, then dropped onto the table when the power was cut off. They were lying there like a pair of bloody bullets when we went in. All his other tools ended up in there in the same pile."

"He had the power off though, didn't he?"

He scratched his lofty head. "Yes. I've looked at the engineering records for the building. Last night Barsky informed engineering that he would turn the power off in this whole equipment wing for a maximum of one hour beginning at four a.m. That was correct—it went off at exactly four as a result of the master switch being disengaged. In checking the records in the computer here in the control room, I learned the switch to the MRI here on the console was locked off at three fifty-five. Then the main switch was thrown at four a.m. Barsky would have done both of those and then come back here to go to work. At four-thirty, the power in the wing came on unexpectedly and would have lit everything up. That would have been a hell of a surprise to Mr. Barsky. The MRI was engaged at exactly four-thirty one and immediately opened up to full power. At four thirty-four the switch to the MRI was disengaged and at four thirty-five the power in the wing went

off and everything was dark again."

"Was it manual or accidental?"

"Manual. The design of the switches allows for no accidental engagement. Somebody turned the main power on purposely. The main switch is down the hall in a panel which is in a service room. All service rooms have spring locks. When the door is shut it automatically locks, and you need a key to open it from the outside. After the power was turned on, the killer must have come back in here and turned the MRI switch up to maximum power, watched Barsky die and turned it off again. Then the killer went back down the hall and turned the main power off."

"Are there any prints on the panel or this console?"

"Wiped clean. *'Nada.'*"

I looked up at the corner of the room. "All that traffic ought to be on camera."

"No, dammit! Sometime after Barsky turned the lights off, someone sprayed black paint on all the critical cameras and we got zip."

"I would like to see all the discs from the cameras on this floor for the entire evening. Can you arrange that?"

"Yes, but what do you expect to see?"

"I'm not sure I'll see anything, but I'll tell you if I do. Please have them delivered to Executive Suite B."

He stepped away and spent a few moments on his radio. He turned back to me and said, "It'll be about an hour, and they'll be on your bed."

"Thanks." I pointed to the bag in his hand. "Is that the note?"

"Yes."

"May I see it?"

It was a common piece of five-by-seven note-paper from one of the hospital's pads. There were probably a thousand such pads in the hospital. The note was neatly printed, apparently with a Magic Marker. The message ran diagonally, corner to corner, in large red hand-lettered block capitals. It read: "Your blood is sweet. K."

I held the note up to the light. The ink had bled through the pulp paper, but there was nothing else there—and probably no finger-

prints either. I gave it back to him. "Someone really hated him. I wonder who—and why? And who is 'K'? Any ID and background on Mr. Bar-sky?"

He shrugged. "Local records show he did not exist before he walked into this hospital seven years ago, and we get nothing on his fingerprints either. On top of that, his Social Security Number is safe-scanned."

I was incredulous. "You mean the hospital hired him without checking his background?"

"Martin tells me that was because he was in a non-patient position. He was a whiz at electronics and came with recommendations. He filled a badly needed position and they took him at face value. We're checking those recommendations now."

"Might be worthwhile to run his DNA through the national bank and see if we get a match. Oh yes, Dr. Martin gave his permission to search the entire floor."

"As we speak."

"Please have your people itemize anything non-medical and indicate where it is found."

He was puzzled, but agreed.

Later I munched some junk food in my room while watching the surveillance disks. I saw the normal routine of the Neurology Lab until just before 4 a.m. This part of the floor catered only to transient patients so there was very little traffic. All personnel on the floor had been notified of the repair plans and had gradually vacated the lab section because it was going to be in the dark. The crew had already handled their sanitizing tasks, including the MRI Lab, and was totally off the floor when the murder occurred. The cleaning ladies were in the distant part of the wing.

At 4 a.m. on the disk, my screen went dark as it should have. I let it run. At 4:20 a small light spot came briefly on screen, moved a bit, and then disappeared into denser darkness. It was camera number four, which was in the side hallway across from the main bank of outside windows. Had ambient light caught my murderer in the act of defiling the camera lens?

I did a bit of cut-and-paste, then sent the cut in an email to an old colleague in the Federal

Bureau of Investigation's Audio, Video and Image Analysis Division with a request for accelerated identification of the spot.

Okomolu buzzed me. I put his abruptness down as part of his nature. "Doc, our man dropped out of thin air seven years ago. The only thing we've got so far is his physical description, approximate age and ethnicity—the name is certainly bogus. Makes me think he might have been in the Witness Protection Program, and we all know they are sealed." I could tell he started to hang up the phone then he remembered something else. "Oh, his hair is dyed dark and he's wearing blue contacts. His eyes are naturally brown, and we found some very interesting bits of brown stage hair and a can of black spray paint in the trash barrel in a ladies' room on the fourth floor."

I swallowed the piece of cheese I had in my mouth. "Stage hair? As from a wig?"

"Yes."

This was indeed significant information. "Any prints on the can?"

"No."

"Is there some way you can get around the sealing of the WPP records?"

"My captain says there isn't any way."

I took a sip of coffee for the same reason a smoker drags on a cigarette. "How soon for the DNA match?"

"We've asked for acceleration. Maybe today. You still going to be here?"

"Dr. Martin has asked me to try to see this to an end. I have nothing else scheduled for about ten days." I looked at my travel clock. "Security, Human Resources and IT folks are due here in about half an hour. If I turn up anything I'll be in touch."

"Okay," he said and was gone.

I opened my door after the second knock. Two men and a woman greeted me.

A man's eyes always concentrate on the attractive woman first. She was handsome and as tall as the two men. She was mature, gray-headed, with wary green eyes and a brilliant smile. Dressed conservatively in a dark pantsuit, she had big shoulders like a swimmer and still trim hips. Her purple silk scarf was knotted carefully

at her throat. Her name was Carol Chesney and she was the Vice President of Human Resources. Her companions deferred to her and let her shake my hand first, after which she side-stepped me and flowed into my room like she owned it.

As she moved past, something nagged at me like a splinter under my fingernail, but I could not immediately pull anything out of the mist.

My mind has a funny way of amassing incongruities. It will go on and on, piling one on top of the other until one comes along that triggers another and suddenly, like jackstraws, the whole stack begins to sort itself out.

Behind her was a bulky black man in a security uniform with captain's bars on his collar. Dr. Martin had told me that a requirement for promotion within the hospital was completion of the Boot Camp at the Kansas City Police Academy, so the man I was looking at was professionally trained. His name was Andrew Progress, and he was a twenty-five-year veteran at the hospital. His wide grin made it easy to like him, and we were immediately comfortable with each other.

Jacob Freeman was a different breed. He was the company geek. Like a concert pianist, he entrusted only the tips of his fingers to me in his handshake. He had a high forehead, a receding hairline, a shirttail out, and a mind that responded mostly to numbers.

Technicians like him are first class because they can't stand the dissonance of anomalies. It was easy to visualize him over in the corner by himself surrounded by the innards of a computer. My direct gaze embarrassed him.

I invited them in. I dealt with Freeman first because he was so ill at ease. He listened to me for a few moments, then sat down at my laptop and began to tap the keys. Judging from his speed in comprehending my request, it was obvious he had received instructions from Dr. Martin. In about thirty seconds he jotted something on my notepad then got up.

"Doctor, your password is on your notepad and there's an icon on the desktop. That gives you executive access to all records as requested by Dr. Martin—until the password is rescinded."

He reluctantly slipped me another limp

handshake and made for the door.

As he left, he smiled triumphantly in Chesney's direction but made no direct eye contact. She shrugged her shoulders as though it was of no importance. Intrigue in Camelot, perhaps?

Captain Progress indicated I should take care of the lady first, but I wanted time with both of them, so I thanked him for coming to my room and then asked him how many guards would normally be on duty in the wee morning hours.

He said, "There are four patrolling on that shift—one on each floor."

"Do they have contact with each other?"

"Yes, each other and the office. Each shift has at least four other men in the office watching the monitors. When the lights came back on briefly, the guard on this floor was informed that the cameras were compromised and told to find out why. He was the one who discovered Barsky at four-fifty-five and called it in."

"Who brought in the police?"

"I did. As senior officer I received the call at home and was told the situation, so I immediately called in the authorities while I was still dressing. They and I arrived about the same time."

"Did your guards see anyone on the floor—anyone?"

He rubbed his face. "There were ten nurses and a hundred and twenty-two patients in the other wing. In this wing—two cleaning ladies, Baumgartner, who is new, and Leeman, but they were on the other side. Usually they split the wing, but in this special instance they both worked the same side until the lights were to come back on."

"What time were the cleaning ladies spotted?"

He consulted his notes. "Three-thirty-three for Baumgartner on the other side. Leeman on this side at three-thirty-six."

"You sure there was no one else in this wing?"

He nodded.

"Anything unusual on the floor, Captain?"

He looked at Chesney and back to me. "I'm sure Ms. Chesney can add more to this, but my

guards ran a quick search of the floor right after we found Barsky and found Mrs. Baumgartner sleeping in a linen room. She was sent home by this lady for two days without pay."

"What time was she found?"

He looked at his notes again, then at her. "Five-forty-three, and Ms. Chesney was immediately notified by cell phone."

Anchored on each side by high, prominent cheekbones, Chesney's wide smile was dazzling white. If she was born with that set of teeth she was indeed fortunate. I knew I had seen that smile before. She was very quick. Before I was able to mask the flicker of recognition, she caught the cognizance in my eyes and tipped her head. To bridge the moment and keep the ball rolling in my court, I turned and plucked a bottle of water from my refrigerator. In the time I took to offer it to both of them and be declined, I was able to place that smile.

"Are you still modeling?"

"An occasional Senior Citizens ad."

"You were number one for a number of years. How did you get to here?"

Her smile was rueful, "Youth passes with time. Eventually you wake up with some wrinkles you can't cover with anyone's cosmetics. I retired for a few years, repositioned myself, and took on other challenges. I've been here four years and enjoy every minute of it."

Captain Progress was lost in this interchange. I brought him up to date briefly. His eyes were wide with new respect when he looked at her.

"Tell me about the sleeping cleaning lady."

"It's very simple. She's been on the job less than a week. She was caught sleeping on the job. Gave me some cockamamie story about being drugged. I had to make an example of her, so I suspended her for two days without pay."

I turned on the DVD player and fast-forwarded to the spot I had marked showing the cleaning lady disappearing along the hall. She was a tall, old crone hunched over the cart she was pushing down the hall. Her frazzled hair stuck out around her head like thatch from a hay wagon. There was a wall clock visible in the subdued light at the end of the hallway. The hands showed 3:33 in the morning.

"Was this the lady who was supposed to be here or on the other side of the wing?"

Chesney looked intently at the screen. "Yes—the far side. That's Mrs. Baumgartner. She's the one I sent home."

I ran the disk forward to the second cleaning lady. Both Chesney and Progress agreed she was the one responsible for this side.

"What's her name?"

Chesney said, "Leeman, Betty Leeman."

"I need to speak with both of them." I turned to Chesney. "Can you see that they are here as soon as possible?"

She checked her watch. "Leeman is just about to get off. I'll tell her to come up, and I'll send a car to pick up Baumgartner."

I had just finished making a pot of coffee when the knocker on my door was given a tentative clunk. I opened the door to Betty Leeman. She was of particular interest because she was responsible for this side of the wing. One bony, careworn hand was raised to hit the knocker again. She let it drop limply to her side as I invited her in. She moved painfully past me, favoring one leg with arthritic awkwardness.

Domestics earn their pay the hard way and show the wear early. It was difficult to tell how old this woman was. But I could tell she had been through the mill, although she was freshly showered and her hair was combed close to her head. A rueful half-smile showed a snaggle tooth in front. Her brown, weather-beaten face supported blue eyes which looked directly at me for a moment, then dropped respectfully to my knees. In that flash I saw little pretense but sensed great strength of purpose.

After the pleasantries, during which she declined a cup of coffee, I led her over to the video to let her see herself on screen. She drew a breath sharply.

"That's the first time I ever seen me on the TV."

On screen a clock was plainly visible at the end of the hall. "Is the time there correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you go from there?"

"I ain't normally supposed to work on anything on the other side of the wing, so when

the power went off I scooted into a linen room and sat down for an hour."

"You were alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you spend the rest of the time after the power came on?"

"I had already done the MRI Console Room so I went on about my business on the rest of my side."

"What you are telling me is that you never came near this end of the floor after the power was shut down?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank You, Mrs. Leeman."

Sharon Baumgartner looked almost like her video. A sack dress and a thatch of mouse brown hair over broad, humped shoulders. The weary kind of shoulders that come from years of emptying someone else's trash and dusting some one else's furniture. I offered her some coffee. She was not used to drinking coffee with her superiors, and she declined. I asked her to view the video with me.

She stood uncomfortably while I turned it on. When the cleaning lady appeared walking away down the hall, Mrs. Baumgartner pointed a bony finger and asked, "My eyes ain't too good anymore. Who's that?"

I tried to look unconcerned. "I thought that was you."

She snorted. "I know I look frowzy, but I ain't never wore my hair like that. That's the other cleaning lady. Besides, I was in the linen room at three-thirty-three."

"How can you be sure of the time?"

"I come on at ten o'clock, take an hour lunch and get off at seven a.m., Mr. Doctor. I had my tea break at twelve-thirty like usual, then I went into linen room number twelve to get some supplies. I don't remember anything after going into that linen room. I don't drink and I don't smoke. Somebody put something in my tea that made me sleep for six hours and left me with a terrible headache."

"Ms. Chesney tells a different story."

She snorted. "When it's my word against hers, I guess you know whose they'll take."

"Who was in the break room with you at

twelve-thirty?"

She smoothed her hair while she thought. "Five or six floor nurses. That other cleaning lady and Mrs. Leeman—and I think the guard slipped in for a cup of coffee."

That was twice she had mentioned "that other" cleaning lady. I studied her more closely. "What 'other' cleaning lady?"

She sighed. "I only been here a week and I don't know everybody. She must have been from a different floor. Real pleasant sort. Didn't seem pressed for time though—she was still in there when I left to start my rounds."

"Thank you, Mrs. Baumgartner, you've been very helpful."

I started her for the door when she stopped and looked at me. "Do you think I'm going to be fired?"

I patted her on the shoulder. "I'll put in a good word with Ms. Chesney."

"Thank you, sir."

I went back to my computer and noticed a new email. I pulled it up. It was from the FBI. They must have pounced on my request.

"Re your excerpt from the KCH disk, preliminary diagnoses indicates a bright unknown object approximately five and a half feet off the floor and two and a half feet in front of the camera. It disappears because the lens becomes obscured, probably by black spray paint. It may be a piece of jewelry worn by the person who sprayed the lens. More detailed identification not probable. Advise if you wish us to pursue."

I went back to my spying. Mrs. Leeman kept popping up as the most logical suspect. She had been with the hospital for five years, during which time she had had no entries in her file. There was nothing there until I delved into her past via her application and Social Security number. An hour later, after tapping two or three of my other sources, I had an answer of sorts. Betty had had a daughter named Charlotte. Charlotte was married to Joseph McGregor of North Brook, Illinois. Their union produced two children. First, Joseph Henry McGregor, Junior and second, Mary Katherine McGregor. The 'K' stood out in neon and her name rang a bell in my head. I continued to dig.

All had been sublimely normal in the charming suburb of North Brook, Illinois, until just three weeks after Mary Katherine's thirteenth birthday.

Then she was brutally abducted from her own bedroom. She was repeatedly raped, brutalized, and left to bleed to death in a culvert with both her arms lopped off just above the elbows.

The inhuman fiend who abducted her, one Raymond Cotter, served fifteen years of his life sentence. At the age of 47, he had been paroled, as he was a model prisoner and was no longer considered a threat to society. Raymond Cotter had much trouble finding a community that would accept him and his gruesome secret, and he disappeared two years after he was released.

Charlotte Leeman McGregor and her two children came to live with mother Betty Leeman when Charlotte's fifteen-year marriage foundered in the fallout from the abduction.

Charlotte committed suicide shortly thereafter, leaving Betty with the grandchildren. After her mother's suicide, granddaughter Mary Katherine McGregor withered away and died from complications resulting from Cotter hacking off her arms.

I surfed the archives of the *Chicago Tribune*. The Leeman-McGregor case had gotten more press than Speck and his nurses. There was a picture of the young Cotter handcuffed in the courtroom. Take away some hair, add twenty pounds, a mustache and some glasses, and you had a damned good likeness of one Leonard Barsky.

I surfed Raymond Cotter and looked in detail at his prison record, including his prison photo—which confirmed his identity.

Raymond Cotter was Leonard Barsky.

His prison time was exemplary. No altercations, good time accrued, and a fondness for electronics. He received an A in every class in electronics available to the prisoners. There were records of correspondence courses with New York University. I made a quiet phone call to a colleague on the NYU Staff who confirmed that one Raymond Cotter had received an advanced degree in Electronics Engineering—

with honors. He was something of a poster boy for the University—he was a lifer at Illinois State Prison when he received his degree.

The answer was clear. Betty Leeman, mother of Charlotte, grandmother of Mary Katherine, somehow learned of Cotter/Barsky's release from prison and followed his travels. She knew enough about him to see through the WPP and track him here to Kansas City. She had more than ample reason to hate this monster. She picked her time and exacted her own brand of bitter vengeance.

Rarely do I become embroiled in the personalities in my cases, but I really had to force myself to detach from the facts of this one. Putting Betty Leeman in jail for avenging her daughter's death and her granddaughter's horrible experience and death was the supreme irony. Betty lost a daughter and a granddaughter. A granddaughter who could not *feel* anything ever again and was sentenced to combing her hair for the rest of her short life with a hook in place of each hand. The searing memories of this triple atrocity would haunt Betty Leeman for all time.

Wasn't that pain enough?

Yes, it was, but I had no professional or moral choice.

I called Lieutenant Okomolu, brought him up to speed and asked him to orchestrate a meeting in my room at 2:00 with all concerned persons present. He agreed.

I crawled back into my laptop to do some more checking. I still had several thorns digging into my side. I deep-surfed everyone in the hospital whose name I had on my list. I flopped around in their backgrounds and found no surprises.

Then I turned a corner in that library of information and there was the key that sorted all my mental dominoes into one long gratifying line. That one piece of information completed my puzzle. I rewarded myself with a snifter of my favorite Armagnac and sat back in a self-satisfied silence, inhaling its bouquet.

They were hushed and expectant as they filed into the room. Some sat on the bed, some on the couch, and others the two chairs. All con-

centrated on me—and waited.

I've never shared this information with anyone but this is the moment I wait for in every case. As they say about the bull in the ring, it is "the moment of truth" and, like the matador, I am the one with the rapier.

I looked around the room. Okomolu had silently stationed one uniformed officer near the door just in case the pigeon tried to fly the coop.

I said, "Lieutenant Okomolu and I have collaborated on this murder and this is what we have found."

Okomolu smiled his thanks.

I locked onto Betty Leeman's face. At first she did not look at me, but as I spoke she raised her eyes to mine. There was pride there.

I really felt bad about what I was going to do but I continued, still looking straight at her. "First, Mrs. Leeman, I wish to express my heartfelt sympathy for the loss of your daughter and the brutality inflicted upon your granddaughter and their deaths as a result of it. Those were gruesome episodes no parent should ever have to bear."

Her face clouded with pain and her bony shoulders drooped in grief. All eyes were now on her, and it was obvious this was news to almost everyone. I continued, now addressing the group: "Betty Leeman's granddaughter Katherine was brutally raped, sodomized and nearly dismembered while the girl was still alive. She was abandoned in a culvert to bleed to death by one Raymond Cotter. Raymond Cotter is—or was—Leonard Barsky."

A horrified murmur filled the room. I raised my voice above it. "Betty Leeman found him, bided her time, and concocted his bizarre murder. Right Mrs. Leeman?"

Her voice was barely audible through her tears. "Yes."

I indicated the wall switch and asked the uniformed officer near the door to dim the lights. All but ambient light left the room. As my eyes adjusted, I spotted Ms. Chesney sitting on the sofa. Even in the dim light, that smile was gorgeous.

I flicked the remote on the DVD player, and we watched the two cleaning ladies pushing

their carts. I mentioned the hair on the one and told the group that we had found the wig in the ladies' room on the fourth floor. "The wig was abandoned because the guards were searching the floor and there was not enough time to take it elsewhere."

Then I scanned their faces while I dropped my bombshell. "And we know at this point there was an accomplice."

They swiveled their heads at each other like a flock of bobbleheads. As surprised as the rest, Okomolu watched all of them.

I continued, "We know there is an accomplice because it is physically impossible for Mrs. Leeman to make it from the Console Room down the hall to the Service Room, unlock it, flip the switch in the panel, and get back to the Console Room in one minute. The lady wearing that wig is the imposter. We can all see that it was a woman, tall and broad-shouldered. She spiked Mrs. Baumgartner's tea, which resulted in Mrs. Baumgartner taking an unscheduled nap in the linen room. So we have an accomplice who is the 'other cleaning lady' Mrs. Baumgartner saw in the break room. Conclusion then is that Mrs. Leeman was not alone in her quest for vengeance, right Mrs. Leeman?"

She nodded her head.

The room went silent like the silence in an underground tomb. When you first walk into one and stand still—and stop talking—and turn out the lights—and just listen there is... nothing. In the absolute darkness you can exquisitely feel everything and everyone around you, but there is nothing. Everyone in my room held their breath. The murderers because they were about to be defrocked. The authorities because they desperately wanted to file this case under "Solved".

I continued and all eyes swiveled to me. "We started looking for someone else who had motive, opportunity, and the means to assist in this killing, and only one person stood out." I flicked the disk to the spot floating in the gloom and pointed to the screen. "That person is here spraying the cameras but unable to conceal her dazzling smile even in the low light of the hallway. That person is Betty Leeman's fraternal twin sister, Carol Chesney!"

All eyes burned into Carol Chesney. She jumped to her feet, her face livid, her body contorted with loathing. She spat the words out like red hot drops of iron. "That bastard! He stole the light of my life and turned my world upside down. Then he did unspeakable things to her." She turned to me, and was momentarily at a loss for words. Her anguish was deep and unending.

She continued, more to herself than to us, and her voice dropped to a whimper. "Then he chopped off her arms and left her dying in that filthy gutter. They didn't kill him; they slapped his hand and let him out of jail. They let him live, and laugh, and breathe—as though nothing happened."

She turned and focused on me for the first time. Her eyes brimmed with satisfaction. "When I threw that switch and watched those stents fly out of that bastard's chest, I heard my niece say 'Thank you, Auntie,' and my world came right again."

We had anticipated a run for the door—but not the window.

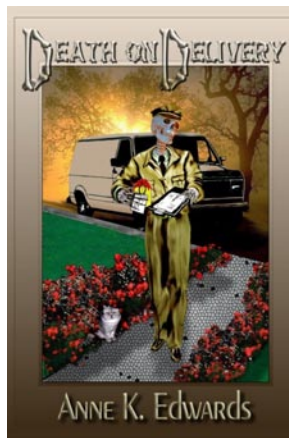
Like a fullback hunched over the ball streaking for the goal line, Chesney bent over and charged the window. That dazzling smile seemed to hang in the air as she shattered the glass and disappeared.

The silence was broken only by the mewing of Betty Leeman. She had lost a granddaughter, a daughter and now her twin sister, and she was going to spend the rest of her days behind bars remembering the evil that was Raymond Cotter.

Rus Morgan is a member of MWA, SMFS and Mensa. He has been many things while trying to become a writer. He has published previous mysteries in FMAM and Mysterious-E. He has self-published three novels: Blackberries Got No Thorns, The Voodoo Vortex and Luci.

ORDER YOUR COPY OF FMAM PDF OR PRINT TODAY!

www.twilighttimesbooks.com/fmam/fmam_order.html



DEATH ON DELIVERY

BY ANNE K. EDWARDS

Your victim will be listed as having died from unknown causes. The price is ten thousand dollars. Remember to pay once the service is started—or—you'll be the next victim—at no charge. This is the deal and warning clients of a murder for hire ring are given. And this is the case that brought Hannah Clare out of retirement.

"Death On Delivery," Mystery (\$16.50 paperback) is available from your favorite bookstore and online booksellers.

Copies can also be ordered from the publisher:



Twilight Times books, P.O. Box 3340, Kingsport, TN 337664
www.twilighttimesbooks.com/

**Something different in a gift
 Buy a murder
 Just send in a post card
 It's that simple.**

FMAM FEATURE AUTHOR...

>>

Revenge is a dish best served steaming.

Stuffed Shirt

Barry Ergang

Illustration Copyright © 2006 Gin E L Fenton



Label it instinct, intuition, or clairvoyance—when I met Theron Claymore, I immediately sensed a predator in our midst.

When he strode into the department alongside Haskell, art director at Danforth Advertising, I thought Claymore was a model. Tall and blond, with appraising slate-blue eyes, he carried himself with the erect confidence one associates with a California surfer. He lacked only the deep suntan.

I sensed his superficiality and was astonished when Haskell announced him as the newest member of our ranks.

Claymore gave the room and the occupants of its glassed cubicles a conquistadorial scrutiny. Haskell then introduced him to each of us.

Haskell smiled benevolently beneath his heavy mustache and indicated me. "This is Eric Dennison, our senior artist."

Despite my aversion, I murmured, "Nice to

meet you," and shook Claymore's hand.

Within a short time my initial assessments were confirmed. Claymore's work had a draftsman like competence but lacked the passion—if such a term may be used with regard to advertising—necessary to our type of illustration. Haskell, however, apparently took to it. Perhaps Claymore's greatest artistry was his ability to sell himself despite the charming sophistry of the product.

Indeed, charm was his biggest commodity and he used it like a chameleon, adapting himself to suit the various agency personalities with whom he had to contend. His good looks and forceful manner endeared him to many of the women, but he was equally adept at bantering with the men. He had none of the newcomer's reserve and quickly became the focal figure in the art department, magnet for the irreverent remark or salacious joke. Tales of the women he purportedly bedded were incessant.

I was able to ignore most of it. In my five years at Danforth I had, for self-protective reasons, kept distant from my colleagues, which allowed me to work with a relative freedom from interruption. What I could not ignore was Claymore's camaraderie with Haskell, my immediate superior. Their time together was not spent exclusively on matters of agency business. They lingered in the corridors exchanging jokes and stories, they went out for drinks after hours, they lunched together—often with other department heads. During my tenure I had never socialized with the upper echelons; Claymore exerted a disproportionate amount of time insinuating himself into their circles.

My mother would have been appalled. When she returned to the workplace after my father died, she performed her duties diligently and reliably but shunned the intra-office politicking common among her colleagues and thus never received the promotions she deserved. "I don't understand them," she would say of the other women in her office, "fawning and bootlicking and backstabbing to be noticed. No woman—or man either—should have to stoop that low."

Up until her own death, she did not possess

the pragmatism necessary to deal with Theron Claymore's sort. She never knew her child did. Never knew, for instance, that the disfiguring "accident" in high school chemistry which befell one of my classmates had avenged an affront; never knew that during my first year at Danforth, the occupant of an apartment in the building next to mine died to prevent disclosure of what he had seen when, upon arriving home from work one evening, I had carelessly left the bedroom curtains open.

My disregard of Claymore succeeded for a while, but inevitably, like the schoolyard bully who cannot bear to be ignored, he intruded onto my parcel of the playground. I was bent over the layout on my drawing table late one afternoon when he entered my cubicle and peered over my shoulder.

"Which account is that for?" he asked.

"Ardis Cosmetics," I said, not looking up.

"Oh, a biggie, huh?"

"Mm-hmm." I had been handling the Ardis artwork for over a year, though I did not tell him so.

"Yeah, well, listen, man, a bunch of us are going out for a drink after work. What d'you say?"

"No, thank you."

"Why not?" A faint edge in his voice implied he was unaccustomed to having his invitations refused. "C'mon, we're goin' over to Gerrity's, check out the action."

"Gerrity's?"

"Oh man, you never been to Gerrity's?"

I admitted I had not.

"It's just the best place in the city to meet babes. C'mon, we'll have a good time. You might get lucky and score."

"Thanks just the same, I'd rather not."

He moved to the back of the table, facing me, and leaned forward confidentially. "Listen, if you're worried about striking out, don't. I know plenty of broads there I can set you up with. Guaranteed you score." He smiled raptorially.

The cavalier imprecision of his speech and the empty appetite it promised oppressed me. I had barely looked at him, keeping my gaze on the layout in the hope he would give up and leave. I glanced up and saw three artists, all of whom were single, standing just outside

my cubicle. One of them frowned at Claymore and shook his head minutely, but Claymore winked and turned back to me, waiting for my answer.

"For the last time, no thank you. I've no interest in what you call 'scoring'."

"Don't be such a stuffed shirt." He grinned lasciviously and exaggerated an intake of breath. "After all, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."

"Then do it somewhere else if you please."

"What're you—gay? You like guys?"

In truth I adored women—their tastes and textures and smells. One in the Danforth sales department I found devastatingly attractive. But personal strictures forbidding intimate relationships which, in the event they fell apart, could lead to workplace disquietude, and the revelations I was unwilling to risk, irrespective of success or failure, demanded that I maintain a chaste, professional attitude toward her.

"I already have plans," I answered.

"I bet. Needlepoint? Or are you just gonna curl up with a book and some hot chocolate?" He laughed, dismissed me with a wave, and went off with the others.

The next morning, they regaled one another with tales of their previous evening's putative conquests.

When I returned from lunch that afternoon, I found Claymore in my cubicle idly examining a series of layouts tacked to the bulletin board on the right-hand wall and others that sat on top of the supply cabinet beneath. "You got enough variations on this Ardis thing," he said.

"Fussy client," I muttered. Some clients have specific ideas they want us to delineate, some almost prefer to be told what their advertisements should look like. Others, like Ardis, want to see multiple possibilities from which they can choose. Assembling their layouts, after consulting with the account executive, the copywriter, and Haskell, often required weeks or even months of work.

"Is there something I can do for you?" I asked. I removed my suit coat, hung it up, and slipped on the loose-fitting gray smock I kept on a hook on the left-hand wall.

"No, just takin' a break. You always wear that

thing, don't you?"

As I sat down at the drawing table, I noticed a couple of other artists looking our way rather expectantly. "Yes."

"Why?"

I scowled and adjusted the angle of the table. I did not answer him.

"You wear a suit every day, too."

I nodded silently, my head lowered over another Ardis layout.

"You oughta lighten up, man."

Except for the day we first met, when he had dressed in a faultlessly tailored charcoal-gray suit, Claymore wore blue jeans, boots, and turtlenecks or sports shirts. Sometimes he added a sports jacket to his ensemble. Casual attire was management's concession to "creative temperament," and it was true that most of the artists favored it.

"Did it ever occur to you I might be comfortable like this?" I said.

He snorted. "You don't know *how* to be comfortable. You're a stiff."

"I'm very comfortable—when I can work without unnecessary interruptions."

"A regular company man, eh?" He grinned back at his waiting friends before speaking to me again. "Regular loser's more like it."

That elicited the snickers from the others he sought and, having attained his puerile victory, he left me alone.

Anger and humiliation bubbled within me. He baited me, I surmised, from a need to assert his imagined superiority. But never before had anyone embarrassed me in front of my co-workers.

Over the next few months I periodically endured jibes about my sexual preferences, manner of dress, and conscientiousness. Although I bore it with an outward stolidity bordering on self-abasement, I grew steadily embittered toward his swaggering attitude which implied the agency was merely another place in which to "score," the job a woman to be conquered.

I experienced a small victory of my own when, one afternoon, Claymore and Audrey Merriam, a copywriter, marched side by side into my cubicle. Claymore wore his too-familiar smug smile, Audrey a look of angry determination.

"Eric," she said, "we'd like your opinion on something."

"Yeah, man, we need you to settle a bet," Claymore said offhandedly, his eyes scanning the latest series of Ardis layouts on the bulletin board.

"What is it?"

His slate-blue eyes fastened on me. "It's about—"

"No, you don't!" Audrey snapped. "Don't you dare set him up." Her voice softened when she asked me, "Do you think it's still mainly a man's world?"

So wholly unexpected was the question, it took a moment for me to collect my thoughts. Audrey's dark eyes were tense behind her designer-frame glasses, her posture taut.

"I guess it depends on how you define your terms," I said at length, "but if you mean women are still subservient with respect to salaries, benefits, and legislation, and chauvinistic and sexist attitudes fostered by the media, then I'd say it is. I recently read a study—"

"Pay up!" Audrey thrust out her hand, palm up, at Claymore.

He glowered at me, as if I had betrayed an unspoken pact, and extracted a five-dollar bill from his pocket. He smacked it into her hand. "Like I said," he growled, "women have already castrated half the male population. This little wimp"—he jerked his chin in my direction—"is a prime example."

In mid-summer, rumors began to circulate that Haskell would be promoted to a creative directorship in September. Management at Danforth believed in promotion from within; therefore, based on seniority, I was the logical candidate for the position of art director. An exciting prospect, it was something I had worked a long time to achieve, risking decisions with regard to my "life choices," as psychologists call them, that no one knew anything about. I said nothing, nor was the rumor confirmed. The mere fact of its existence galvanized me, making even Claymore's unwanted attentions bearable. I indulged a fantasy of firing him in front of the entire art department when I became the new director.

But then he went beyond verbal abuse, altering my fantasy and his own end.

After several months of work, I went to Haskell's office to turn in the latest series of layouts for Ardis Cosmetics. Haskell examined them, nodded approvingly, and then cleared his throat. His expression was uncharacteristically sheepish.

"Very nice, Eric. Up to your usual standard. But...uh...I've got something I think they'll like better."

I gaped incredulously at him.

"Theron did some...extracurricular work. He had some ideas of his own and tried them out—on his own time," he added hastily. "He saw what you were doing and took it from there." He cleared his throat again. "His work is very good."

"But Ardis has always been *my* account."

"I know, Eric, but... Well, take the long view. We're all team players here. You of all people ought to know that."

"Yes, yes I do. But...why didn't you tell me before?"

He looked at his desktop a moment, then back at me. "Honestly? Because you've always done excellent work for Ardis, and I wanted to see the finished product before I decided." He shrugged. "My gut hunch says Theron's work will go over better."

"Why not show them *both* of our concepts and let *them* decide?"

He brushed at his mustache with a fingertip. "I know this is upsetting, but there'll be plenty of other work for you—for Ardis and other clients. Besides, all Theron did was make a few improvements on your basic ideas. Would you like to see them?"

What I answered, or whether I answered at all, I do not remember. I did not return to my cubicle. I left the building and walked, I cannot recall where or for how long, in a feckless rage. It was suddenly clear that Claymore's subtle dominion over the art department was part of a ploy to undermine my seniority and advance his own objectives. My grasp on the art directorship, I sensed, had been weakened by Claymore's inveigling schemes. I could imagine him inverting my own fantasy and firing me. Or—

worse, perhaps—keeping me on as the constant target for his verbal sallies. If I resigned and went elsewhere, I would have to start all over again, perhaps spend another five years establishing myself at another agency without the assurance of attaining a senior position.

When I returned to Danforth, I said nothing more to Haskell and he said nothing to me. Once, however, I thought I spied Claymore smirking at me.

By that evening I had calmed down, red fury turned to white decisiveness. Claymore was a steadily debilitating malignancy. Pragmatism dictated his removal. I had two weeks' vacation coming up, and during that time I would kill him.

The Monday morning I returned from my vacation, the agency thrummed with shock and horror over the murder of Theron Claymore, the Thursday before, by a person or persons unknown. My co-workers either moped mournfully or eagerly heaped on me the details they had gleaned from newspaper reports and from the police interrogators who had visited the agency. "You sure picked the right time to go away," someone said. "This place has been somewhere between a morgue and a circus."

By the time I arrived home that evening, I was simultaneously elated and enervated. After running the bath water, I went directly to my bedroom and undressed. I hung my suit neatly, then removed my shirt and threw it into a hamper. I am small-breasted, and the bandeau I wear beneath my shirt to flatten my bosom does an admirable job of disguising my curves. I took off the bandeau and, wearing only panties, regarded my suntanned reflection in a full-length mirror. I slipped off the dark male toupee and finger-fluffed my own short-cropped, almost mannishly cut brown hair. Finally, I stepped out of the panties and settled into the soothing bath.

Killing him had been an absurdly simple task.

As planned, I flew to the Bahamas for my vacation. I immediately sent a postcard to the agency to establish that I had, indeed, been away. I spent my days on the beach, tanning

and imagining how I would approach Claymore without putting him on guard. After eight days, three fewer than the original reservation called for, I flew back.

Locating Claymore might present some difficulty, but I suspected that Gerrity's was the logical place to find him. I went there in the middle of the evening on the day of my return, but he didn't appear. The next day I arrived during "happy hour," when the city's businesses release their employees to their own diversions.

Gerrity's was dim, noisy, and congested with people, strutting men and preening women, their faces hectic and brittle. There was a pathetic quality in the way some of them approached others in a travesty of the mating ritual.

Within half an hour of my arrival Claymore appeared, grinning his assurance, waving hellos to people he recognized, occasionally pecking the cheek or squeezing the shoulder of a woman he knew, "high-fiving" some of the men. I had dressed to enhance rather than to conceal my attributes in a reasonably snug blue dress and a longish red wig. The only demure touch was a pair of cream-colored gloves.

I caught his eye easily enough, after which I engaged in the immemorial gestures of a woman desirous of a particular man's attentions. Claymore took the cues without hesitation. After drinks and conversation laced with innuendoes, I suggested he take me to his apartment. There we had another drink, and I submitted to his kisses and touch, suppressing my loathing in the knowledge that intimacy would be his nemesis.

At length I urged him to take me into the bedroom. Mistaking my eagerness for lust—the impression I hoped to convey to gain the advantage I needed—he complied. I had brought no weapon, and would have to improvise, catch him at a vulnerable moment. The heavy glass ashtray on his nightstand declared retributive providence was my companion.

He kissed and fondled me as we stood alongside his bed. He unzipped my dress and I let it fall around my ankles. I stepped out of it, unclashed my brassiere, let it slip slowly away from my body, and posed for him until he

reached for me again. I suffered another embrace, then bade him huskily to undress.

"We got plenty of time, baby," he said, but obediently sank onto the edge of the bed to remove his boots. His vulpine grin flooded me with reminiscent fury—memories of months of supercilious smiles and caustic remarks.

I grabbed the ashtray off the nightstand and smashed it against his temple. He howled and toppled off the bed to his knees.

"You bitch," he moaned.

"Don't you mean *son-of-a-bitch*?" I said in the lower register I affect at Danforth.

Whether realization of my identity penetrated his pain and disorientation I could not determine. I did not take time to gloat. He was much taller and stronger than I; if I had to struggle with him I would surely lose the fight. I struck again with the ashtray, this time at the back of his skull, and he fell forward to the floor, still moaning.

I strangled him, appropriately, with my brassiere.

I dressed calmly, wiped surfaces and items I had touched after removing my gloves, ascertained I had left nothing behind to incriminate myself, and departed.

Mother would not have understood her pragmatic daughter Erica. But perhaps Claymore, of all people, would have. It was he, after all, who had said, "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."

Sometimes, so does a woman.

Managing Editor of FMAM and an Assistant Editor at Mysterical-E, Barry Ergang has had his fiction, poetry, and non-fiction appear in a variety of publications, print and electronic, including Stereophile, Mindfire Renewed, Writers Post Journal, Flashshot, The Listening Eye, QPB Presents the World's Best Shortest Stories, Mystery File, Mystery Readers Journal, Web Mystery Magazine, The Pedestal Magazine, and Moondance. http://www.geocities.com/b_ergang/index.html

Spot Illustration Copyright © 2006 Gin E.L. Fenton





It's Twilight Time

Some writers are wall-flowers. They write in order to work out their demons or as a way to interact with a world they deem hostile or inscrutable. Others enjoy the solitude that is inherent in the world of the written word. Of course, there's the other side of the spectrum, as well. There exists in the publishing business certain personalities whose birthright places them among the flamboyant and extroverted of the world. Publicity and a sense of entitlement come naturally to them. Somewhere between the painfully shy and the aggravatingly ostentatious lies the realm of talent and drive. Writers in this category are genuine and warm. They are comfortable in their own skins. They can maintain their individuality even when group-think is the order of the day. These are the true talents of the writing world; the work horses of subtle ambition. It is within this rarified realm that Lida Quillen moves with ease and self-assurance.

As a motorcycle-riding, expert pistol-shooting, card-carrying member of Mensa, Lida Quillen is anything but shy, and when it comes to the publishing industry, she has a lot to share. Like many writers, she's loved the craft for as long as she can remember. "By 1995 I had garnered publication credits in over twenty print publications with my short stories, poetry, and articles." But when she discovered the internet in 1997 she quickly realized that she was among a tiny population of writers whose work had actually seen print. "I was amazed at the number of highly talented and yet unpublished writers I kept meeting online," she says. "I could feel their anguish and frustration at not being able to break into print."

Somewhere in the process of meeting these writers, an idea formed in Quillen's head. She decided do something about what she saw as a misfortune of chance. In July of 1998, she created Twilight Times e-zine for the purpose of showcasing some of the great writers she'd met. "It was a chance to give these writers an outlet," she says. In a natural progression from electronic magazine publishing, Quillen launched Twilight Times Books in January 1999. "I listened to writers who could not get their novels published. I started [the publishing company] to present the works of talented but under-published novelists."

Twilight Times Books began life as an e-publisher, publishing and distributing books in electronic formats. After five years Quillen decided upon a bold move for her publishing company. Where many e-publishers were jumping into the Print On Demand (POD) publishing arena, she decided to shepherd her company into the territory of traditional small press. "I listened to other e-publishers who went the POD route complain that they could not get

their books into bookstores and could not get mainstream reviews. So, in November 2003, I decided to go with a traditional publishing model—by traditional I mean national distribution and the author pays nothing. We're possibly the only e-publisher who has transitioned to traditional print publishing as opposed to POD publishing." By 2005 Quillen was able to launch a new imprint to Twilight Times called Paladin Timeless Books, secure national print distribution for her company's products, and acquire the rights to publish Futures Mystery Anthology Magazine.

The company's growth is steady, and Quillen is looking forward to the future. "In 2005 we gave authors twelve promo copies of their print books at no charge. In 2006 we will offer a small advance to new authors and current authors with new books." She also plans to increase the marketing budget for new titles launched in 2006 and 2007. Her goal? "To be a mid-list publisher with initial print runs of five thousand-plus for each title by 2010."

How does one go from an Internet e-publisher to a growing traditional small press? In a world where a publisher is only as good as its last acquisition, Quillen has found a niche market that other presses all but ignore. "We accept cross-genre books, or books with more of a literary flavor for publication." For an example of this she points to Robina Williams's *Jerome and the Seraph* (a free copy is included in the Twilight Times SF/F sampler at <http://twilight-timesbooks.com/freebies.html#TTBooks>). "This book is a mix of fantasy, Pre-Raphaelite art, mythology, and quantum physics," she says. "I have very eclectic tastes [but] I strongly feel that anyone who likes to read can read any of our books and enjoy them...even books outside their normal area of interest."

Among the genres on Quillen's current list of books one will find Science Fiction and Fantasy (Quillen's personal favorites), as well as Action/Adventure, Literary, Magic Realism, Historical, Mystery, and Thrillers. She's open to other genres, however. "I had not published romance until a college professor who had 3400-plus Regency romances on his bookshelf decided to write one," for instance. What she is interested

in is not genre-specific, but works that are "exemplary, that transcend genres and/or are beautifully written." She adds that novelists whose work has been published in Twilight Times e-zine or Futures Mystery Anthology Magazine will be given first consideration when Twilight Times Books and Paladin Timeless Books are open for submissions.

Consideration is only the proverbial foot in the door, however. There is a lot of work that must come before an author submits a manuscript. "I am willing to look at any book, in any genre, that is well-written and entertaining, but the author must have a unique story to tell and [should have] obtained the services of an editor or talented friend and polished the book to the best of his or her ability prior to submission. One misconception writers have is expecting the first or second draft of their novel will be accepted for publication."

Once accepted, an author should be prepared for the process of publishing. "Another misconception is expecting a significant advance or a ten city book tour will be provided by a small press publisher." Instead, she says, an author should expect Twilight Times Books and Paladin Timeless Books to operate the same way as any other publisher, but without the big budget. "We offer a standard royalty and we pay all expenses pertaining to publication of e-books or print books, including galley copies to reviewers, edits, copy edits, press releases, as well as the formatting, design, artwork, interior layout, and actual printing of the book—that's pretty much the role of a mainstream publisher."

Aside from what the publisher does for the author, Quillen says that an author has a job to do, as well. Since acceptance of a manuscript is only the beginning of the publishing process, she says that an author should be "patient with [the] process [...] I need an author who will work with us to make his or her manuscript the very best writing of which they are capable." The process is long and arduous. "Our editing process is accomplished electronically. We have an editor go over the manuscript, then the file goes back to the author with notations and suggestions. The author makes the changes he or she deems necessary, and sends the manu-

script back me. I then assign a copy editor who goes over the manuscript. The file goes back to the author who makes the changes—or not—then sends the file to me for final edits [...] the author generally has the last word on changes.”

Twilight Times normally publishes titles in e-book format first, then as trade paperbacks. “An author needs to be prepared to go through the editing process all over again prior to taking the book to print.” Patience with the process. That’s what is required.

Though some may find the process of taking a book to print a tedious endeavor, Quillen finds the procedure fascinating and challenging. “I enjoy giving talented authors their first break and watching them develop as writers. Fortunately, I also enjoy the publishing process. We have authors, editors, and artists from countries around the world. A new book from an author in Denmark might have a Canadian editor and cover artwork from an artist in Australia. Finding the best editor for a particular author, commissioning the artwork, bringing out the

book in various formats, sending it around to the distributors, handling the marketing and promo...it’s all part of the publishing process—a most interesting and challenging endeavor.”

In the end, the thing that matters most to Lida Quillen is also what motivated her to become a publisher in the first place, “I am committed to providing an outlet for brilliant authors with books that deserve to see print.”

Bret Wright is the publisher and chief editor of the award-winning ezine Apollo's Lyre—www.apollos-lyre.com. A novelist, poet, and short story writer, Bret has enjoyed success in almost every genre. Drawing from his experience as a profile writer for art magazines, Bret brings a unique voice to “The Informant,” which he hopes will be both helpful and entertaining. You can contact Bret directly at brrite@aol.com.

**See Bret’s ‘SPOTLIGHT’ on FMAM artist
Teresa Tunaley...page 132**



Twilight Times Books is pleased to announce a new imprint, Paladin Timeless Books. We will be open to submissions from February 15 to March 5, 2006.

First consideration will be given to authors previously published by Twilight Times Books, Twilight Times ezine and/or Futures Mystery Anthology Magazine. Our current response time is four weeks to two months. Send a cover letter, synopsis, first chapter and marketing plan in the body of an email message to publisher@twilighttimes.com

See our submission guidelines for more info:
<http://www.paladintimelessbooks.com/subs.html>

>>

Intuition is an appetizer that often precedes a full and satisfying meal.

Gnawing Suspicion

Chick Lang

Illustration Copyright © 2006 Teresa Tunaley



It might have been the cooing of the huge doves in the tall pine trees under which Amboy had pitched his tent the night before. Or perhaps it was the irritating saw of the locusts that had refused to retire when he did, called to each other throughout the night, as if their peculiar ambition was to make sure his was an uneasy sleep. It may even have been the intermittent raindrops that rat-tatted against the canvas shortly before dawn. Whatever the reason, he was wide awake now, and the night creatures appeared to be giving way to the day shift—unreasonably happy cardinals, twittering thrushes, and lambent larks announcing the onset of unavoidable day.

"Get up, Dave," said the raspy voice, cutting through blanket, pillow—penetrating even the flesh and bone of hands against ears.

"Is it time?" offered Amboy in feeble defense.

"The fish are waiting," rebuked the voice.

"Tell them I've been unavoidably detained."

"It doesn't work that way, Dave. Now get up. It's what we came for."

Amboy rolled off his cot, sat upright on the damp ground, and scratched himself—more out of habit than any particular itch.

"Strange. I thought I was up here helping an

old friend catch his wife fooling around."

"Hell, Dave, there's plenty of time for that. Besides, her doctor friend is at a convention until Sunday. Unless she's two-timing him, too, she's at home figuring out more ways to spend my money."

Amboy caught a whiff of brewing coffee on the wind. "So basically, Dan, what you're sayin' is you're payin' me to trout fish—for old times sake."

"For the time being," Dan chuckled. "I need your P.I. skills...and if that's the only way you were going to come visit—so be it."

"I haven't tossed a fly in twenty years."

"Then it's high time you started back. It used to be your favorite pastime."

"Second favorite," Amboy corrected, rubbing his eyes.

"Excuse me. I forgot about the women."

Amboy pulled himself up, stretched against the stiffness of his joints, then reached for his pants. "I wish I could. I'd be a rich man today, Dan, if I'd just been more moderate in my passion."

That's how it started. As a simple fishing trip pursuant to making a simple case of spousal adultery—making a simple divorce possible

for Amboy's old friend Dan Brady.

But things had never been simple for Amboy. Especially where women were concerned. His own three failed marriages attested to that. His ten years as a cop had proved it. Five times wounded. Four times awarded for acts of valor. Yet twice passed over for promotion because of problems in his personal life. Problems that ultimately led him to quit the department and opt for what he believed was a less complicated, less stressful life. For the most part, it hadn't worked out that way.

They found the body—Mrs. Dan Brady—at the bottom of a hill, five feet from the trout stream they were intending to fish. Less than 100 yards from the campsite, through second-growth timber and brush. She was cold and stiff; one foot dangled from the bank and was half-submerged in a large puddle of rainwater.

"My God!" Dan screamed. Over and over—the same two words—changing only in intensity, inflection, and volume.

He dropped to his knees, cradled his wife's battered head in his arms, his vocabulary now down to one word. "Shana," he whispered.

The day became a *mélange* of shock, grief, anger, and bewilderment—a somber play acted out upon a stage that soon filled with uniformed actors wearing police badges or medical insignias. Amboy alternately assumed the part of witness, friend, and determined investigator.

It was in that last role he intended to offset the police department's suspicion that Dan Brady had killed his wife in a fit of rage—rage brought on by her irresponsible spending habits and rumors she was having an affair, even planning to leave him and take half of everything he owned.

"I love her, Dave," Dan said on the day of the funeral. "Would I have divorced her if I could prove she was unfaithful? You're damn right! But I didn't kill her."

Their friendship aside, Amboy felt Dan's argument was compelling.

"Why would I kill her when I could just divorce her? And even if I was angry enough, would I be so stupid as to dump her body nearby...somewhere where I'd be sure to be the

prime suspect?"

During Dan's questioning, the police attempted to counter that logic with accusations he'd panicked, come up with an irrational scheme that included hiring Amboy as little more than a glorified witness to his innocence.

Amboy made phone calls, called in all his markers, eliciting help from his former associates on the force. The results: he garnered a measure of professional courtesy from the out-of-state authorities in whose jurisdiction he now labored to find the truth—which included permission to observe the interrogation (via one-way glass) of all suspects from the compartment adjacent to the interrogation room.

Before the week was out, he had autopsy results, phone records—a plethora of information. None of it was conclusive. There wasn't one piece of evidence that shouted Dan's guilt. On the other hand, there was nothing there to prove he couldn't have done it.

Shana Brady had been dead nearly two days when they found her. There were signs she'd been bound hand and foot, cut loose after she died. Varmints and insects feasted upon her body, both before and after death.

Amboy sat back in his chair, rubbed his eyes, and looked around the motel room. He'd been anxious to be alone, ostensibly to get some rest before another hard day of investigation. Truthfully, he wanted to commune with his thoughts, go through his notes, and ultimately drink himself into a stupor, if needed. He'd slept little since he'd gotten to Ashford—the precedent having been set that first night in a hot, uncomfortable tent.

He poured his third Crown Royal, looked at the skimpy list of suspects: Dan Brady, Dr. Walter Simmons, and the always-convenient mysterious murderer. Dan's alibi was non-existent—prior to the time he'd met Amboy at the airport. Simmons, the cuckolding doctor, had only his wife to corroborate his story. Despite Dan's understanding, the doctor had not gone to a convention. He'd canceled at the last minute, he said—because his wife had become ill. As for the mysterious murderer, his identity was still a mystery.

Amboy unconsciously scratched between

his legs. This time the itch wasn't imaginary.

"Damned redbugs," he mumbled. "That's what the woods are good for."

He sipped his drink, looked over the coroner's lab report, then tried to invent a scenario that would fit the incomplete facts. He was determined to be objective.

What if Dan had done it? he thought suddenly. What if, as the police believed, he was using an old friend—his reputation, his influence—to get him off the hook? Absurd. The case was a stretch at best. And, as Dan himself had intimated, he'd have done a better job concealing it.

As for Dr. Simmons, his involvement with Shana Brady had come out—as such things almost always did: phone records, eyewitnesses to their not-so-clandestine lunches, and hotel clerks who remembered the couple's midday assignations.

Where was the answer? thought Amboy. Somewhere in the pile of pictures and scribbling on the desk? They lay before him like shards of a broken mirror—one sliver missing that might somehow reflect the truth. As he finished his drink, he glanced at the autopsy pictures and scratched savagely once again.

Somewhere out of the growing fog—call it experiential insight; call it a Crown Royal muse—came a glimmer of intuition. He reviewed his notes alongside one of the autopsy images. He looked at photos he'd taken of the inside of Dan Brady's house, compared them with snapshots of Brady birthdays and Christmases. Then he picked up the phone and dialed Dan, asked a question concerning a piece of bedroom furniture. When he got his answer, Amboy hung up, then called Dr. Walter Simmons.

"Yes, I know it's late, Doc, but I think you'll want to hear what I have to say. No, it can't wait. It's a life and death matter...yours. Fifteen minutes of your time, that's all I ask. I'll explain... Good. I'll be there in ten minutes."

It couldn't be that simple, he thought, as he negotiated the always-heavy downtown traffic. Nothing ever was. But this—something he'd seen when the doctor and his wife were interrogated. And something else he'd noticed

about the Brady photos.

The porch lights were on when he pulled up in the rental car and got out. He crossed his fingers in hopes his outrageous story would hold—hold long enough to prove his theory.

Mrs. Simmons met him at the door, ushered him into a large drawing room. "Please sit down," she said, reaching for his hat. "Can I take your coat?"

"Thanks, ma'am. I'll just keep it on for now."

"Okay, Amboy, what's this all about? What do you think you know that I might be interested in?"

Amboy chose a sofa in the middle of the room. "How much do you value your wife, Doc? Enough to cover for her?" He rubbed at the consuming itch.

The doctor sat down in a nearby armchair, adjusted the crotch of his pants, as if protecting a chafe. "Cover for her?"

"Pesky little things, aren't they?"

"What?"

"Redbugs. Nothing short of kerosene will relieve the itch."

"What the hell are you blabbering about?"

"You scratched just now. Just like you did during questioning at the police station. Just like Mrs. Simmons did during *her* interrogation. Redbugs. You get 'em in the woods."

"Hell, you can get—"

"In the woods, Doc. That's where you got yours; that's where I got mine. Must have been a million of 'em out there in the vicinity of where you threw Shana Brady's body. Of course, that was your wife's idea, wasn't it? Shift the blame onto poor old Dan Brady whose only crime was to marry a money-grabbing, unfaithful woman. Any port in a storm, right?"

Dr. Simmons jumped up, stuck his finger in Amboy's face. "Of all the nerve! You dare to—"

"Sit down, Doc. I haven't finished my story." He motioned to Mrs. Simmons. "Come sit by me, ma'am. You're a part of this, too."

The dark-haired woman with too much makeup looked at her husband as if for direction. He nodded. She sat down.

"Nice ring you have there, Mrs. Simmons. I bet it set the doc back a pretty penny."

She mumbled something, then rested her

hand in her lap. She fidgeted with it, scratching herself through fabric.

"Funny thing," said Dave, "there's a cut on Shana Brady's face that resembles the configuration of those diamonds. You must've hit her pretty hard."

"You're crazy! Why, I—"

"He's baiting you, Helen. Don't say anything else." The doctor broke into a smile. "You want me to think you know something...you're willing to keep your mouth shut for a price. Sorry Mr. Amboy—you're not dealing with idiots."

"Adulterers, conspirators, murderers—you're right, not idiots."

"You haven't a shred of proof. Now if you'll be so kind as to leave."

Amboy turned to Mrs. Simmons. "You caught them together, didn't you? At her house. You confronted them, struck Shana Brady in anger. She fell and hit her head on the corner of the nightstand. You forced your husband—what was it, guilt? A nasty divorce? You threatened him, and he agreed to help you haul her up the mountain, drop her off near Dan's favorite fishing spot. A place and agenda you knew about, Doc—since his fishing trip was another opportunity for you to spend time with his wife."

Dr. Simmons leaned forward in his chair. "Are you going to leave, or do I have to call the police?"

"Maybe I'll call them for you, Doc. Maybe I've called them already. Maybe they're outside waiting on a signal from me."

"Walter?"

"Shut up, Helen. He doesn't have anything. It's a bluff, can't you see?"

"You were lucky, Mrs. Simmons. The only blood was on the end table. And you had your husband remove the marble top. Where'd he throw it, ma'am? In the trout stream, I bet. Seemed like the thing to do at the time, didn't it?"

"Walter? Walter!"

Dr. Simmons walked toward a desk. The phone was on the opposite side of the room.

Amboy pulled a .38 from an inside holster. "If you put your hand in that drawer, Doc, you better come out with a cigarette lighter."

"Walter! He's got a gun!"

The doctor turned around, absentmindedly

scratched his upper thigh. "I was—"

Amboy motioned with the revolver. "Come sit down. I'll be through in minute. Where was I? Oh, yes, the tabletop. Will we find it in the stream, Mrs. Simmons?"

Slowly, she buckled at the waist, let her head fall forward into her hands. "Walter?" She began sobbing.

"Dammit, Helen, I said be quiet!"

She jerked her head up, her eyes suddenly flashing. "It's your damned fault, Walter. If you hadn't been—"

"Helen!"

"If you'd kept your pants zipped up...this wouldn't have happened. I hate you!"

Amboy reached in his side pocket and retrieved his cell. He dialed the private number of Detective Willis Claiborne, the officer in charge of the investigation. He glanced first at Helen Simmons, then her husband. She was sobbing, head in hands. He was staring at the ceiling, as if his fate was written there for all to see.

"Detective?" asked Amboy. "Have you ever had chiggers? No, I'm not drinking...yet. You might want to send somebody to the Simmons place. I believe Mrs. Simmons has something important to tell you. Like a confession. How do I know?" He scratched himself again. "Just call it a gnawing suspicion."

Chick Lang is a part-time schoolteacher and computer consultant who spends most of his spare time writing fiction. In the last three years he's garnered over 50 writing credits, including stories accepted for Futures Mysterious Anthology Magazine, its FAME Ezine, ByLine Magazine, Coffee Cramp Magazine, Nimue's Grotto, Hardluck Stories, Christopher Gooch Ezine, Another Realm, Writer's Post Journal, Mysterical-E, Apollo's Lyre, The Writer's Hood, Virginia Adversaria, The Alabama Writer's Conclave Anthology, and placements (including a first place) in assorted writing contests by Writer's Digest and ByLine Magazine. He is currently serving in an editorial capacity for FMAM, The Muse Marquee, and Coffee Cramp Magazine. Presently he lives in Laurel, Mississippi with his wife Cheryl and daughter Natalie. Chick can be contacted at chick_lang@yahoo.com.

>>

Of course you're too smart to fall for it.

How I Learned to Play the Harmon Con

Robert L. Iles*Illustration Copyright © 2006 Laura Givens*

I think if he had wanted to, Chet Harmon could have sold Times Square to the mayor and gotten extra for the traffic lights. He was that good. But he preferred high-volume, low-profile cons to big scores. "A lot less chance of doing big time," he told me once. So over the years he took thousands of schmucks for a little here, a little there, while more daring chiselers sold the Queen Mary, for instance, and came and went. To Auburn State Prison, for instance.

I had watched him operate. A frail little guy with a bad haircut and wearing a suit a couple of sizes too small, he would hang around unnoticed in tourist spots until his practiced eye picked out a mark. Rushing up he'd say, "Excuse me, mister, I just found this ring (necklace; bracelet) and I must run to catch my train to Keokuk. Do you know, does this ballpark (train station; hotel) have a lost-and-found where I might turn it in and leave my name in case there is a reward?"

The mark would reply along the lines of, "Why don't I give you a dollar right now for your share of any reward? I'll turn it in and you can run catch your train."

"A dollar?" Chet would say. "My gosh, this thing must be worth five hun—"

"Okay, here's five dollars—"

"Gee, I'd think the reward would be more like—"

"Shh. All right, hold it down, willya? Here's a twenty, gimme the ring and we'll both be happy."

Of course the jewelry was paste, two-bits in the quantity Chet bought the stuff in, but it looked good unless you were a jeweler.

One night, Chet and I took a break from the card game in Pighead's back room and went to the tavern up front for a drink. Pighead's sister had just closed it to the public and we had the place to ourselves. I kidded Chet that he was getting up in years and should retire. He laughed, said he'd never retire. "My story is a prostitute's in reverse—I started doing it for the money and now I do it for fun. After forty years, I still think I can do the con a little bit better, and I can't wait for the next day to find out. Besides, I gotta hustle. You guys clean me out at poker." Not true. He was as sharp at the table as he was on the street, but he gave away most of the money he made. Shop girls, run-away kids, beggars, anybody he thought needed a boost might get a surprise handful of cash from him. He once told me, "Just like I can spot the marks, I can spot the people who are about ready to jump off a bridge. You don't know how great it is when you're at that point to have someone hand you money."

I asked him how he spotted his marks.

"I don't know. It's a knack. All I know is I want double-Ds from out of town—tourists dishonest enough to cheat me and dumb enough to think they can. That kind swarms into town for the big sporting events. Madison Square Garden is my happy hunting ground on a fight night. The place is full of guys with bloated egos and blotto brains. But when the Ice Capades are there, forget it. Doesn't matter if they're all rich, stupid and from Sheboygan, they wouldn't risk a dime to get the Hope dia-

mond. Just a bunch of old ladies of both sexes and all ages."

"Don't people ask questions, want to think things over?"

"Not the way I do it. From the very first second the name of the game is hurry. 'I have to go catch a train. Take your chance now, mister, before I move on.' A man confronted with the unexpected doesn't think straight. Some are so afraid I'll offer the piece to somebody else they almost shove their money in my pocket. And I keep talking. You control minds when you control the conversation. Everybody says con men are fast talkers, but it just seems that way—we're constant talkers. Until the hook is set, then I let them run with the bait."

I asked him how he could tell out-of-towners from the New Yorkers.

"Come on, Bruck, you do it all the time."

I said I wanted to hear how he did it.

"Okay, if I gotta tell you. Your average tourist has got a map of the city. He's got a camera. He doesn't know how to hail a cab. He buys souvenirs you wouldn't have in your trash can. He tips cabbies and waitresses a dime. He checks his wallet pocket every ten seconds when he's in a crowd but couldn't spot the pickpocket two feet away if there was a neon sign over the guy's head flashing 'Thief.'"

I waved him off, laughing. "I guess you don't think much of people from out of town."

"Oh, don't worry, I know we got our own skinflints and ding-dongs. I just have to tell the hicks from the slicks because the last thing I need is some local mark hunting me down. I need the guy who isn't going to find out he's been taken till he gets back to Sheboygan. Hey, what is this anyhow? All these questions. Gonna try the con yourself?"

"Not a chance, Chet. Just interested. I couldn't do it if I had to."

"Sure you could. I did."

Some weeks later at a poker game I realized Chet hadn't been around for a while. "Anybody seen Charmin' Harmon," I asked.

Uptown Lew seemed about to say something but hesitated, sent a sidelong look at Mickey Two-Hands. Mickey switched his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other, glared

at Lew, and said, "Bellevue. Let's play cards."

The next day I asked around Bellevue Hospital for Chet until I was directed to the charity fracture ward. Ever been in a charity fracture ward? In the summer? The stench was so strong I had to step back out into the hall. But what the hell, I told myself, if they can stand it in there, so can I.

Wrong. The next thing I knew I was back in the hallway on a bench with a young woman in white bending over me. She wanted to know if I was going to be okay.

"I'll make it."

"Who are you here to see?"

"Chet Harmon."

Stitched on her uniform over her breast was Bellevue Orthopedics and pinned under that was a name tag that said Doris. "You a nurse?" I asked.

"Not yet. But somebody has to take care of these people." She took me by the arm and guided me down the long windowless room to a bed at the far end.

Both of Chet's arms and one leg were in casts, the leg held aloft by a rope and pulley rig. A stained bandage circled his head. His eyes were open but he didn't exactly look awake.

"Chet? Chet, you awake?"

A pause for a second that made me think he wasn't, then, without moving his head, he breathed, "Bruck? That you?"

"Wanted to see how you're doing. Anything I can get you?"

"New body."

"What happened?"

"A mark...jumped me. Madison Square Garden."

"Anything else you can tell me?"

"Big guy...Princeton football sweater."

He tried to say more but nothing came out. The woman came to tell me I had to go, that Mr. Harmon couldn't take anymore.

"Wait a minute," I said, "he's trying to tell me something."

But she took me by the elbow and led me out of the room.

I went to a window in the hallway, opened it, sucked in a lungful of the city's smoke and grime and swore I'd remember to appreciate

every day that I could stand on my own two feet to do it.

I found her doing paperwork at a tiny desk in an alcove.

"How long has he been here?" I asked.

She took a clipboard from a wall hook. "Eight days."

"How much longer?"

"Hard to say. It was as near murder as you can get. The casts won't come off for another five, maybe six weeks."

"Holy smoke. What all was broken?"

She read from the clipboard. "Skull fracture with multiple scalp lacerations. Two broken ulnas, a broken humerus. One broken tibia and one fibula. Plus who knows what internal injuries. But the real problem is the concussions. Nobody knows how many he sustained. Even if it's just one, there's no way to tell how much brain damage was done. I talk to him all I can to keep his mental functions going, but I have other patients and the shape he's in..."

"You don't sound too optimistic. Which doctor is taking care of him?"

A look of sympathy for my ignorance. "This is called The Bellevue Scrap Heap. If Mr. Harmon is lucky, a nurse will stop in once or twice a week, an intern maybe. If he's real lucky, a resident once a month. And if you tell anyone I said that, I'll call you a liar."

"What has Chet said to you?"

"One day it's 'Where am I?'; the next, 'Who are you?' But one day he was pretty lucid and talked about jewels."

"Yeah. What about them?"

"It wasn't real clear, but apparently he sold a young man some at Madison Square Garden, and the man came back the next week and beat him up. Now I have to get back to work."

I stopped at the hospital's billing office on my way out and found a Mr. Isaacs was in charge. "How much does a private room with a private nurse cost per week?"

He said eighty-four dollars. I said, "No, per week, not per month."

"That's it. Eighty-four a week, twelve a day."

I knew good hotels that didn't charge that much. I asked him how much a bone specialist charged to look at a patient.

"Five dollars a peek, if you get the best."

"How about a brain specialist?"

"Oh, ho. We only got one. He gets eight per peek, maybe more."

"I'll get back to you," I told Isaacs.

I paused outside on the sidewalk, trying to think of some way to get the money Chet needed for good care at the hospital. If he was on the street, he could earn in ten minutes what it took to pay a whole day's bills. If, if, if. Could I do it? No, not a hope. It took an artist and I wasn't even a hack.

So I tried thinking of how to find his attacker. If I could lay hands on him I'd squeeze until he paid Chet's bills. But dozens, maybe a couple of hundred boys wore Princeton football sweaters.

Go to the repository of arcane information, I told myself—Sergeant Callahan, the city's walking, talking encyclopedia. If anyone could fit the few pieces I had into a portrait of Chet's attacker, it was Sarge. And he could be conveniently found every day at the 83rd precinct house, just one block from Madison Square Garden.

Sergeant Callahan had his feet up on the Charge Desk and his nose in *The New York Times* when I walked in. He glanced around the paper, said, "We're closed for the day, unless you've stopped in with a bribe, in which case put it on the desk. And next time have your sister bring it in." Then: "Oh, it's you."

"Glad to see you, too," I said. "Know any Princeton football players who go to the fights?"

He smiled broadly. "Why?"

"I want to talk to one who would be inclined to beat an old man to within an inch of his life."

His smile grew broader. "And what am I offered?"

"My undying gratitude."

"Ah, I know just where I'll put that."

"All right, a drink."

"Now you're talking. I should have thought of it myself. Well, let's see," and he rattled off a few names. Among them I thought I heard "jewels."

"Did you say jewels?"

"Jules. Not jewels. Like Julian."

Dawn broke. Chet had been saying Jules, not

jewels.

"What's his last name?"

"Careful. You're dealing with Frankie Fenton."

"I'm looking for a college boy, not a Fifth Avenue crook."

"Frankie is Jules' father."

Frankie was indeed a man to take care with, for the Mob took very good care of Frankie. He was the first known to have attended Princeton on a Mob scholarship, where he studied creative accounting and within a week of graduation was magically able to afford Fifth Avenue digs for his tax accounting firm.

I told Callahan I'd settle for finding son Jules.

He said that wouldn't be too hard. "Just get here soon after a fight at the Garden. He has a habit of drinking too much and trying to emulate the men in the ring with anyone at hand, then wind up here. But don't dawdle. Frankie's lawyers arrive immediately after if not sooner, a writ of habeas corpus in hand to spring the boy post-haste and ipso facto. 'Tis wonderful what a father's love can do."

I asked him what that was code for.

"Lad, you must know only high-priced lawyers can get a judge out of bed in the wee hours and, ahem, persuade him to issue a writ. The boy would get out just as surely at a bail hearing in the morning, but that would mean his name and the name of whoever bailed him out would appear on a prosecutor's list, a court clerk's records, and a judge's docket. Frankie knows reporters check those records assiduously and attend bail hearings in hopes of finding a name such as Fenton to build headlines around."

"So what? Teach the boy a lesson."

"And send Frankie's dreams of disporting himself among the bluebloods up in smoke. For years he's been building a rep as law-abiding, hoping to rise in social circles. He's at the front of the line with checkbook in hand for every charity ball and yacht raffle. A son who makes hooligan headlines would not fit the image, so he gets the boy the fastest and most discreet justice money can buy."

"What every red-blooded college boy wants."

"Not as much as this," Callahan said, turning the newspaper to me and pointing to an item

on the Society Page headlined, "Willborns to Tour Greek Islands." The story said Mr. and Mrs. Hollings W. Willborn of Highland Woods, New Jersey, and daughter Shirley would sail aboard their 145-foot yacht on a tour of islands in the Aegean Sea following the young lady's graduation from Princeton June 6th.

"You think the boy wants to tour the Greek islands?" I asked.

"Wants what will be on that boat—the beautiful Miss Willborn. Whose hand he won only three weeks ago according to a story in this very paper. Mr. and Mrs. Willborn were proud to announce the engagement of their darling and her impending wedding June seventh to Julian Fenton. A match that no doubt brought tears of joy to Frankie Fenton's eyes. But today we see the young miss is going to the far side of the world without mention of Julian joining the cruise. Doesn't sound like much of a honeymoon for him, does it?"

I didn't answer. Dawn was breaking again. I asked, "When did you say that announcement appeared?"

"Three weeks ago, thereabouts."

"Callahan, you're a wonder. You gave me the who, I think the why, and possibly—just possibly—the how."

"What are you talking about? And where are you hurrying off to?"

"To the library," I said. "To read that announcement."

"Don't you believe what I just told you?"

"Of course, that's why I want to read it."

A few minutes in the library's newspaper stacks and I had the details I needed—the name of the bride-to-be's Princeton sorority and where the wedding reception was to be held. I phoned her at the sorority house and introduced myself as Paul Ross in the office of the Fox Hills Hunt Club. "I just got a call from a Mr. Julian Fenton," I said, "asking about the return of the deposit on our club's facility for your June seventh wedding, and I wanted to ask—"

A gasp on the other end. "What did you say?"

I repeated, and added, "You see, I understand the wedding isn't going forward, but I have to check because—"

"He asked you to return the deposit to him?"

He actually said that?"

"Yes."

"That dirty, low-down, cheap, rotten, son of—"

"I'm sorry, miss. I didn't mean to cause any trouble. Did I do something wrong?"

"No, you did something right. You just don't understand. But how could you? How could anybody? Listen, my father paid that deposit, so it should go back to him, not that dirty, rotten, conniving—"

"Heh, heh. I guess you're a little steamed at him. Calling off the wedding and all, I guess I would be too if I was in your—"

"What? Did he tell you that? That he called off the wedding? He did not call off the wedding. I did. And my father did, and my mother did. And you want to know why? I'll tell you why. We found out the engagement ring he gave me was paste. Fake. Phony. Like him."

I thanked her, hung up and clapped my hands with glee. Few things are as satisfying as a long-shot hunch coming through.

I went to my office and called Isaacs at Bellevue, told him to expect a big check that afternoon and what to do with it. Then I wrote notes for my next phone call and gave my secretary, Ella, her lines for the upcoming suspense drama.

I told the phone receptionist at the offices of Fenton, Abrams, Vasser & Donnelly I was Malcolm Martin, publisher and editor of the Manhattan Mirror newspaper, and that we were going to print a story that afternoon about Julian Fenton having injured someone in an altercation.

As I had hoped, Frankie Fenton got on the phone blustering and sputtering. A man confronted with the unexpected doesn't think straight.

"You'll be sorry you ever tried to blackmail me," he raged. "My lawyers are on the way to the courthouse right now to file suit."

You control the other guy's mind when you control the conversation.

"There's a misunderstanding," I said. "I called not because I want to print the story but to keep it from being printed—with your help. You see—"

"Never heard of you or your rag."

"Understandable. We're new, our first edition came out three days ago. We're a bi-weekly right now, serving mainly the Upper East Side, but we have the backing of some top people in New York, and we're going to be one of the city's major dailies soon. Our board of directors includes politicians, society leaders, philanthropists. I'm sure you would recognize many of the names."

"I'll call you back. Gimme your number."

"What? Mr. Fenton, I'm on deadline and—" I had also hoped for something like this.

"Gimme your number and hang up."

I did and told Ella, "You're on, babe." When the phone rang seconds later, she answered with, *Manhattan Mirror*, How may I direct your call? ... Just a minute, I'll connect you."

I picked up. "Hello. Malcom Martin, *Manhattan Mirror*."

"Listen, you," Fenton said, "I know people who take care of guys like you. Know what I mean?"

"Of course, of course. Just listen for a minute and I think I can help you and everybody else avoid any, uh, awkwardness—"

"You got thirty seconds"

"I barely have that much time myself."

Take your chance now, mister, I'm in a hurry.

I said, "This story came in from a group of doctors at Bellevue Hospital. It's a long letter describing the squalid conditions in the fracture ward. It tells about a patient there who represents a lot of the others, people with no money, who have to accept whatever care they get after the paying patients have been taken care of."

"This has nothing to do with me."

Keep talking.

"I think you'll see it has a great deal to do with you and in the end can benefit you greatly. You see, this patient told the doctors he was assaulted by someone, your son, he claims, and suffered several broken bones, at least one concussion—"

"My son would not do such a thing. I'll sue you for slander, libel, attempted extortion—"

"If you'll just let me explain. I am trying to do something here that will bring some good out of what could be a bad situation. The doctors say they will send the letter to another paper if

we don't publish it, and they'll keep on sending it till it is published."

"Not one cent. I will not stand for—"

"I understand that. Now, I immediately saw an opportunity to do the hospital good, the doctors some good, and you some good. You're going to come out of this ahead. What do the doctors want? What do the patients want? Better medical care. Not somebody's reputation ruined. Passing along a story that harms you or your son wouldn't do anybody any good."

"Cut the crap."

"Listen, this is a golden opportunity to become one of the most admired men in the city, the whole state. Maybe the nation. Imagine what an impact you could have if you began the campaign for what we'll call the Fenton Medical Foundation. A way to inspire others to give. I've already checked and the hospital will be happy to have your name on the foundation. You would be an inspiration to others and help bring in donations. Someday, the Fenton Medical Foundation could be as famous as the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation."

"How do I know this letter won't wind up in the newspapers anyhow?"

"I've already spoken to the doctors. They've given me till five o'clock, just one hour from now. They'll forget the letter if something is done for the indigent fracture patients. Why would they want anything else?"

"If my friends come over there, you might fall out the window."

"And the doctors would send their letter to another newspaper, and another, until one publishes it."

"My friends can deal with doctors, too."

"If they can find them. How will they know who the doctors are? How many there are? Who might step in if this group can't carry the job on?"

"What about this patient?"

"He lapsed into a deeper coma and isn't expected to make it through the night. That's what drove the doctors to write the letter. Now, I must tell you, the leader of the bunch is a little hot-headed—"

"How do I know you or they won't try to hold me up again?"

"You'll still have every option open to you then that you have now—using your powerful friends on me, suing me and my paper out of existence. But think what happens if you don't do as I'm suggesting? You know these docs will keep trying. Take the choice I'm offering you and you become a famous, admired benefactor of the poor."

Silence on the other end. I was afraid I'd overplayed him. Then, "How much do these quacks want?"

"An endowment of twenty thousand would get the Fenton Medical Foundation off to a great—"

"Five," he said.

"Make it ten. I think the doctors will consider that a significant contribution, show your heart is in the right place. Here's what you need to do right away, before the hospital's business office closes and before I have to put the paper to bed. Send a check to the hospital by messenger, payable to the Fenton Medical Foundation. You want it to go to the hospital business manager, a Mr. Isaacs. Once he has it, I won't have to publish this letter and the doctors won't have any reason to send it to any other newspaper. But hurry, because—"

"All right. I know when I'm being held up. I'm going to send a check for seven thousand. If you or the doctors or the patient or anyone else ever tells this story to anyone and it gets out, you and your newspaper will meet with some significant disappointments, that patient will wish he'd died in his sleep if he ever wakes up, and those docs will wish they'd never heard of me. Understand?"

"Of course. But hurry, we don't have much—"

"All right, all right."

"And one more thing—tell your clients and friends what a great tax deduction contributions to the Fenton Medical Foundation would be."

I hung up and hustled over to Bellevue to watch from a distance as a messenger delivered an envelope to Isaacs, saw his eyes light up when he opened it. He signed a receipt for the messenger, then danced around his desk with the check before running off to put it in the day's deposit bag.

It took quite a while, but Chet, who had not lapsed into a coma, recovered, and soon thereafter was back to making the visits of double D tourists memorable.

I went to check out the fracture ward a couple of weeks after Chet's recovery and found it was gone. In its place were clean, freshly decorated and furnished quarters with air conditioning. Doctors and nurses bustled about. I stopped Doris, now wearing a nurse's cap and insignia, and asked if she knew how it had all come about.

"All I know is one day a crew came in, put in windows, cleaned everything, walls, floor, ceiling. Remodeled the whole place. And put that little plaque up there." She pointed to a brass plate over the door that said, "The Fenton Medical Foundation, founded June 1949."

Doris went on. "But nobody I know calls it that. It's Harmon's Haven. He comes in with handfuls of money every few days and spreads it around to patients, doctors, nurses, anyone here. And, now if you will excuse me."

Isaacs in the business office said the first donation from Fenton was followed in a few days by a trickle that became a stream and then a river. "It's funny, the names on the checks are from two distinct groups, the upper crust and people the newspapers say are from the underworld. What would those two groups have in common?"

Sergeant Callahan told me about a year later the Fenton kid wasn't showing up on fight nights anymore. "And the word I get is there's a guy named Julian Fenton doing five-to-seven in Auburn for felonious assault. But it's got to be somebody else with the same name, doesn't it? Our Julian's father could surely buy him out of a charge like that."

"Yeah, I guess he could," I said. "If he wanted to."

Bob Iles is the author of a book of short stories about Private Investigator Peter B. Bruck, a novel, a short novel in an Eppie-winning anthology, and a prize-winning stage play. He lives on the outskirts of Olathe, Kansas, listening to the frogs, the hogs and the dogs until his muse speaks.

POSTWAR Dinosaur Blues

Darrell Bain

After the Vietnam War, the hard drinking, adventurous Williard brothers decide to go hunting for a dinosaur rumored to be living in the Congo. Flying a beat up old plane, pursued by the Mafia, carrying a half million in drug money they don't know they have; they are shot at, shot down, almost eaten by Mokele Mbembe and finally are captured by a tribe of Pygmies.



Adventure / Suspense
ISBN 1-933353-65-1

"...the narrative flows smoothly from one looming disaster to the next, and we end up with a great adventure tale, told with comedic overtones. Highly recommended to all lovers of action and adventure. Five Stars."

Reviewed by Bill Riepe, Amazing Authors Showcase.

Darrell Bain is the author of two dozen books in various genres, including the best-selling SF novels, *Alien Infection* and *Strange Valley*. Darrell served in the military and his two stints in Vietnam formed the basis for his first published novel, *Medics Wild!* *Postwar Dinosaur Blues* is the sequel to *Medics Wild!*

Visit Darrell's website: www.darrellbain.com

POSTWAR DINOSAUR BLUES is available through your favorite local bookstore and online booksellers. Copies can be ordered directly from the publisher and also via the internet at <http://twilighttimesbooks.com/media-room/>. Distributed by B.C.H., Baker & Taylor and Ingram.


Paladin Timeless Books
an imprint of
Twilight Times Books
Kingsport, Tennessee

>>

Buddy thought he had it all sewed up...until blood gave up its secrets...with a little help from a friend!

Blood Secrets

R. B. Swets

Illustration Copyright © 2006 Teresa Tunaley



I'd been dead for an hour by the time the cops got to the house. Bleeding all over the clean white carpets. Leave it to Buddy to make a mess. Never could do anything right.

They say confession is good for the soul. Well, they'd be wrong. Confessing ain't what I'm doing here. I shouldn't oughta be able to do it, either. After all, I died. They all said I died. Died before my time.

Last thing I remember hearing was Buddy screaming at the top of his lungs. The cops had him by the arms by that time. Don't know how I heard him. After all, as I keep telling you, I'd been dead for at least an hour.

First thing I remember is the smell of my mother, holding me close, singing in my ears. Safe, warm, at home, fed and snuggled up in her embrace. That didn't last long enough to my liking. Wasn't long before Buddy came into the picture, snatching me out of Mother's arms, holding me up against his big stomach, whining how I were his, not nobody else's. Mother

couldn't stop him.

I know she tried. Buddy still has the scars. He killed her, too, you know.

Nobody did anything about Mother. But me, well, that's a different story.

When the cops got to the house, a big hand reached down and cuddled me up from the blood-sticky carpet, whispering old songs into my ears. He wrapped me up in a warm blanket, and I rode somewhere in a huge flashing loud vehicle. Didn't never cotton to no cars, you know. Too nervous making. Never knew which way was up.

Buddy drove a truck. A big red black-wheeled double-cabbed behemoth of a truck. When they drove me out of the front yard, we passed the truck. A big meaty cop had Buddy spread-eagled against the cab, patting him down in places even his momma hadn't seen in years.

I smiled through my pain, knowing he was gonna get his. They'd find my Mother in the basement, they'd match him to the crime, and the truth would be out.

The truth is always out there, you see. All you gotta do is make it come screaming and kicking into the light.

I did that. Me myself alone my lonesome.

When Buddy came home from the garage the night before, he'd smelled of liquor and cigar smoke, and a scent I'd never felt before. Some exotic something or other that had his face stretched into a grin that would frighten the dead.

I was sleeping on the front porch in the old white rocking chair, my favorite spot of all the spots in that ancient creaking house of his.

He came up the front walk, saw me, and

stopped dead in his tracks. He frowned, mumbling something under his breath.

Next thing I knew he'd jerked me up out of the rocking chair without so much as a by your leave, or "I'm sorry." Dragged me down the hallway into the back storage bedroom, threw me across the bed and locked the bolt on the door.

I got up from the chenille spread and stalked over to the door, trying to hear what happened on the other side.

He'd left the house again, that much I could tell. When his footsteps headed back toward me, they were heavier, dragging, like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

I heard him stop just outside the door and thought as hard as I could, "Buddy, open the door. Please, Buddy, open the door!" But of course he couldn't hear me. Never did have good hearing that one. Not Buddy. No siree.

So I put Plan B into effect. Walked over to the windowsill and creaked it up a few more inches. The old house had secrets, it did, one of them being this window never were shut all the way. Couldn't close it if you were The Hulk.

I squeezed through the opening and sneaked along the roof's edge, being careful not to slip. Didn't want to die before I got back into the house to see what he was up to.

He never saw me come back inside.

But I was there. Peeking through the crack between the edge of the kitchen door and the living room. Seeing him standing there over a bleeding body.

Buddy's breath came in hard sucking sounds, and that's when I noticed he were crying, like a little boy. "Why'd you have ta fight me? Why'd you have to make me go and do this?"

I pulled my sight away from the crack in the door just in time, sneaking over behind the pantry door, sliding it closed barely two seconds before Buddy came barreling into the kitchen.

What little light there was helped me see him scrambling around under the sink. He pulled out a bottle of dish detergent then threw it into the sink. Next thing he dragged out was the bottle of Clorox. That he kept, grabbing it in one meaty fist and scrambling back into the

other room.

I sneaked out of the pantry and made it through the door behind him before it slanted closed. I ran for the hidey hole behind the couch. Funny thing, he never heard me. Guess he was concentrating too hard on his task.

All I could see from behind the couch were his feet, shuffling back and forth, and the liquid of the Clorox pouring over the carpet. Buddy kept muttering something about cleaning up the evidence.

I couldn't let that happen. Not again. I'd make damn sure he got caught this time.

So, when I heard his old truck start up in the driveway, I snuck out from behind the couch and walked over to the bleeding body. It weren't nobody I knew, but I knew if I got some of it on me, the evidence wouldn't go away that easy.

Problem was, Buddy came back. Seems the truck didn't stay started. He stomped into the living room, glanced over at his handiwork, and saw me standing there.

He screamed. Words I didn't know he knew came spewing out of his mouth.

"You bastard! I thought I locked you up in the spare room! How the hell?!"

He reached down to grab me so I bit him and dug my claws into his arm.

That's when he hit me with his fist, and that's when I started to die.

He threw me down on the floor and straightened up all of a sudden.

As my hearing faded away, I could hear the sound of wailing coming closer and closer. Sirens. Lots of em.

So that's how I ended up covered in blood, lying on the carpet in the middle of Buddy Harper's living room.

When they got me to the hospital, one of the doctors yelled out, "Hey, what's this damn cat doing here?"

And the cop who held me said, "He's our best witness. I want every bit of blood off him you can get, you hear me? And you'd better save his life, or I'm gonna have your medical license!"

So the doctors saved my life, and the blood evidence, along with some not so small chunks of my fur, ended up being prime evidence in

the trial of Buddy Harper for the first degree murder and rape of Blaze Carpenter, a local hooker.

And the cop? Well, he feeds me the best from his table, and his wife, well, she's quite a looker. There's a baby on the way, and yea, I like it here.

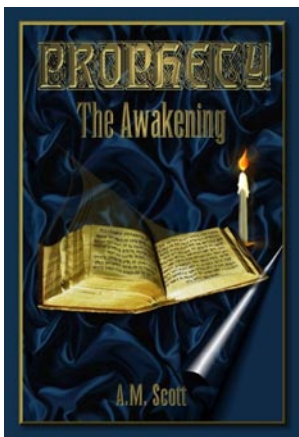
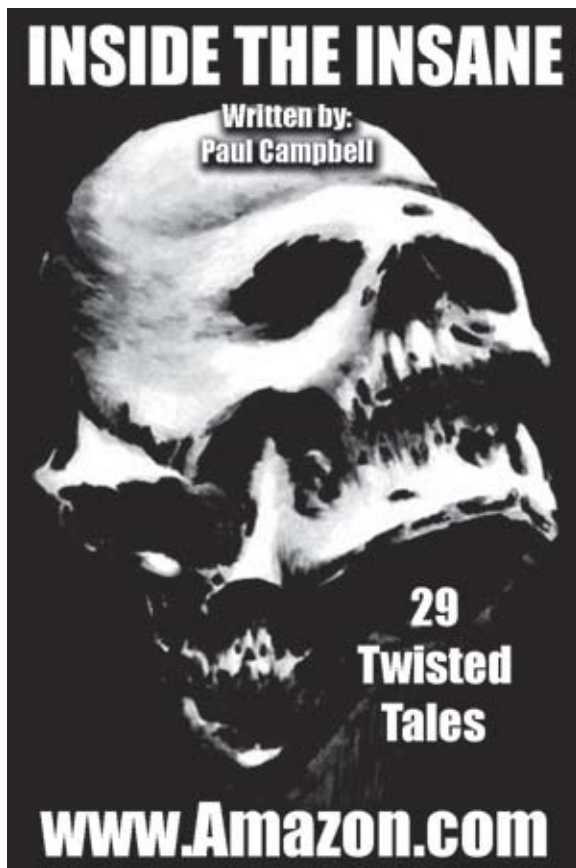
And yea, they found my momma's body buried in the basement along with the tiny carcasses of my litter mates.

Next to that were the bodies of Buddy's momma and daddy, who everybody thought had retired and moved to Florida years ago.

Mack, that's the cop, says I got a home here long as I want. He's also making damn sure I keep the last eight of my nine lives.

After all, being a cat detective ain't easy. Sometimes you gotta get bloody.

R. B. Swets has been writing for publication since the age of eight. Her first published mystery story was "Christmas Blues" in the December, 2002 issue of FMAM. RB is a member of MWA-Florida, Short Mystery Fiction Society, and is the Music Director at Boca West Community UMC in Boca Raton.



ISBN: 1-931201-32-3 New Age
Available from Twilight Times Books
<http://twilighttimesbooks.com/>

PROPHECY: *THE AWAKENING*

by Ardy M. Scott

What if you had to share your consciousness with a benign, but ancient being on a mission?

What if you had to make life or death decisions with sketchy knowledge of the issues at stake?

What if the balance between Light and Dark has shifted — giving Dark the upper hand?

The answers can be found in "Prophecy: The Awakening" and a New Age realm where the inhabitants travel astral planes, converse with the gods and use computers to unite their efforts.

>>

For some people marital problems lead to divorce. For others...

The Perfect Marriage

Neil Davies

Illustration Copyright © 2006 Teri Santitoro



3rd March, 11:30pm

I don't think I can pinpoint exactly when I decided to kill my wife.

You see, I think it's an idea that's been growing for some time, an idea whose time has come, so to speak. All couples argue, true. All couples hate each other at times, also true. But when it gets to the stage we're at now, where how I feel about her is so strong, so overwhelming, so hateful.... Well, murder seems the best way out of things.

I know what you're thinking. Why not divorce like other couples do? Why go to this extreme?

Without going into details let me say one word. Money.

Okay, some details then. For a start I doubt she'd give me a divorce. She relies too much on my salary. Second, I couldn't afford a divorce. The way this country is, she'd get more of my money than I would.

No, sorry. My mind's made up. Like I say, don't know exactly when it happened but it's happened.

She has to die.

5th March, 10:45pm

I hate coming home!

Work's bad enough with people putting on me all day, but walk through the front door at the end of the day and it starts.....nagging,

shouting, swearing.

The house is a tip. I'm out at work all day, she's in the house or round at her friends' houses, so whose fault is it that the house isn't clean? Mine of course! Everything's my fault as far as she's concerned.

I've had another day to think about it and I haven't changed my mind. Now all I have to do is think of a way to do it.

6th March, 6:10pm

Wonder if the police can trace things back to the shops like in the movies? I bought the rat poison with cash; I'm not stupid enough to use a cheque or credit card, too easily traced. Still, I wonder how clever they are these days

Anyway, tonight's the night. I've offered to make the evening meal, something I do occasionally so she's not suspicious about that. A good proportion of rat poison in her chicken should do the trick, and I can be one grieving widower cursing the lack of care in supermarket food preparation and blaming general lack of standards for food poisoning.

I'm shaking with the excitement. Not easy to cook like this, but I'll manage.

8:00pm

Damn!

Just when exactly did she turn vegetarian?

I have had to sit there watching my freedom being scraped off the plate and thrown out the door. An argument followed, of course. I never listened to what she said anymore! Why didn't I take any notice of her? If I worked less and spent more time at home I'd have known she'd stopped eating meat!

Calm down. It's not over yet. Time for another plan.

She must die!

7th March, 9:30am

There was a dead cat on the doorstep this morning.

Not my fault. Well, okay, maybe it is my fault a bit, but how was I to know she'd throw the food

out the door in a fit of pique?

Anyway, time for plan B. It's quiet here at work at the moment. Gives me time to think. I already have an idea. Electrocutation.

How do I make sure I don't get electrocuted instead? By a bit of clever mis-wiring on the vacuum cleaner, of course. Her mother's due to visit day after tomorrow which means tomorrow she'll be cleaning up the house because if there's one thing we agree on it's how irritating her mother's "holier-than-thou" attitude towards house cleanliness is! A visit from her mother is one of the few times she does clean the house.

A chance I might use the vacuum first? Don't make me laugh! That's woman's work that is. I'm out earning money, she cleans the house... well, she should but she doesn't. That's one of the reasons I'm doing this!

8th March, 10:00am

It's painful this excitement, waiting for the phone to ring, preparing myself for the performance of the century as I take the news of my wife's demise.

Yes, I did some rewiring last night and everything's ready to go.

Hang on. Who's going to phone? God, I'm stupid sometimes. No one will know she's dead until I get home and "discover" the body.

No problem, just need to refine the act slightly and make a sobbing phone call to the police. No, maybe the ambulance would be better, after all I'm not meant to know she's dead, particularly. Surely I'd be concerned to get her treated in case there was a chance she survived? Was there a chance? I doubt it, not with the job I did!

There were a couple more dead cats in the garden this morning. You'd think owners would feed them occasionally so they didn't go looking for scraps!

11:45pm

The electrician says it's going to cost me over £1000 to get the house properly checked out. Damn!

My "darling" wife? Still alive! Her mother's funeral will be sometime next week, no doubt.

How was I to know she was going to come visiting a day early and insist on cleaning up the house herself? Still, no great loss to the world.

Suppose I'd better get back down stairs and do the comforting bit. It's not easy you know. Life's hard sometimes!

19th March, 12:45pm

It's been a tough week, all this pretence, all this "compassion." At least now her mother's in the ground, I can get on with things. In fact, the whole business has given me an idea.

I'm tired of subtlety. Time for something more direct.

I've "borrowed" a gun and some bullets from a friend of ours who's in a local gun club. He won't miss it until it's all over.

Poor Susan, so depressed at losing her mother, especially through an accident right in front of her. Guess she couldn't handle it, decided to end it all. She must have stolen the gun earlier in the evening when we were round at our friend's having a quiet drink to try to forget the last few days. I never saw it coming, honest.

Well, that's what I'll tell the police anyway.

Where did I put the gun? I was sure I hid it in the bedside drawer. Must be getting forgetful with all the stress. Damn, here she is as well, coming up the stairs. This was meant to be the ideal time. Everyone knows I work late in my "home office" while she comes to bed on her own. Where the hell did I put it?

22nd June, 10:20am

I don't think I can pinpoint exactly when I decided to kill my husband.

I'm not even sure now whether it was before I found his diary or after, it just seems an idea that should have been there all along. Whether it was or not seems irrelevant.

I can almost forgive him for killing my mother, she did tend to interfere and get in the way, and maybe even for the cats, although for some strange reason that seems the harder of the

two. But the fact he did these killings purely by accident while trying to kill me.... Well, that's just too much to bear. I mean, have you ever heard of such incompetence? And then leaving the gun where I could find it so easily?

He deserved to die!

In truth, he helped me considerably in the end. The death of my mother and his suitably edited diary both covered the reasons for his "suicide" and for any erratic behaviour by me.

Okay, I admit bursting into laughter at his graveside was perhaps pushing it but I couldn't help myself, and I think I got away with no more than a few pitying looks! Even the policeman investigating the whole thing put his arm around me and said some comforting words.

I don't think I'll be looking for anyone to replace my dear departed husband –not for quite some time anyway. Time to enjoy my freedom. Coming here to the Caribbean is just the start. Just look at how blue that sea is!

Guess all those years of "happy" marriage finally paid off.

Neil Davies lives in the North West of England with his wife and two children and works with computers. In the past year he has had stories published on several websites, including the winning story in the onewritten.com Halloween competition, and is awaiting the publication, later this year, of his first novel, a science fiction detective story entitled A World Of Assassins.





>>
Pretending to be Sam Spade can get you into trouble.

The Frisco Frame

Arthur C. Carey

Illustration Copyright © 2006 Laura Givens



"Easy on the smelling salts," a voice said. "Help him up."

Just above the thick weave of the carpet, I saw a pair of expensive brown leather shoes wavering like road tar under an August sun. Strong arms jerked me up and shoved me deep into a chair.

"Feeling better? I'm Detective Myron Feldstein—Homicide."

The speaker, a sallow-faced, gray-haired man, sounded bored. He wore rumpled tan pants and a dark brown wool sports jacket, the kind usually on sale for \$99 at Macy's on holiday weekends. *Who wears imported English leather shoes and cheap sports jackets?*

"What." A tsunami of pain washed up in the back of my head. I flinched and put up a hand. Like my vision, my mind began to clear.

"Mr. Sloan," he said impatiently.

"Dr. Sloan," I corrected. "Dr. Charles Sloan." I hadn't spent three years getting a Ph.D. in English at USC and gone \$17,000 in debt to be Mr. Anybody!

"Okay, Dr. Sloan," he continued, unruffled. He flipped open a notebook. "The 911 dispatcher got a frantic call from a Marion Munson. She said her husband had been shot to death. When the police got here, they found the husband dead on the floor and you unconscious beside him."

He paused, waiting for a reaction, and then continued. "She said you and she had been having an affair, and her husband came home unexpectedly. When he got a gun out of the bedroom, you wrestled it away from him and killed him. She said she whacked you with an ash-tray." He nodded to a plastic bag containing a heavy glass object on the top of the bar. "It's got blood on it. We'll see if it's yours."

I touched the back of my head again and winced. A Fourth of July's worth of rockets exploded before my eyes.

The detective fell silent while a medic checked the back of my head and waved three fingers in my face. When my finger count matched his, he said, "no concussion," took a blood sample, and left.

"Where's Mrs. Munson?" I asked, still shaky. "Why would she say we were having an affair?"

"Mrs. Munson?" The detective raised an eyebrow. "She's resting in a bedroom. Still upset over the death of her husband." He gave me the eye. "Did you kill him? An accident? Self-defense, maybe?" Warmth and understanding flooded his voice but didn't reach his eyes. "She's a beautiful woman and I can understand if..."

"No, I didn't kill him! She gave me a drink... bourbon, I think. It must have been drugged. You can test it."

He gestured to a second plastic bag on the bar top, this one holding a glass. "That glass smelled like gin. We'll see about drugs after your blood is tested."

"Then she washed it out and refilled it! I was drinking bourbon!"

He frowned at me and stood. "We need to

talk at greater length, Mr. ...Dr. Sloan. Not here, though."

The "not here" the detective mentioned turned out to be police headquarters, and I spent the night answering questions. Feldstein had a partner, a buzz-cut, whiskey-voiced guy who acted as if he wouldn't believe his own mother. They played good cop, bad cop, and when that didn't work, wore me down with clouds of cigarette smoke, sarcasm, disbelief, exhaustion, and repetitive questions, rephrased just enough to trap me into conflicting answers.

At 5 a.m., they gave up and I was escorted to a sterile, one-room apartment with ample ventilation but no view and no privacy. I had never been in a cell before. The walls pressed in on me, and I recalled bitterly the first time I laid eyes on Marion Munson. She played me for a sucker from the beginning.

It was a brisk summer day in Frisco—as transplanted Midwesterners like myself call San Francisco, to the chagrin of natives. I was concluding one of the tours I lead, retracing the fictional path of Sam Spade, Dashiell Hammett's unforgettable sleuth in *The Maltese Falcon*. The last stop was lunch at Spade's favorite restaurant, John's Grill on Ellis Street. On the menu for only \$26.95 is Spade's usual meal of chops, baked potato, and sliced tomato. You can top it off with a too-sweet (at least for me) Bloody Brigid (vodka, grenadine, and soda over crushed ice). I usually settle for the seafood *cioppino à la marinara* and a glass of good Chardonnay; but for this occasion, I had ordered a Brigid, named after the treacherous, whiny wench Mary Astor played in the third film version of *The Maltese Falcon*.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not a detective. I'm an English professor at San Francisco University. As much as I admire Shakespeare's sonnets, I'm really hooked on detective stories, and I teach a class about how to write them. Or, at least try to write them.

To pay my dues at the gym, I lead Saturday walks for mystery story aficionados. I introduce them to locations in the city immortalized in "who-dun-its." When I show up, I suspect some

members of my audience are disappointed. They probably expect to see a tall, pipe-smoking Sherlock Holmes look-alike, tricked out in a deer-stalker hat and checkered great coat. Actually, I thought about doing just that; but it's pretty hard to pull off when you're a 5-foot, 10-inch, African-American body-builder in his 30s who wears an earring.

On that Saturday, as members of my tour group filtered out of the restaurant, Marion Munson walked up. Sam Spade would probably have described her as *"a blonde bombshell, the munitions nicely packaged but clearly lethal."*

As I often do, struggling to re-create Spade's cynical mindset, I tried to put myself in his scuffed brown shoes. What would *he* have thought?

(Spade knew right away she was trouble with a capital T, wreathed in a cloud of gray smoke drifting his way like fog off the bay. She looked at him coolly, like a discriminating diner selecting a live lobster from a tank at an expensive restaurant. Her eyes, wary as a cat's, teased him. "Mr. Spade.")

Actually, she wore a white blouse, stone-washed jeans, nylon jacket, Nikes, and carried a shoulder bag with a water bottle stuffed in a mesh pocket.

"Dr. Sloan," she said, swallowing nervously. "I need your help."

The last members of the tour, stuffed with sourdough bread and good fellowship, trickled down the stairs from the grill's banquet room, where they had been admiring the photos and other Hammett memorabilia on the walls. Nursing sore feet, they faced souvenir shopping, a train ride home to the East Bay, or threading their way to the hotels on Nob Hill through the resident crazies and panhandlers on Market Street.

"My husband is planning to murder me," she continued, voice trembling.

Wow! Now how, I wondered, would Sam Spade have handled THAT?

(Her eyes, bottomless pits of pure jade, held Spade's. He had the feeling she had sized him up, totaled the pluses and minuses, and decided he was the only game in town—at least for now. "My husband is planning to kill me," she said evenly.

Her voice rang dully, like a fork dropped on the floor—flat, tuneless.)

I stammered. "I'm sorry, what did you say? I must have misheard you. I thought you said your husband is planning to kill you."

"That's what I said! My husband is planning to murder me!" She swallowed. "My name is Marion Munson."

Munson. Munson. The name almost rang a bell, but I couldn't put a face to it. Especially *her* face: high, curved cheekbones, limpid green eyes, blonde hair framing a heart-shaped face. Not a former student. If she'd been one of my students, I'd have remembered her, no question about it.

"Perhaps my husband's name will be more familiar," she suggested. "He's Charlie 'Have I got a deal for you!' Munson."

Well, she had that right. You couldn't turn on a cable TV channel without seeing the beaming face of good-time Charlie Munson, owner of Tri-City Autorama. With outlets all over the Bay Area, he constantly exhorted TV viewers to "drive on down and we'll make you a deal you can't refuse!"

"Have you called the police?" It was all I could think to say.

"It's not that simple." She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. "He has another woman. He says he'll kill me if I don't give him a divorce."

I shook my head. "I don't know how I can help you. I'm not a detective. I told you that at the start of the tour."

"I know that," she sniffed, "but perhaps you could recommend someone who *could* help me."

(Spade lit a cigarette, the molten glow crawling slowly up the paper cylinder. He studied her. He could use the money, but something about her raised storm warnings. "Why me?" he said bluntly. "The cops do this sort of thing for free.")

"Excuse me," Mrs. Munson said, jerking me back to the present. "I forgot something. I'll be right back." She vanished up the stairs toward the banquet area. When she returned, her shoulder bag bulging, I wrote down the name and telephone number of the detective I turn to for technical advice and gave it to her.

Of all the writers who have made San Francisco

the locale for their stories, my favorite is Hammett, author of *The Falcon* and *The Thin Man*. Trying to decipher clues to locations he referred to in *Falcon* is fun. Even today, you still can trace much of Sam Spade's gritty path to truth and disillusionment.

After we complete our trek of the mean streets of San Francisco, and I have finished talking over the cacophony of shrieking sirens, blaring horns, screeching brakes and revved-up engines, I like to pose a simple question: What's the last line uttered in the best known film version of the *Maltese Falcon*?

Most people jump on the movie's most famous line, the one where Humphrey Bogart gazes at the statue and describes it as "the stuff that dreams are made of." Bad guess. The final line is provided by gruff, burly Ward Bond, who looks quizzically at the black bird containing gold and jewels. His less than memorable observation: "Huh?"

A week had passed after Marion Munson's shocking announcement. I taught my classes at the university and almost forgot about her. Almost, but not quite. Every time one of her husband's commercials appeared on television, I wondered what happened to her. Those green eyes and chiseled features resurfaced in my mind whenever I walked behind a slender woman with blonde hair.

Late one night, as I read my students' feeble efforts at creativity, I wondered—not for the first time—why I did this for a living. Most of the plots, implausible at best, involved incredibly astute observations by detectives who would have put Charlie Chan or Colombo to shame. If that didn't work, *deus ex machina*, the always dependable and invisible hand of fate, resolved all difficulties. I groaned at the wooden characterizations and stilted dialog. And then the phone rang.

Marion Munson, agitated and almost incoherent, spoke frantically. "Professor Sloan! Please, you've got to help me. My husband has been drinking. He's threatened to kill me!" she sobbed. "I'm in the bedroom, afraid to come out. He went out, but he'll be back!"

(Spade stared out the window. On the street be-

low, a neon sign with a broken bulb flashed monotonously over the entrance to a bar, painting his sparsely furnished apartment in alternating bands of red and white. He gripped the telephone receiver and sighed. "Call the police, lady. They'll come. That's what they get paid for."

"Please," the terrified voice continued. "My reputation will be ruined. I'll pay you whatever you ask!"

Spade looked regretfully at the half-empty glass of rum on the table. He brushed aside the Examiner sports page on which he'd been handicapping tomorrow's race card at Bay Meadows. Why couldn't people get in trouble during the day?

"Lock the door," he said. "I'll be right over. Have your checkbook handy."

He hung up, jiggled the headset again, and called Yellow Cab.)

"Really, Mrs. Munson, you must call the police," I said, firmly.

"All right. I will. I will. But please come and help me! You're the only one I could think of to call!"

Flattering, but still no sale. "I'm sorry," I said, "but..."

"Please," she pleaded, "I'll get all my friends to take your tour.... I promise!"

Now THAT was another story. I charged \$50 a head for a walk and talk. "Where are you?"

"On the 11th floor of the Emory Towers. Apartment 1153. Hurry!"

(Spade put on a green tie to go with a green-striped white shirt, shrugged into a rumpled gray suit coat, picked up his hat, and went outside to wait for the cab. On the building's Z-shaped, rusting fire escape, pigeons cooed softly in the dank evening air.)

I grabbed my San Francisco 49ers jacket and dashed out the door. I jumped into my dinged and dented Honda Civic and roared off. The Emory Towers stood on a hill overlooking San Francisco Bay, part of an expensive condo development near Pacific Heights. Pricey digs. I hoped Mrs. Munson's husband didn't return while I was hunting for a parking space among the BMWs, Jags, Lexuses, and Hummers.

Unluckily for me, parking near the Towers was harder to find than an unused elliptical

trainer at the gym on Saturday morning. The hell with it. I double parked. If I got lucky, I'd be out before the car got towed.

She jerked open the door before my second knock. Mascara dripped from her lovely eyes, and she clutched a handkerchief tightly in shaking hands. Oil paintings illuminated by tiny brass lights stared at me from the walls. I almost tripped on the thick Persian rug as she led me to a plush leather chair. "Where's your husband?" I asked apprehensively.

She trembled in a blue chiffon negligee, the right strap of which had slipped off one shoulder. Puffy eyes registered fear. She stumbled around a glass coffee table, knocking over a gold cigarette lighter, and half-sat, half-collapsed onto the couch.

"Where is your husband?" I repeated.

"He...he...left."

"Did you call the police?"

She looked away, refusing to meet my eyes. Tousled blonde hair masked the black stains on her cheeks. "I couldn't. He said he'd kill me if I did."

I stood up. "Well, I can't help you then."

"Please...don't go! Oh God, I need a drink!" She rose unsteadily and walked over to a chrome and walnut bar backed by a large mirror. The glass created a second image of creamy, lightly freckled shoulders and plunging neckline. I studied the row of liquor bottles behind the bar.

"What will you have?" she said, picking up a square glass.

"I don't want a drink. I'm leaving. I suggest you call the police—now!"

"Please. I don't want to drink alone. I don't want to be alone. I'm afraid. Stay for just one drink!" Her eyes bore into mine, but I felt no inclination to tumble into those bottomless green depths.

"All right. A glass of Chardonnay. But only if you call the police!"

She rummaged behind the bar. "I'm sorry. We're out of wine."

"Okay. Make it a weak bourbon and water."

She made the drinks and returned. I watched her take a sip and look at me calculatingly. I took a swallow and then another. She smiled. I

wondered how Spade would have handled this.

"Where is your husband?" Spade repeated.

Red-rimmed eyes held his fearfully. "He...he...ran out, but he'll be back! I know he will!"

"Did you call the police?"

"No, I was afraid to. Charles..."

"Spare me the tears and the lies. What's the game, sweetheart?"

Her fingers gripping the tumbler turned white. "There's no game. He said he'd be right back. Don't leave me! I'll pay you well!"

Spade tossed his hat on the silver-edged glass coffee table. "There wouldn't happen to be bottle of rum in that bar behind you, would there?"

The mocking smile did it. I'd had enough. "I don't believe you, Mrs. Munson. I don't know what game you're playing, but I'm not going to be part of it." I started to get up, but suddenly I saw two Marion Munsons. The room tilted, and I plummeted through sudden darkness. That's all I remember.

(Spade took a few belts of the smooth rum, a far cry from the rot gut he usually drank and studied her. Pieces of the puzzle didn't fit. She seemed relieved, no longer afraid. Her eyes taunted him. He put the glass down and stood up. The room had gotten hotter, and he had trouble focusing his eyes. Uh-oh. Suddenly, the floor rose and sand-bagged him.

He blinked awake and looked up at the stony faces of two detectives. The woman was gone; a body on the floor had been added.

The cops took him downtown to a small, bare, windowless room. They questioned him nonstop for hours.

"We got you cold, this time, shamus," one detective said. "Your prints are on the murder weapon."

Spade squinted in the blinding cone of light bathing his face. "Yeah, they might be," he conceded "...if the killer stuck the gun in my hand when I was in dreamland from the Mickey Finn. Tell me, boys, did you find any gunpowder residue on my hands? If not, you flat feet can keep looking for the killer. You bet on the wrong pony."

The two detectives exchanged silent glances.)

They let me call the university from jail, and I

canceled my classes until further notice, citing illness. I coughed impressively for the department secretary.

Lunch and dinner arrived, bland and forgettable. I missed John's Grill. I would have missed McDonald's. Worse than the food was the boredom. Hour after hour of it. How do inmates stand prison? But 37 hours and 13 minutes after my arrest, Detective Feldstein showed up.

"Good news, doc," he said. "You are free to leave. We won't even put the stay on your credit card."

"What."

"The widow, who doesn't seem to be grieving a lot, has been charged with the murder. Seems she had quite a track record for sleeping around. Hubby had closed out some of her charge accounts and had seen a lawyer about a divorce. She made what the Pentagon would call a pre-emptive strike. You had the means and opportunity," he added, almost regretfully, "but not the motive."

I started to get angry. "I told you that!"

Feldstein shrugged, which I did not interpret as an apology.

"Things didn't look good for you, doc," he said defensively. "First, you were a perfect fit for the frame—oddball prof who's a fan of detective stories. A likely candidate to try and commit the perfect crime, probably egged on by the gorgeous wife." He paused. "And then some of your prints turned up on the gun. Despite what you had said, the glass on the bar with your fingerprints didn't test out for any residue of a barbiturate." Feldstein frowned. "However, there was some in your blood. That was a surprise."

"So what changed your mind?"

"A couple of things. First, when you asked where Mrs. Munson was." He paused. "That was a strange way to refer to a woman you had been having an affair with. I decided either you were a good actor or your relationship with the lady wasn't close. And then there was the glass you'd been drinking out of," Feldstein said.

"Glass."

"Yes, the one we found your fingerprints on. It was a plain water glass, the kind you can find in any restaurant in San Francisco."

"I don't see."

"It was on the table with another one, a tumbler," he continued. "Hers, the one with brandy, was fancy cut glass, Waterford, I think. Why would a woman make a drink in an expensive glass for herself and give a cheap water glass to her lover? That raised some doubts in my mind." He looked at me hopefully, like a parent encouraging a 2-year-old to recite the alphabet.

"See? It didn't square. So I went back and rooted around through the trash. Fortunately, it hadn't been taken out. Guess what? I found another cut glass tumbler. This time the techies found traces of chloral hydrate on it along with bourbon. Your story started to make sense."

I was still lost. "Okay, but how did my finger prints get on the water glass in the first place? I never touched it."

Feldstein nodded, as if I had gotten at least the letters A through D correctly. "That's the question, isn't it? But Mrs. Munson said you had come on to her at lunch after one of those mystery writer tours. My guess is she copped your glass at John's Grill after the lunch," he said patiently. "Kept it and planted it in her apartment." He paused. "And there were other things. The fact tests showed only a trace of gunpowder residue on your hands even though the husband was shot at close range but showed more on hers."

He looked bored with playing teacher to a slow learner. "Finally, the lab rats in forensics studied the gunshot wounds, just like they do on one of those TV shows. The killer had to be left handed. You're right handed. I noticed that when you touched the back of your head." He stifled a yawn. "The lady, on the other hand, is a lefty."

And then he escorted me from jail. The air had never felt so fresh, the sky so blue.

A month or so later, I invited him to lunch at John's Grill—as guest speaker. When the luncheon buzz ebbed, I rose, Bloody Brigid glass in hand, and offered a toast: "To our distinguished speaker, the finest detective in San Francisco, public or private. Myron Feldstein!"

He blushed, actually blushed, lowering his eyes in modesty. *Probably checking to see if all*

the silverware is still there, I thought. Once a cop, always a cop.

Of course I had no idea whether Feldstein was the best detective in the city. Nor did I care. If not for him, I'd still be behind bars, charged with murder. I owed him.

As I stood just inside the entrance to John's grill, passing out business cards to departing tour-goers, Feldstein came down the stairs. I followed him outside. Ellis Street overflowed with kids wearing backpacks, parents pushing strollers, business types in dark suits. A few tourists shivered in shorts, just discovering Mark Twain may have been right when he wrote that the coldest winter he had ever spent had been a summer in San Francisco.

I had one last question. "Did Mrs. Munson ever confess she killed her husband?"

Feldstein shaded his eyes from light reflecting off the windshields of parked cars. The high-pitched pecking of a pneumatic drill drifted from a construction site, and he waited a beat. "No. She's still hanging tough. After you were eliminated as a suspect, she tried to pin it on Munson's brother. Said the murder was his idea."

"Munson had a brother?"

"A younger brother. Lives in Oakland. A lawyer, I think. Had an alibi, though. Look, I gotta go." He pumped my hand. "Try to stay out of trouble, doc. And don't play detective. Promise?"

He walked up the street, melting into the crowd.

I wish I'd been there when the police arrested Mrs. Munson. Spade would have enjoyed it, too.

(Those lovely green eyes flashed bolts of lightning as they slapped the cuffs on her. Spade blew a smoke ring that hung in the air briefly like a cottony life preserver and smiled. "It's your bad luck the frame didn't fit, beautiful. Maybe you can figure out how to do it right the next time—if there is a next time.")

I strolled down the street and entered a dimly lit cocktail lounge. The noon rush had ended. The sole customer, a sandy-haired man with horn-rimmed glasses, looked up at my reflection in the mirror over the bar and removed a

package from the stool next to him. I sat down.

"How did it go?" he asked.

"No worries. The police still think she's the only one involved."

The bartender placed a glass of Chardonnay, Napa Valley 2000, in front of me and moved to the end of the bar, where he buried himself in the Chronicle sports section.

"I ordered for you," the sandy-haired man said, drumming the bar top nervously with manicured finger nails.

"It's obvious your end went smoothly," I said, after taking a sip.

He nodded. "She called him at the auto dealership and said she was sick. Wanted him to come home immediately. You had been out cold about 15 minutes when he walked in the door and saw me."

"Surprise, surprise," I murmured.

"Charlie was even more surprised when I shoved the gun—in my left hand of course—into his stomach and shot him three times." He shuddered. "The blood...even wearing gloves...it was awful."

"And then."

"I handed the gun to Marion," he continued, "and told her to hold it while I moved the body. She was shaking worse than I was." He drained his scotch and soda. "Then I took the gun and put it on the floor next to you and placed your right hand over it lightly. She brought out the glass from the restaurant, poured a little gin in it, and emptied it. I took the tumbler with the knockout drops and told her that'd I'd dispose of it. But when she wasn't looking, I buried it in the trash for the police to find."

"Good. Good," I said. "No trouble getting back to your apartment?"

He shook his head. "No. I caught the first train back under the bay. I had chatted up the night security guard when I got home earlier that night so he'd remember me. Then I ducked out the delivery entrance in back, keeping the door from closing with a folded piece of paper. It was still open when I got back. I was home when the police called to tell me my brother had been murdered.

"You were properly shocked, of course."

He smiled. "Of course. The next day that detec-

tive called and asked where I was the previous night, but the security guard provided me with an alibi."

He looked anxious for a moment. "Does the detective know about my late, lamented brother's will?"

I took another sip and liquid coolness trickled down my throat. *A touch of nutmeg?* "Apparently not. The subject didn't come up."

He exhaled sharply as if a particularly nasty exam at school had been passed successfully. "Good. Then he isn't likely to find out when Marion is convicted of murder, I'll inherit Charlie's auto dealerships, worth, what did we say?"

"Probably \$6-7 million, give or take."

"I'd rather take!" He nudged my shoulder playfully.

I enjoyed my wine. *Definitely better than a Bloody Brigid.* "Feldstein said your sister-in-law swears you were the killer and planned to frame me for the murder."

"Poor Marion," he replied, a false note of sympathy in his voice. "I'm sure she intended to cheat me out of a share of the estate after we killed Charlie—even though it was my idea."

"I expect so."

"And there would have been absolutely nothing I could have done about it without incriminating myself. Absolutely nothing!"

I nodded in sympathy. Life isn't always fair.

He raised his glass. "Well, salud! Better days lie ahead."

I clinked my glass with his. "Did you get the airline tickets to Cancun?"

He smiled. "First class, amigo. And the beaches should be superb. Full moon, too."

I put my arm about his waist and squeezed him affectionately. "It's the stuff that dreams are made of."

Arthur C. Carey is a former newspaper reporter and community college journalism instructor who lives in California. This is his first published story.



"THE BAD NEWS IS, WE'RE BANKRUPT. THE GOOD NEWS IS, I WAS GOING TO FIRE YOU ANYWAY."



>>

Edgar and Macavity winner G. Miki Hayden clamors for social justice in the dark future of *New Pacific*, which follows a corporate security investigator in 2031.

G. Miki Hayden

Mystery Probes Murder Plus 'Issues'

Investigating and solving the mystery of murder often means drawing moral conclusions, if only in the light of non-mainstream codes (in the case of the darker subgenres). So, how do mystery writers typically view their function as arbiters of social justice? And how do they fulfill that role at a time when, as a people, we seem to be so fiercely divided as to what constitutes the "good"?

"We deal with general questions of morality—right versus wrong—in everything we write, and any political issue that directly concerns our crime stories—gun laws, say, or capital punishment—is going to be examined as well," notes author Tom Savage. "That's a part of what we do."

Yet, says Savage, "Mystery novels are entertainment, first and foremost. My primary duty is to tell a good story."

Savage, the author of six novels, does, however, deal with what he calls "large" issues. "I've tackled stalking, for instance—and our need for stronger laws to protect us from predators. I don't think any sane person would disagree with my stand on that." One of his current projects is a postapocalyptic thriller, and he's trying to keep specific politics out of his end-of-the-world scenario. "I want to provide a social portrait, as opposed to a tract. It's not always easy, but that's the challenge."

Savage cites *The Stepford Wives*, *Wag the Dog*, and *The Da Vinci Code*, as thrillers including controversial elements that wouldn't work without those issues. "When writers stop being able to hold up mirrors to society, we will stop writing. It's as simple as that," Savage concludes.

Author Laura Lippman, constantly nominated for every award in sight (probably because of her outstanding writing and well-wrought, idiosyncratic characters), knows the feeling. "I just happen to have a compulsion to write about the world around me and that world is Baltimore, which has its share of social problems. It's hard to write about Baltimore without touching on the city's concerns," she says.

Lippman emphasizes that she doesn't editorialize and that her protagonist, Tess Monaghan, often expresses an opinion not Lippman's own. "I weave social issues into the fabric of the story. For example, *Butcher's Hill* is a mystery that's easier to solve if you know something about

welfare policy. And the homeless often appear in my novels in the way they appear around Baltimore—reading at the library, offering to guard one's car on certain streets."

Lippman says her editor has been open to her handling of such themes, but also has also been good at telling Lippman when she's gone too far. "I don't want to alienate any reader and I don't ever want my views on social issues to overwhelm the stories," Lippman adds. "But I do believe that the crime novel is the closest thing we have to the social novel of the early 20th century. And it's my desire to humanize those whom too many people glance past on the street."

Author Ken Bruen, jailed unjustly for four months in a brutalizing prison in South America, points out that mystery authors are able to serve as useful commentators on society because, "We can report back from the streets, sometimes literally." He adds that his characters "are noted for their position on the very bottom ring of society." And he explains his message is "that we've completely forgotten them."

Bruen, a former teacher, also says, "Prison showed me that people are capable of ferocious cruelty, and that greed, made possible by a total lack of any belief system, is the dominant force in the world."

A master of the social issue mystery, Michael Connelly, remarks, "Social commentary in a mystery novel raises it to a higher level. I view these books as having a role in explaining the world to us, showing how it works or doesn't work, exploring its issues and ills. I think a book that does this in even a small way has a significant dimension to it."

Connelly tries to incorporate geographic locations in his stories that bring the story and reader into settings and scenes where social observation and commentary will seem natural. "The trick is to finesse it in without ever being didactic," he says.

Connelly's experience with editors is that they are very much open to this approach. "A book that packs some social commentary takes on the aura of importance. And all editors want to work on important books, books that will

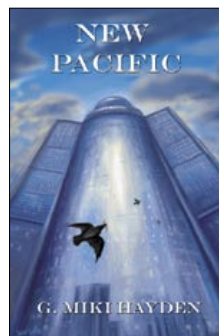
stick around for a while."

Calling the mystery novel "the perfect vehicle for social comment," Connelly states, "Mystery novels are very much of the moment and more easily reflect what is happening in our world right now."

And how does the reader feel about mystery novels adding this extra dimension? Insatiable reader (and reviewer) Sally Fellows states her position, "I like a book to have a message—if you wish to call it that—but I don't want it shoved down my throat. I think some of the authors who do it very well are Jo Bannister, Nevada Barr, Lawrence Sanders, Jan Burke, Barbara D'Amato, Katherine V. Forrest, Laurie R. King, William Kent Krueger, Laura Lippman, Miriam Grace Monfredo, Sara Paretsky, S. J. Rozan—especially in *Absent Friends*—Karin Slaughter, Minnette Walters, and Stephen White. I think they all bring social issues to my attention and then, usually, leave any solution up to me, the reader."

As multiple mystery award winner Steven Bochco said when being handed a statuette of a famous mystery writer (that Poe guy), "We as authors are the creators of social consciousness.... We are the conscience of society."

The sequel to the critically-acclaimed *Pacific Empire*, *New Pacific*, gives a frighteningly possible picture of the future and of the new global order. Can one corporate underling—an investigator set to finding a missing scientist—make any difference in what happens within humanity's brave new world?



FROM SILVER LAKE PUBLISHING
[HTTP://WWW.SILVERLAKEPUBLISHING.COM](http://www.silverlakepublishing.com)

>>

What's a hit man to do when the mark turns out to be his first love?

The Hit Man

Nancy Sweetland

Illustration Copyright © 2006 Kevin Duncan



It would be a perfect night for a murder. I suppose not many people would think like that, but then not many people are in my line of work. It never seems like work to me, though; each job is an intriguing challenge. Who? How? Where? And, when? And, I do so enjoy the outcome: money. Lots of money.

This particular job was going to be especially interesting, my first in a small town. A really, really small town. I usually work big cities where it's easier to do my deed and disappear.

The Who was somebody's wife. The How was, of course, up to me. The Where was dictated by her husband, who was going to be anywhere but there. The When was also stated in our contract (verbal, of course, not on paper; can't have

something like that lying around, can we?).

We met in the food court of the Cliffside Mall, where other people, intent on their dinner plates, paid no attention to us. "This Friday," the husband said decisively. "Between eight and ten."

It was already late Wednesday afternoon. Not much time to plan. I asked, "You'll be safely away?"

"Thousands of feet in the air between Vegas and Chicago."

"And she'll be where?"

"She leaves the fitness center about eight, drives home over the cliff road. She never varies."

"Even if she knows you aren't going to be home?"

"She doesn't know. I told her I'd be there by

about seven, and I'd bring takeout and wine—she loves wine—so she wouldn't have to worry about cooking dinner."

I nodded. He'd done half the work for me already; now all I had to do was finish her off and get out of town. "Got a picture of her for me?" I wouldn't want to pick off somebody else's wife.

"Sure." He handed me a color snapshot.

My heart stopped.

I knew her. Well. Very well. She was—had been—the first love of my life. We'd lost touch over the years, yet I'd have recognized her anywhere. Same wide blue eyes, same tilted nose, flyaway blond hair. Same air of excitement that thrilled me as a teenager. And that, I realized, could still thrill me now.

I swallowed. "You're sure this is her?" My grammar fails me when I'm flustered. "I mean she?"

He frowned. "Don't you think I know my own wife?"

"But...but..." I stuttered.

"What's the matter? Fifty thousand isn't enough? I've got it right here." He reached for his inner coat pocket.

"No, no." I swallowed. Hard. "It's plenty." Erasing (my preferred terminology) a stranger was one thing, but the girl that had taken my virginity so sweetly in the back seat of my father's Buick way back when? That was another.

Fifty thousand. Good pay for a couple of days' work, wouldn't you say? It was more than I usually asked, enough to set me up for some time in a new place, with a new name. Maybe even in a new business, I thought now.

He handed me the packet of bills and we shook hands. I watched him walk away, shoulders straight, a nearly rich man without a care in the world. I could almost hear him humming under his breath.

My own shoulders slumped; I felt the weight of that world on me. Sweet Janie Mason. Not Mason now, I thought. Janie Glidden. Rich Janie Glidden. She'd inherited a bundle from her father's tech business. Her husband wasn't into sharing; he wanted it all. And it was my well-paid job to see that he got it.

"Make it look like a mugging gone bad," he suggested. "Or run her car off the cliff road on her way home, something like that. I don't care.

Just do it." His voice was cold.

I'd nodded. Sure.

But...Janie?

I felt sick. Really, really sick. But before I went back to my motel (small, cheap, the kind of place where the guy at the reception desk was used to not noticing people), I decided to take a drive around town, check out the cliff road Janie's husband had mentioned. Maybe I wouldn't feel so bad if I could work out that scenario, if I didn't have to actually touch her. If she never saw my face.

I tried to think back on my other jobs—there had been more than a dozen in the past couple of years. Had I ever really thought about the mark? About what he or she was really like, had done, or cared about? I closed my eyes, trying to picture faces, places, but nothing stood out. They were just jobs to be done, were done, became history. Get paid, do the work, move on. This one was different, and I wasn't sure how to continue.

I spent the rest of the afternoon and early evening at the library, checking into the microfiche tapes of the past year's social events. Janie was all over the papers at one charity event or another, at a soup kitchen, a day care, helping out at a blood drive. In every picture her love of life shone around her like an aura. Her husband, on the other hand, was no more than an escort on a couple of occasions. There was no press on his accomplishments. I assumed there weren't any, except for marrying well.

The truth was, I'd been hired by a gold-digging nothing to erase a not only beautiful but worthy person. It made my stomach ache, and I headed back to my motel to brood. Maybe something would come to me in my sleep. I'd heard about the subconscious working out solutions that way.

It didn't happen.

The next morning I got into my rental sedan, a nothing-special model that wouldn't be remembered by anyone unless they had reason to notice me and drove to the east side of town where the road climbed steeply up a rock cliff overlooking a swiftly flowing river. A vehicle pushed over the edge would tumble over a few outcroppings before hitting the water. The current looked strong enough to push the car well

away from the site where it went over the embankment. But there was a problem with the cliff scenario: the drop-off was protected by a sturdy rock and cement wall almost three feet high. No way would a car break through that.

I headed back into town, running and discarding possibilities through my mind, oblivious to my surroundings until, at a stoplight, the Lexus that pulled up beside me honked. My light was still red, so what was the beef? I turned to give the driver a scowl that changed to astonishment as the window toward me slid down and a smiling woman waved.

Janie.

This couldn't happen. I thought about gunning the motor and disappearing. I thought about pretending I hadn't noticed. I thought about Buicks and yesterdays and rolled my own window down.

"Janie!" I called. "What a surprise!"

"Pull over," she said.

I did.

Later, much later, over drinks and dinner at a nondescript bar and grill I would bet had never been graced with Janie Glidden's presence before, we were still catching up. We laughed and reminisced. I fabricated a job in Chicago (advertising) and a reason for being in Cliffside (just passing through, going north to check on some vacation property). She was honest about what she did (I knew most of it already) but hesitant to talk about her husband. I was pretty sure she didn't like him much.

"Are you married, Tom?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Never found the girl that could measure up to my memories of you," I answered, surprised to realize that was probably true. I raised my glass of wine.

She blushed, and I remembered how easily the color came over her face. "Silly," she said and impulsively reached out to take my hand. "It's so good to see you. Won't you stay over and have dinner with us tomorrow night? Alec will be home, and I know he'd be pleased to meet you."

Yeah, right.

"I can't," I said. "I have an appointment up at Tomahawk."

"Oh." She really was disappointed.

"But I could have lunch before I leave town," I suggested. "If you're free."

She smiled, the old sparkle in those wide blue eyes. "I'd love to," she said, and we parted. I didn't kiss her, but I wanted to.

I couldn't wait until the next day just to be with Janie again. I was smitten.

I couldn't sleep. My stomach churned every time I thought about the job I had to do. I'd already been paid for it. I had never backed out on a contract. And what if I did? That wouldn't save Janie. Alec, the jerk, would just find another hit man to erase her. This old world would keep on turning, as the song goes, but without Janie's special light. Without her good works. Without her smile.

It was beginning to get light before I fell asleep, and that didn't last long. It is true—your subconscious can solve problems for you. When I woke up, I knew exactly what to do.

Janie and I had a wonderful lunch in the restaurant on the top of the highest building in Cliffside, five whole stories up overlooking that swiftly moving river. By the time we left, the restaurant was almost empty, and I knew it was time for me to leave town to make my fictitious appointment in Tomahawk.

"You will come back, won't you, Tom?" she pleaded as she got into her Lexus. "I really want to see you again."

"Oh, yes, I will," I said. "I want to meet Alec."

And meet him I did as he strode through O'Hare on the way to come home, fully prepared to experience the disaster of his wife's demise. I met him in passing with a stiletto so thin hardly any blood spotted his white shirt. I was yards away through the crowd before he sank without a sound to the marble floor.

As I said before, it would be a perfect night for a murder. I'd got paid, I'd done the job, and I'd moved on.

I'll wait a while, then I'll return to Cliffside. After all, I promised Janie I'd come back.

Nancy Sweetland writes from Green Bay, Wisconsin, where she's currently marketing adult and juvenile short stories, along with two mystery novels and a mystery series for Beginning to Read books.



>>

John L. French is a crime scene supervisor with the Baltimore Police Department Crime Laboratory. He is also a writer of crime and horror fiction.

His novel, *THE DEVIL OF HARBOR CITY*, is available from Amazon.com. Signed copies can be obtained from www.shocklines.com or from mlcgrace on www.half.com.

John L. French, The CRIME LAB GUY

Recovering Blood

The last two columns discussed what might be learned from blood stains on a crime scene and how to determine if those stains might actually be blood. But the main question is very often exactly whose blood was found and what that discovery means.

The history of the identification of blood goes back over one hundred years. The first forensic use of ABO markers was in 1902 and in Turin, Italy in 1916 ABO typing was first used to exonerate a suspect. Not much changed until DNA analysis became prevalent in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Using DNA, investigators could, for the first time, positively identify a blood sample as coming from a specific individual. Before that, all science could tell them was whether or not a suspect belonged to a group of people whose blood contained certain genetic markers such as ABO types and a positive or negative rhesus factor.

But before blood can be analyzed, it must first be safely recovered and properly submitted to the laboratory. There are several ways of doing this; some are right, some are wrong and at least one is downright dangerous.

There are several ways of recovering blood from a scene. The best way is also the easiest—recover and submit the item that the blood is on. Bloodstained bedsheets, clothing and any other easily portable item should be removed from the crime scene and submitted as found to the analytical laboratory without any attempt by the crime scene investigator to remove the stain. This not only preserves the stain in the condition in which it was found, but it also insures that the all the evidence was recovered.

The next best method is similar. If the object which bears the stain is just too big to recover—a sofa, wall-to-wall carpeting, the back seat of a Honda—then if possible the stain should be carefully cut out, recovered and submitted. (Note the use of the word “carefully.” The recovery of blood and other biological materials present certain hazards to the crime scene investigators, ones that could lead to serious health problems or even death. The topic of crime scene safety is a broad one and will be the topic of a future column.)

Sometimes it's not possible to recover the item or cut out a piece of it. The bloodstain might be on a wall, or on the sidewalk, or on the trunk of a car. If this is the case, then the blood must be removed from the surface. One way to do this is to use a wet sterile cotton swab and carefully transfer the blood from the surface to the tip of the swab, collecting as much of the blood as possible. If the stain is large enough, it should be standard practice to collect two samples from it, one for immediate analysis and one in case further examination is needed or if the result of the first one is called into question. After collection the swab is placed in a specially designed box that allows it to hang suspended without touching the sides of the box. (The better to air-dry.)

But swabbing up a blood stain is not always the proper procedure to follow if the size and shape of the stain might be important. (And it would be if the bloodstain is also a fingerprint.) In that case it might be possible to use tape to lift the stain from the surface and place it on a clean white card. Before this is tried, however, the person collecting the stain should first photograph it and then try lifting a non-critical stain from a similar surface just to make sure it will work.

There are older techniques, practiced because of necessity, convenience or just because "it's the way we've always done it." When I started doing crime scene work (way back in 1977), it was common practice to swab up a bloodstain using a small swatch of clean cotton cloth. The cloth was then placed in a plastic snap-cap vial with holes punched in its top. (See below for why this was not the best idea) Cotton cloth was used instead of swabs because chemicals used in the manufacture of the swabs interfered with ABO typing. Another method of recovery is to use cloth or swabs, allow them to air-dry and then place them in small envelopes.

One method of recovering blood from a scene that should be used sparingly is scraping dried blood off a surface. Not only is there a definite risk of cutting oneself and getting possibly infected blood into the wound, but the scraping causes small particles of blood

to become airborne, creating the possibility that they could be inhaled or ingested by the investigator.

Once recovered, the blood sample, and its immediate container if swabs or swatches were used, must be packaged for submission. Paper evidence envelopes or bags should be used, whichever is appropriate.

One mistake you'll see over and over again on television and in films is the placing of bloodstained evidence in plastic bags. Blood is a biological product. And unlike glass, guns, and fibers, left by itself blood will inevitably decay and putrefy, leaving behind nothing to analyze. One way to speed up decomposition is to seal blood evidence in plastic. A sealed plastic bag is airtight, and without air blood decays rapidly. Paper or cardboard is better.

However, the use of paper or cardboard runs afoul of federal regulations. OSHA rules require that items that are likely to drain off body fluids must be sealed in red plastic bags, red being a warning to all concerned that the contents of the bag are a biohazard. To comply with federal law and to avoid losing evidence, items that are still wet with blood are allowed to air dry before being packaged.

That's how blood evidence should be recovered, packaged and submitted. Once this is done, it's analyzed and its DNA determined and compared to that of victims and suspects. What happens next is up to the detectives investigating the case, or the author who's writing the story. Until next time, thanks for reading.

THE CRIME SCENE

"From hardboiled to cosy, articles and opinions on all aspects of mystery fiction."

<http://www.crimescenescotland.com/>

>>

Two murders are committed aboard HMS Tudor, and Captain Square uncovers a story of vengeance as he hunts the killer.

Captain Square and the Turk's Head

Charles G. Mossop

Illustration Copyright © 2006 Kevin Duncan



The body of Able Seaman Archibald Kingston was found at the foot of the companionway ladder in the forward hold of HMS *Tudor* just after six bells in the morning watch. It was clear to all that the unfortunate fellow must have missed his footing in the dark and pitched headlong to his doom. His death was reported, duly noted in the log by the mate of the watch, and his body carried to Dr. Ogilvy,

who did his best to look after the men when he was not looking after a bottle of spirits.

The body was stripped naked upon the surgeon's table in the cockpit, carefully examined, and then Ogilvy, a man of sallow complexion and as doleful a being as God ever created, hastened to the great stern cabin to report his findings. A childhood accident had left him with a badly misshapen left foot which caused

a severe limp, and by the time he reached the captain's cabin, he was much out of breath and greatly pained. The captain's steward, Finch, a pigtailed old sailor of over sixty, ushered him into the presence of his commanding officer who turned from his desk, asked him how he did, and cordially bade him be seated.

"It was no accident, after all, sir," said Ogilvy in a strong Scottish accent. He had the flat and mournful voice of one who finds the world a generally disagreeable place.

"Was it not?" asked the captain, in surprise.

"No, sir. He was struck from behind."

Captain Sir John Square, twenty-five years in his Majesty's navy and as thoroughgoing a sailor as a man could meet anywhere, stared at the ship's surgeon.

"Are you saying he was murdered, Dr. Ogilvy?" he asked.

"Aye, sir," said Ogilvy. "That he was. Someone fetched him such a clout on the back of his neck as to break the bones. The mark is vivid and unmistakable."

Captain Square sat silent for a time. It was his fifth year in the *Tudor*, a thirty-eight-gun frigate, and he had seen death come to men in many forms, for it was 1801 and England was at war with France. Murder, however, was outside even his width of experience.

"What else can you tell me?" he asked Ogilvy at last.

"Nothing at all, sir," said the doctor, with a shrug. "He was undoubtedly thrown down the ladder to make us believe his death was an accident."

The captain nodded, stroking his chin thoughtfully.

"Tell no one of this, Dr. Ogilvy, until I give you leave," he said crisply. "I want no hue and cry amongst the men. This must be investigated, and I shall require the room to do it discreetly. At least for the time being."

The surgeon took his leave, and as Square heard the distinctive sound of his labored tread down the passageway, he called for his steward.

"My compliments to my officers," he said to Finch, "and tell them that I would be pleased to see them all here as soon as it is convenient for them."

After weighing the risks, Square had decided

to take the officers into his confidence and enlist their aid. He considered the possibility that the culprit might be amongst them, but concluded the chances were remote. Officers were gentlemen, while seamen, skilled though they may be, were born of the lower orders. Thus, in the captain's view, they possessed a greater capacity for violence.

Within a few minutes, the three lieutenants, four midshipmen, the ship's master and the captain of marines assembled in the spacious cabin and stood awaiting their captain's pleasure. Those who had been on watch when the summons came wore long greatcoats or heavy cloaks, for the English Channel was an inhospitable place in early February. *Tudor* had been clawing her way to windward for three days against a bitter nor'easter, and the salt spray was freezing on the shrouds.

Captain Square greeted the men with customary civility and then stood before them at the weather bulkhead. He was a tall, lean figure, resplendent in the ribbon and star of his knighthood, gold braided blue coat and white breeches.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you will have heard of the death of Able Seaman Kingston some time last night, and I fear I must tell you now that in the professional opinion of Dr. Ogilvy, the man was murdered."

The captain's words caused his audience to erupt into alarmed conversation, questions and exclamations of horror.

"For the present," the captain continued, raising his voice to quell the noise, "I wish each of you to keep your mouths closed and your eyes and ears open. Let the crew believe the death was accidental, as the killer intended it to appear, but keep your wits about you and take note of anything untoward—anything at all out of the ordinary. Question no one, mind you, but report any such incidents to me. If the culprit believes we suspect nothing, he may grow careless."

"Begging your pardon, sir," spoke up Mr. Bourne, the ship's sailing master, "but I believe I can report such an occurrence to you now."

Bourne was a man of fifty-five years who had joined the navy as a landsman and risen to his present rank through intelligence, skill and dili-

gent application. Captain Square had great respect for these qualities in any man.

"Indeed, Mr. Bourne?" said the captain. "Go on, if you please."

"Well, sir," began the master, "I drew the middle watch last night, and observing that this damned rheumatical knee of mine pains me badly in this weather, the gunner did most handsomely offer to take my place. Now when he came off watch he told me of a very queer thing he had heard when all hands were turned up to tack ship at about five bells. He said that a gang at the main royal braces was singing a strange stamp-and-go he had not heard before. He paid no special heed to the men themselves, more's the pity, but to the best of his recollection they chanted *Beware the Turk's head, lest all shall be dead*. Just quietly it was, sir. As if to themselves, like."

"And can anyone tell me what those words mean?" asked Square, but no one answered.

After the departure of the officers Square contemplated what Bourne had said. A Turk's head was an ornamental knot whose intricate weaving resembled the windings of a turban. It was often seen reeved around masts or other similar ship's timbers, and had no practical application at all. Square could imagine no connection between a Turk's head and the dead sailor, and so eventually dismissed the strange shanty as inconsequential.

Mindful of his duty to make an appearance on deck in each of the daylight watches, Square put on his greatcoat and a woolen scarf before mounting to Tudor's broad quarterdeck and assuming the captain's traditional place at the weather rail. The wind was merciless, and carried a fine snow which stung his face. The deck suddenly canted under his feet and he took firm hold of a nearby shroud, feeling the thin coating of ice on it, even through his glove. He cast his eye aloft to evaluate the set of the sails, and then looked out across a desolate grey sea heaped into great rolling swells.

"Have you anything to report, Lieutenant Wycombe?" he asked, as the second lieutenant approached and touched the brim of his cocked hat.

"Nothing sir," Wycombe replied. "Neither a

foremast nor a mainpole have we seen all the morning."

Square nodded his thanks, and as he did so he caught sight of a man moving quickly through the ship's waist calling to others as he went. A large group of sailors soon gathered around him and he began to speak to them with much animation. Within a few minutes, the word murder was on everyone's lips.

"Damn and blast it to hell, Mr. Wycombe," said Square. "Find out how this happened. I will not have my orders disobeyed."

Wycombe was back in a trice to report that the source of the information was fifteen-year-old Mr. Midshipman Molesworth Pike, son of the Earl of Marchland, and an inept young ratting if ever there was one.

Captain Square ordered the young aristocrat to the quarterdeck, curtly advised him to provide himself with his warmest clothing and some victuals, and then mastheaded him for two days. He watched as the young lad climbed laboriously up the ratlines to the main t'gallant masthead, cumbered about with a heavy cloak and clenching a canvas bag full of ship's biscuit and cheese firmly in his teeth.

"I marvel he has not fallen overboard months ago," Square observed dryly to Lieutenant Wycombe, who nodded and then allowed that Midshipman Pike had likely been born with two left feet.

At that moment, one of the bosun's mates appeared before the captain, touching his knuckles to his forehead.

"Well?" said Square.

"Mr. Bourne's respects, sir," he said, "and he would be greatly obliged if you would meet him at the larboard battery, sir."

Square followed the sailor to where the master stood beside one of the ponderous thirty-two pounders in the waist, and after raising his hat slightly in salute, Bourne pointed to a Turk's head neatly reeved in thin brown cord around the base of a stand post.

"Who did that?" snapped the captain.

"No one knows, sir," said the master, "but it could easily have been done during the night. It was not discovered until just now."

Square returned to the quarterdeck, his brow

furrowed with concern, and resumed his place. The words of the strange shanty now assumed a new importance, for here was a clear sign. A Turk's head where it had no business to be. But what was its interpretation? For whom was it intended?

The snow turned to rain about midday, and by two bells in the afternoon watch, the wind was approaching gale force. All hands were piped to shorten sail and the watch below, those men not on active watch, poured up from the companionways. Men ran to their stations on deck or swarmed up the shrouds to spread out on the slippery and treacherous yards to begin preparing to reef the heavy sheets of canvas. Square retreated to his cabin, deposited his sodden greatcoat and hat into the waiting arms of Finch, and summoned the first lieutenant.

James Bishop was a man of thirty-two, tall and powerfully built, with an unruly tangle of black curly hair and a black beard. He had dark and penetrating eyes, but in defiance of his saturnine appearance, he possessed a lively sense of humor. Captain Square and Lieutenant Bishop had been shipmates and good friends since their earliest days in the king's service.

"So, we've a Sawney Bean aboard, have we?" said Bishop with a grin.

"A what?"

"Alexander Bean," explained Bishop. "Scottish murderer. About two hundred years ago."

"Kindly contain your levity, James," said Square, but not severely. "We face a weighty problem, and the whole crew now knows of it, thanks to the entirely witless Mr. Pike."

"I'm bound to say there is some agitation amongst the men," said Bishop, more soberly, as he settled himself into a chair opposite his captain. "And I warrant morale will suffer because of it."

"Then keep the crew busy," said Square. "Gun and sail drills, target practice, anything you like, but keep them occupied."

"Aye, sir," said Bishop, "but this confounded weather..."

"I need hardly remind you," said Square, restraining his irritation, "that if we sight a Frenchman running down upon us with his gun ports

open, we shall engage him without regard to the weather."

"Very good, sir."

"Now," said Square, putting the tips of his fingers together carefully, "where are we? We have a man dead in the hold, a group of hands singing about death and Turk's heads, and a Turk's head itself reeved in a gun bay. I am sure these three things bear a relationship one to another, but upon my soul and honor, I cannot penetrate it."

The captain fell silent, his brow furrowed in thought.

The wind moderated the following day, and while the first lieutenant exercised the gun crews with repeated practice at loading and running out, Captain Square ordered the murdered man's messmates to appear before him. Common sailors almost never entered the private domain of the captain and his officers, and the five sailors shambled into the large cabin and gawked about them at the desk, cabinets, upholstered chairs and wide stern windows. Each man knuckled his forehead and waited in silence.

"Now lads," said Square, "can any of you tell me anything which will aid in our apprehension of the blackguard amongst us? Speak up, now. This is no petty misdemeanor. Murder has been done, and it is your messmate who lies dead."

No one answered. The men merely looked at their feet and shifted awkwardly from side to side.

"All right, then," said Square, forcefully, and the men looked up. "Do you know the significance of the Turk's head?"

"It be a knot, sir," said one, a little bolder than the rest.

"I know right well what it is," said Square testily. "I wish to know its exact meaning. It has been spoken of by some of the crew, and one has been found in the larboard battery. I want to know why."

Tomb-like silence prevailed once again, but it was clear to the captain that the men were genuinely confused and uncertain.

"E were quick with a Turk's head, were old

Kingston," said the same man. "Even a big 'un. Why, I saw 'im do one myself around the mainmast of the old *Sparta* at Spithead in two shakes of a lamb's tail. Old Archie were a good hand wi' knots."

"Well then, did he reeve the one by the gun?" asked Square.

"I dunno, sir. Sorry, sir," replied the man.

Square dismissed the men with his usual admonition that they remember their loyalty and keep their wits about them, and then set himself to work with charts, parallel rules and dividers. He laid in the course he would order for the next day, checked it and called for his lunch.

An hour later, the sounds of running feet, shouts and the squealing of bosun's pipes signaled the change of watch. The watch below was chivvied up to the cold upper decks by the petty officers, while the men they relieved made haste down the companionways to find what warmth they could. Before these familiar sounds had ceased, however, the cabin door opened to reveal Finch looking distraught. By long-standing naval tradition, the captain's steward was the only member of the crew allowed to enter the great cabin without knocking, but Finch had seldom ever done so.

"Yes, Finch?" said Square, his eyebrows raised in surprise.

The steward saluted and stepped aside to allow Bourne to enter. The master removed his hat and Square observed that he, too, appeared worried.

"I must report that there's another Turk's head been found, sir," said Bourne. "On the orlop deck, just abaft the mainmast. Lieutenant Sullivan found it as he unlocked the door for the cook's mates to collect stores for the watch below. Both he and Mr. Wycombe swear it was not there this morning."

"Well," said Square, getting to his feet, "I'm told Kingston was good with his knots, but I'll wager he is not responsible for this one."

Square and Bourne descended to the orlop, the lowermost deck of the ship, where the air was thick and foul-smelling, rank with the odors of mould, decaying vegetables, human sweat and worse. The knot was fashioned of the same brown cord as the first, and reeved around a

vertical banister post. Square stooped to examine it.

"Nothing but a knot," he said, straightening. "But I am bound to say it is very neatly wrought."

As they reached the upper deck, Bourne touched the brim of his hat and excused himself.

"I believe the wind has lessened again, sir," he said, "and I think we might have the t'gallants back on her."

"Carry on, Mr. Bourne," said Square, and the master shouted to the bosun, who in turn roared out the orders, well laced with blasphemies and threats, which sent men up the rigging to the topmost yards where they began loosening off the clews and ties in preparation for re-setting the sails. Further orders were shouted, the halyards freed and the grey canvases fell out and were smartly sheeted home.

"Handsomely done, Mr. Walker," said Square to the bosun. "And get Mr. Pike down, if you please. I suspect he has learned his lesson, and we don't want to send him back frozen stiff as a dead cat to the lord Earl."

Square returned to his cabin to find Bishop awaiting him and told him of the new knot he had just seen.

"It could be, sir," said the first lieutenant, after he and the captain had accepted a glass of sherry from Finch, "that since one man has been murdered and a Turk's head found, the second knot foretells a second murder."

"I am much of your opinion, James," said the captain gloomily, "and yet I cannot see what to do next."

"I wish I knew, sir."

"I believe that not all the crew are aware of the knot's meaning," said Square, sipping his sherry thoughtfully. "Kingston's messmates did not know of it, but the gunner heard a group of men who obviously did. If only he had paid attention to who they were, for I smell conspiracy in all this."

As he finished a cup of coffee after his meal that evening, Square became conscious of a commotion outside his cabin door. There came some hurried footsteps, the voice of Finch saying God 'elp us, and then Finch himself burst into the

cabin followed on the instant by Midshipman Hooper, who rushed in and pulled off his hat. So precipitous was his entry that the thirteen-year-old stumbled and would have sent himself sprawling had not Finch reached out and seized the collar of his jacket.

"More haste, less speed, Mr. Hooper," said Square mildly, as Finch set the youngster upright once again. "What can possibly be the matter?"

"Lieutenant Sullivan's respects, sir," panted Hooper, "and he would be greatly obliged if you would come to the powder magazine, sir."

"The magazine?"

"Aye, aye, sir, if you please, sir. There is another dead man found, sir."

The captain left the great cabin with almost as much alacrity as Hooper had entered it, and descended to the magazine, set deep within the ship to be safe from the enemy's cannon fire. Upon his arrival, he received smart salutes from the two red-coated marines who guarded the door. Third Lieutenant Sullivan touched the brim of his hat and told Square that the dead man was inside.

"How in Beelzebub's name did he get into the magazine?" said Square angrily. "Where were the guards?"

"It seems, sir," said Sullivan, jerking his thumb at the marines, "that these two miscreants here were somewhat tardy in appearing for their duty, but what is worse, the two before them deserted their post before being relieved."

"Very well," Square snapped. "Mr. Hooper, you will give Captain Metcalf my compliments and inform him of this. Request him to deal with these two as he may choose. And as for the deserters, find them, put them in irons, and tell the bosun they're each to have two dozen lashes today and tomorrow."

Hooper touched his hat and vanished at once.

"Who found the body?" asked Square.

"These two, sir," answered Sullivan, once more indicating the marines. "When they arrived they found the door ajar and investigated."

"Indeed?" said Square. "Then perhaps we may conclude our murderer left in some haste. Let us go in, Mr. Sullivan, and see what we can find."

After a lantern had been lit—the use of flint and steel was strictly prohibited inside the magazine—the captain and the third lieutenant entered the dark locker. Sullivan held up the lantern revealing, in its yellow glow, a space filled on both sides by stacked casks of black powder with a gangway running down the middle. At the far end of the gangway they could discern the huddled shape of a human body, a sailor wearing a dark woolen pullover and gray canvas trousers.

"Look here, sir," Sullivan said, bending over and holding the light close to the deck.

"This is blood and no mistake," said Square, examining the red stains on the oak planks. "He was killed here, or I'm a Dutchman. It's plain...." And here he paused, frowning.

"D'you hear that, Lieutenant?" he asked. "What was it?"

"I don't know, sir," answered Sullivan. "A peculiar sound. I cannot identify it."

"Nor can I," said Square. "But no matter. Nothing more than a piece of loose timber somewhere, I shouldn't wonder."

The two men proceeded down the gangway and Sullivan held the light aloft as Square studied the corpse.

"He did not fall thus," said Square. "His arms are almost straight out in front of him. I'll wager he was killed by the door, dragged here and flung down as we see him now."

The captain and the third lieutenant returned to the door of the magazine, and as they reached it Sullivan pointed to an object lying half hidden behind a stack of empty powder buckets. He bent and retrieved an eighteen-inch length of heavy steel, hafted at one end and sharply pointed at the other.

"What the deuce is a marlinspike doing here?" asked Square.

"And with blood on it," said Sullivan, grimly, lifting it to the light.

"We have our murder weapon, I believe, Mr. Sullivan," said Square. "And further evidence of the murderer's haste. I daresay he dropped it as he ran for fear of being caught with it."

When the two officers emerged from the magazine, Square sent for men to carry the body out. Two loblolly boys, or sick berth atten-

dants, appeared and the dead man was placed on a canvas litter and conveyed to the cockpit. Sullivan, who re-entered the locker to supervise, reported that as they had lifted the body, a great gout of dark blood welled up and ran from the mouth, adding to the broad stain already on the front of the blue pullover.

An hour later, Dr. Ogilvy reported to Captain Square and Lieutenant Bishop that the body, that of Able Seaman Matthew Hardcastle, bore no outward signs of injury save for the blood which spilled from his mouth.

"Upon examination," said the doctor lugubriously, "I determined that he had died as a result of having some sharp object rammed hard down his throat."

"Dear God," said Square. "The marlinspike all right. This is iniquitous."

"Well," said the first lieutenant, "I said we'd a Sawney Bean aboard."

"Sawney Bean was also a cannibal," said Ogilvy, as he took his doleful leave. "At least no one has yet been eaten, Mr. Bishop."

"He seems sorry about it," observed Bishop dryly, as the door closed behind the doctor.

Square said nothing, and Bishop assumed a more serious demeanor.

"You say Hardcastle was killed in the magazine, sir," he said, "so we could perhaps find out what the man was doing below decks, and if anyone saw him."

"Just so, James," said Square, "but there are one or two things which interest me a trifle more at present."

Bishop raised his dark eyebrows and tilted his head on one side.

"It appears," Square went on, "that, thanks to our useless marines, there was a space of time during which the magazine was unguarded. How, unless it were planned, did our murderer know that would be the case, and how did he have a key? Those are the first two points, and the third is simply to know if the two murdered men had anything in common. Is there a thread which connects them?"

He paused for a moment, biting his lower lip thoughtfully.

"Whose section was Hardcastle in?" he en-

quired.

"Pike's, sir," answered Bishop, flatly.

"Lord bless and save us," said Square with infinite resignation. "You'd better get him down here, then."

Mr. Midshipman Pike presented himself, still white and haggard from his recent ordeal at the masthead, and removed his hat. Square ordered him to sit down lest he fall down, and then spoke to him.

"Pike, as you no doubt know by now, Hardcastle, a man of your section, has been found dead in the powder magazine. What do you know of him?"

"Nothing, sir," said Pike, and it appeared that he fully believed this to be the proper answer.

"Nothing, sir," repeated the captain, sarcastically. "An officer, Mr. Pike, should make it his business to know the men who serve under him."

"Aye, aye, sir," replied Pike, chagrined.

"Get out," said the captain irritably, but as Pike prepared to depart, Square spoke again.

"Stand fast, Pike," he said. "Whoever killed Hardcastle had a key to the magazine. Have you by any remote chance an explanation as to how he might have obtained it?"

"Well...sir," said Pike, diffidently, "My...my key was stolen the day before yesterday."

"What?" roared Square. "How did this happen?"

"It was taken from the midshipmen's berth, sir. I...I left it on my sea chest."

"Damn your blood and liver, sir," fumed Square. "That key is to be kept with you at all times, and well you know it."

Pike said nothing.

"And have you any notion of who might have taken it?" demanded Bishop.

"Not really, sir," said Pike, "although I did see Richards, the bosun's mate, loitering about near the berth."

"Did you question him as to his business there?" asked Bishop.

"No, sir," answered Pike querulously. "I'm most dreadfully sorry, sir."

"And to whom did you report the theft?" asked Square, in a tone of weary sufferance.

"No one, sir," said Pike. "You are the first per-

son I have told, sir. Truly, you are. I didn't notice the key was missing until very late. And you mastheaded me, you see, sir, and..."

"All right, all right," said Square angrily. "Now hear me well, boy. You are to tell no one of this theft. I want our thief, who may well be our murderer to boot, to believe the loss of the key remains unnoticed. And if you wag your tongue again this time, I'll send you aloft for the remainder of this month. Do you take my meaning?"

Pike nodded.

"Very well. Now remove yourself from my sight."

"When the Lord put a silver spoon into his mouth, He neglected to put a brain into his head," said Bishop after the young man had departed, and Square grunted morosely.

The captain nodded his thanks as Bishop left for duty on deck, and, having summoned the bosun, Square enquired after Richards.

"A good man, sir," said Walker. "Reliable, if a little hot-tempered."

"What is his background?"

"Eight years a petty officer aboard the *Clyde*, sir. Taken out of her after the fleet mutiny and sent to us as bosun's mate."

The mention of HMS *Clyde* immediately arrested Square's attention.

"Are there other *Clydesmen* aboard, Mr. Walker?"

"Aye, sir. Several, I believe."

"Find out who they are, and report back to me at once."

The *Clyde* was well known to every officer and seaman in his Majesty's navy. She was a frigate of thirty-six guns, almost identical to *Tudor*, which had achieved fame, and notoriety, by being one of the first ships to repudiate the fleet mutiny in the spring of 1797 and stand for the king. She slipped her cable on the 30th of May, ran down through the fleet anchored at the Nore, and gained Sheerness harbor. It was said that not all of her complement had been opposed to the mutiny, however, and there had been much dissension and bitterness amongst the crew.

After the bosun's departure Square chewed meditatively on his lower lip as he cast his mind

back to the powder magazine. What was that queer sound? There was a distant and tantalizing familiarity about it, and yet he could not place it. He was convinced he had heard it before, but could not remember where or when. The mystery kept him awake long into the night.

The following day Captain Square individually questioned the two marines who had been late in reporting for duty and learned that Captain of Marines Metcalf had stopped their pay for a month. The first man, Edwards, a taciturn man of thirty who much resented his punishment, offered little beyond belligerent expressions and one-word answers, but the second, Campbell, was decidedly more helpful.

Private Campbell was barely nineteen, pressed into service at Greenwich the year before and still bewildered and frightened by shipboard life. He stood trembling and awe-struck before his captain – God come to earth in the form of a man in a naval uniform – and poured forth answers to Square's questions with great volubility.

"Please, sir," he said, almost babbling in terror, "please don't flog me, sir. I couldn't bear it, sir. Honest I couldn't."

"Why did you come late on duty," asked Square, ignoring the man's plea.

"It was Edwards as made us late, sir. He went to see the surgeon and was ever so long in coming back. I said we should be reported if we was to be late, but he said all we would get was a shouting-at, and I must not worry. And now here I am, sir, stopped a month's pay, sir. I should not have waited for him, but he said I must, sir. Truly, sir."

There came at that point a sharp rap on the door and Finch entered to say there was a French ship of war sighted, her hull well up above the horizon, two points abaft the larboard beam.

"Mr. Bishop's respects, sir," he finished, "and is it convenient for you to come to the quarter-deck?"

"My compliments to Lieutenant Bishop," said Square, "and I shall join him presently."

Square concluded his interview with Camp-

bell, and then called for Finch to bring him his greatcoat and hat.

When he came on deck, Captain Square found the air still raw. The sea ran a deep swell and *Tudor's* bow plunged into the troughs in bursts of cold salt spray. Bishop, a shroud in the crook of his elbow to steady him, his glass to his eye, reported the French ship to be only a sloop, and Square ordered a change of course to intercept.

"And clear for action, Mr. Bishop, if you please," he added.

"Beat to quarters," bellowed the first lieutenant, and at once the ship came alive with urgent and purposeful activity. All hands were piped and the watch below came tumbling up on deck while two marine drummers took up station in the waist of the ship and commenced a sustained roll. Gun crews sprang to their places, powder monkeys ran hither and thither with buckets of black powder, and the loblolly boys spread sand on the decks to soak up blood and prevent the men from slipping. The topmen gathered at the foot of the ratlines, ready to go aloft and handle the sails, while Captain Metcalf formed up his scarlet-coated marines in a double column on the foredeck and ordered them to look to their muskets. In less than ten minutes, *Tudor* was in battle order, and an air of expectancy and grim determination settled over the ship. *Tudor* rapidly overhauled the French sloop, which the third lieutenant identified through his glass as the *Canard*, and Captain Square ordered that all guns come to the ready.

"We'll have her as a prize, Mr. Bishop," he said cheerfully. "And in the present circumstances, I'll wager the jingle of prize guineas will be a welcome diversion for the men. Prepare to put a shot across her bow."

"Canard is French for duck, is it not?" asked Mr. Bourne, the sailing master, from his place by the fife rail at the base of the mizzenmast.

"Indeed it is, Mr. Bourne," said Bishop with a broad grin. "And like the fabled goose, this duck will lay us a golden egg once we have our hands upon her."

They drew abreast of the small ship less than a cable's length off her starboard beam and

Bishop ordered one of *Tudor's* larboard cannon to fire across her bow. The gun layer, however, perhaps overanxious or simply capricious, sent the thirty-two pound ball straight into the *Canard's* forepeak in a hail of flying splinters. One of her heads'ls, its sheets carried away, went flapping wildly into the wind. The shot cost *Tudor* the prestige of claiming an undamaged prize.

"Damn all your mother's children," roared Bishop in fury. "I'll have the hide off you."

In spite of its poor aim, however, or more likely because of it, the shot achieved its purpose. The sloop at once lowered its tricolor and ran a shirt up her signal halyard for want of a white flag. The *Tudor's* men let forth a ringing cheer, and the engagement, if the encounter may be dignified by such a title, was over. A prize crew of six was told off under the command of the senior midshipman, and given orders to make any English port they could and report there for further instructions.

"You do not send Mr. Pike, I observe, sir?" said Bishop with a wicked grin.

"I want her to reach England," said the captain with a grimace. "Mr. Pike could not be trusted to get her safely out of eyeshot."

As Square spoke, he noticed a sailor running out from the fo'c'sle companionway in the waist of the ship. The man mounted to the starboard gangway, and ran for the quarterdeck. The bosun stepped forward, reached out a brawny arm and arrested the man's progress on the instant.

"And just where d'you think you're a-goin', my lad?" he demanded.

"Captain, sir," called the man, his voice squeaking, "there be a Turk's head reeved in the mess, sir."

Once the sailor, Billy Armitage, had collected himself, he, Captain Square and Lieutenant Bishop descended to the mess deck to inspect the latest appearance of the infamous knot.

"'Tis death, sir," gibbered Armitage, lifting a trembling hand to his forehead. "Death."

"Govern your tongue, man," snapped Bishop. "Just show us the Turk."

"Did you find the knot yourself, Armitage?" asked Square, when they had reached the mess

deck and stood regarding the knot at the base of a stanchion.

"Aye, sir. Right after we was stood down from action stations."

"Was anyone else here?"

"Aye, sir. Dobson. But he said he didn't see it."

"The knot was reeved while we were at quarters, presumably," said Bishop, as they regained the upper deck, "or it would have been reported before now."

"Yes," agreed Square. "And that means it was done by someone whose action station is below decks."

"There are not very many of them, sir," said Bishop, when he and Square had seated themselves in the great cabin. "Powder monkeys, loblolly boys, surgeon's mates. But we've two dead men, and now a third Turk's head which likely portends another murder."

"The men obviously think so. But surely there is someone who can show us what links the murdered men together. I cannot believe all this is the unplanned work of some maniac."

"I concur, sir. This is not the handiwork of a Sawney Bean."

"You will oblige me, James, by ceasing to harp on about Sawney Bean," said Square testily.

The ship's bell sounded at that moment, and Bishop took his leave to oversee the change of watch. Hardly had Square been left alone, when Walker appeared with his report on the Clydesmen.

"There's Richards, sir, as I said, but there's Grant, mizzentopman, as well. And, both Kingston and Hardcastle were Clydesmen, sir."

"Pass the word for Richards and Grant to see me at once, Mr. Walker," said Square.

The word was passed, and the two names were shouted throughout the ship until the men appeared in the companionway outside the captain's cabin. Finch entered to ask if he should send in the first man.

Square nodded, but spoke as Finch turned to go.

"By the way, Finch," he said, "do you know aught of Armitage or Dobson?"

"I don't know Armitage, sir, but Dobson's a loblolly boy. Queer cove, he is, an' all. Never leaves off blatherin' about the Great Mutiny.

But he does marvelous well with fancy things, sir. You know. Lanyards and the like. Why he's just made a canvas ditty bag for Mr. Pike, sir. Work of art, sir."

Finch disappeared, and Able Seaman Grant entered, a short, thickset man, who knuckled his forehead and stood, hat in hand, nervously eying his captain.

"Grant," said Square, without preamble, "you were in HMS *Clyde* at the time of the fleet mutiny, were you not?"

"That I was, sir," said Grant, "but afore God, sir, I was no mutineer. The *Clyde*, she..."

"Yes, yes," said Square, waving his hand, "I know all that. What I wish to find out is whether any man aboard *Tudor* has spoken to you of those events? Questioned you? Or, perhaps, asked after other Clydesmen aboard this ship?"

"Aye, sir, many, for 'twere but four year ago and there is still much bad feeling around and about. And two men of the *Clyde* are now dead, sir, and I am much a-feared for my life, so I am."

"Tell me, Grant," Square continued, ignoring the man's words, "are there any men in particular who have spoken to you? More often than others, I mean."

"Aye, aye, sir," said Grant, nodding vigorously. "Two. Marine Edwards and Dobson, sir."

Square dismissed Grant, and Finch sent in Richards, who revealed himself to be a weather-beaten old sailor of over fifty, pigtailed and gray-haired.

"Did you know the other Clydesmen aboard this ship?" Square asked.

"Aye, aye, sir," Richards answered. "Us Clydesmen, sir, we stick together. I was right suspicious when Archie Kingston got done in, and I kept my eyes skinned – for my own sake, as you might say, sir. I heard some of the men talking of the Turk's head, and how it was a warning sign to traitors."

"Traitors?"

"Aye, sir, traitors. Clydesmen are often called traitors because we stood for the king against the mutiny."

"And traitors lose their heads," finished Square.

"Two months ago, sir," Richards continued, "I sprained my wrist—right bad it was—and I was

sent by the bosun to Dr. Ogilvy. The surgeon began asking me questions, sir, all about the mutiny, and if there was other men from the *Clyde* on board. I answered his questions, sir, for he said the mutiny had been a scurvy business, and the *Clyde* was a brave ship, but I soon found out he was all wind and dandyfunk, begging your pardon, sir. He tricked the answers out of me. Next thing I knew there's Marine Edwards a-jeering at me every time he sees me and calling me traitor. And then Dobson sets in as well."

"Why did you not speak up before?" demanded Square, and Richards shook his gray head.

"I'd no proof of anything, sir. And as for being called traitor, well...that's nothing new to me, sir."

Square dismissed Richards, and was about to order Finch to summon Ogilvy, when he abruptly changed his mind. Time, he thought, might be short.

Square left his cabin and made haste to Surgeon Ogilvy's quarters. *Tudor* had been laid hard over on a starboard tack, sailing as close to the wind as she could, and the deck canted sharply under Square's feet as he went along the ill-lit companionways. Thanks to his years at sea, he maintained his balance almost effortlessly.

When he entered Ogilvy's berth, the surgeon got to his feet as smartly as his surprise and the alcohol inside him would allow. His cabin, a small, narrow cubbyhole in the bowels of the ship, reeked of pipe smoke and spirits, and was largely occupied by several cases of rum stacked and braced into one corner. A lantern hung from a deckhead beam and its violent swinging sent shadows leaping across the fetid little compartment.

"Captain Square, sir," mumbled Ogilvy, breathing rum fumes into Square's face, "what...?"

"You are a sorry sight, Dr. Ogilvy," said Square, who possessed scant regard for men who drank to excess, "but you will oblige me by answering some questions."

Ogilvy stared at him, open-mouthed, trying to focus his bleary eyes.

"Have you any connection whatsoever to HMS *Clyde*?" demanded Square. "The truth, mind."

"None, sir," said the surgeon, his words slurred from drink. "I have not served in her, nor do I know anyone who has, save the *Clydesmen* aboard this ship."

"Tell me about Dobson, then," Square went on, seizing a rail to avoid being thrown against the bulkhead by a prodigious roll of the ship. "Where did he come from?"

"HMS *Sandwich*, sir."

"*Sandwich*?"

The mention of that ship brought Square up sharply, for it was aboard *Sandwich* that the fleet mutiny had been instigated.

"Was Dobson a mutineer?" he asked Ogilvy.

"He says so, sir."

"And were you in *Sandwich*?"

"No sir. *Agamemnon*."

Ogilvy managed to reassemble his sodden faculties sufficiently to ask the reason for his being questioned, but Square interrupted him with a brusque *Good day*, anxious to escape the noisome little compartment. A moment before he turned to go, the ship rolled violently once again, and Square saw the surgeon stagger, his twisted foot dragging across the deck planks. Square paused at the sound, his brow furrowed in concentration, before leaving the doctor's berth and making for the quarters of the Captain of Marines.

Metcalf's berth, although only slightly larger than Ogilvy's, looked neat and orderly. The marine captain, although every bit as astonished as Ogilvy to find the captain calling upon him unannounced in his quarters, greeted Square with cordial formality.

"And good day to you, Captain Metcalf," returned Square. "I ask your pardon for this intrusion, but I need information quickly, lest another man come to harm."

"I am at your service, sir," said Metcalf, promptly.

"You remember the two men who deserted their post at the powder magazine?"

"Of course, sir. Despicable."

"Has either of them furnished an explanation for their actions?"

"Actually, sir," said Metcalf, "they both swear they had Lieutenant Wycombe's permission to leave their post."

"Impossible," said Square, with a dismissive shake of his head.

"Naturally, sir. I spoke to Mr. Wycombe immediately, and he denied ever having sent such a message."

"Sent?"

"Yes sir. They declare Mr. Wycombe sent a message to them by way of the loblolly boy, Dobson, who also flatly denied their claim. The entire story was a fabrication to excuse their disgraceful behavior."

"Perhaps," said Square, thoughtfully, "and perhaps not. But, tell me, what do you know of Private Edwards?"

"An ill-disciplined lout, sir," answered Metcalf with feeling. "Twice flogged for insubordination aboard the *Sandwich*, and I daresay will soon be flogged for it again, sir."

"The *Sandwich*," said Square. "Dobson's former ship, by God. So Dobson and Edwards were shipmates before joining *Tudor*."

"All I know, sir," said Metcalf, "is that the two of them are as thick as thieves with Surgeon Ogilvy, and pass hours with him in talking of the fleet mutiny. I have often seen them in the surgeon's quarters as I go by on my way here. The mutiny was Dobson's moment of glory, and Edwards was a willing supporter, for he despises all authority."

"Have you any idea why Ogilvy should have such an interest in the Great Mutiny?" asked Square.

"Perhaps," Metcalf said, "because he had a nephew in HMS *Clyde* who..."

"What? How d'you know that, captain?"

"Edwards told me, sir, although he was prodigiously drunk at the time. Apparently, the nephew was amongst the few men hanged after the suppression of the mutiny. Edwards said he was convicted upon the testimony of a shipmate."

"Choose six of your best men, Captain Metcalf," Square ordered abruptly, "and dispatch them to arrest Edwards, Dobson and Surgeon Ogilvy. Convey the three of them to my cabin and mount a guard on the door."

Within a quarter of an hour, the three men were delivered into the great cabin, and stood before Captain Square. The drunken doctor

leaned heavily on Dobson, who looked pale and frightened. Metcalf took up his place next to Square, and in a few minutes they were joined by Lieutenant Bishop who had been summoned to serve as second witness.

"Well, Dobson," Square began, his voice cold, "I hear you are a handy fellow with canvas and cord. Tell me, then, how long does it take you to reeve a Turk's head?"

"Couldn't say, sir," Dobson answered, with a shrug. "Depends on the leads and bights, sir. You know. How big it is."

"And you, Surgeon Ogilvy," Square continued, ignoring Dobson, "be so good as to tell us of your nephew in HMS *Clyde*."

"I don't know what you mean, sir," mumbled the doctor, and Square noted that the man still had the use of his wits in spite of his intoxication. "No nephew of mine was ever in the *Clyde*."

"Private Edwards," said Square, turning to the marine with raised eyebrows, "am I now to understand that you were mistaken when you told Captain Metcalf, here, that Surgeon Ogilvy's nephew was in the *Clyde*, and was hanged following the fleet mutiny?"

Ogilvy, not Edwards, supplied the answer to the question, albeit without words. As Square watched, the doctor turned upon Edwards such a look of venomous loathing and fury that the captain became convinced of the truth. For his part, Edwards remained silent.

"Come now, Edwards," snapped Square. "Time waits, and so do I."

"I don't remember saying it, sir," answered Edwards morosely, and Square turned to the surgeon once again.

"Well, Dr. Ogilvy?"

"All right then, it's true," Ogilvy growled. "It was my sister's boy, Toby. He led the mutineers aboard the *Clyde*, but the rest of the crew turned against them and ran the ship into Sheerness Harbor. Blackguards," he said unsteadily, his voice rising. "God rot them. They betrayed him. That viper Hardcastle spoke against him afterwards, and they hanged our Toby from a yardarm at Spithead, so they did. Twenty years old, he was. Naught but a lad. They killed him," Ogilvy shouted. "Damn and blast all

the *Clydesmen*. Scum, every man Jack of 'em."

Ogilvy drew breath to continue, but Metcalf and Bishop stepped quickly to his side, and, grasping his arms, propelled him to a nearby chair.

"Sit down man," said Bishop curtly. "Control yourself."

Ogilvy slumped into the chair and sat still, breathing heavily.

"So, doctor," said Square, "you sought revenge for the betrayal of your nephew. That is a sorry excuse for the taking of a man's life, sir."

Ogilvy said nothing.

"And you Dobson," said Square sharply, "You lured the two guards away from the magazine by giving them Lieutenant Wycombe's pretended permission to leave their post. Do you deny it?"

Dobson did not reply for some moments, and Square thought that perhaps he was about to make a final effort to save himself, but it was not so.

"Ah, what's the use?" said Dobson belligerently. "You'll hang us soon enough anyway. We killed that bugger for sake of the doctor's nephew, and for all the men who stood up for the mutiny. Edwards said those two were too witless to question the message, and he was right. They just walked away as neat as you please once I told them they was free to go."

"And you, Edwards. Where were you before you went on duty at the magazine?"

"Oh, well, sir," began the marine, "I was feeling a mite poorly, sir, and I went a-looking for the surgeon. But I couldn't find him, sir. So I went back to go on duty."

"And when you and Campbell arrived at the magazine, you found the door open. Correct?"

"That's right, sir," said Edwards, in a manner too facile for Square's liking. "I investigated. I was suspicious, for I knew a key had been stolen from Mr. Pike."

"How did you know that?"

"Mr. Pike, sir," said Edwards confidently. "He told me."

"When?"

"That very morning, sir."

"And what, pray, were you doing at the masthead that morning?"

"Masthead, sir?"

"You heard me. Midshipman Pike had been mastheaded, and he divulged the theft of the key to me only after he was recalled. He had told no one until then, and was ordered to keep silent about it afterwards. You are a liar, Edwards, and I believe you are a murderer as well. You knew of the stolen key because it was you who stole it. You left Campbell to see Dr. Ogilvy right enough, but you were not ill. The three of you met in the magazine and killed Hardcastle. I am not aware of how you lured him down there, but that is of no consequence. Afterwards you all went your separate ways. You rejoined Campbell and went on guard duty. When I went to the magazine, I heard an odd sound which I did not recognize until I heard it again this afternoon in Surgeon Ogilvy's quarters. Your lame foot gave you away, doctor, but the three of you were there, weren't you?"

"No, sir," exclaimed Edwards immediately, "I was poorly. I didn't steal any key. I..." But Dobson cut him short.

"Stow it, Edwards," he said. "I took the key, sir, when I delivered a ditty bag to Mr. Pike. It were just sitting there on his sea chest so I helped myself. That's how we got into the magazine. Edwards and I spiked Hardcastle, and Ogilvy egged us on all the time. Edwards did for Kingston with a capstan bar after I got him down to the hold. I'll not see you walk free, Edwards, damn your cowardly liver. You can bloody well swing like the rest of us."

"You filthy scum," snarled Edwards, and turned upon Dobson, but there came at that same instant the rasping ring of steel upon steel as Metcalf drew his sword from its scabbard.

"Stand fast, Edwards," he snapped, "or I swear I shall run you through."

"Marines," shouted Square, and at once the door opened to admit four scarlet-coated soldiers.

Square ordered the three culprits put into the cable tier in irons, but before they were marched out of the great cabin, he addressed them again.

"One last thing," he said. "Why leave the magazine door open?"

The three prisoners stared at him for some moments until Dobson broke the silence.

"This stupid old duffer," he sneered, jerking his head at Ogilvy, "said he heard someone coming, so we ran for it without locking the door. Edwards and me, we were all right, but the doctor, he couldn't move quickly, so he hid in the hold until he could get himself back to the cockpit."

"And I heard him as he did so," finished Square. "Did anyone come, by the way, doctor?"

"No," muttered Ogilvy.

Square laughed mirthlessly.

"Take them away," he ordered, and the small troop departed leaving the captain alone with Lieutenant Bishop.

"So we may assume," said Bishop, "that the Turk's heads were sheer bravado."

"Yes," agreed Square, "although perhaps they were meant as a reminder of what happens to traitors. I think the significance of the knot was better understood by the men than we thought. Don't forget a foredeck gang was heard singing about it."

"True," nodded Bishop, "but one thing still puzzles me."

Square raised his eyebrows.

"If Ogilvy was complicit in Kingston's death, which is reasonably certain, then why did he not certify the death as an accident? I mean,

why tell us Kingston had been murdered?"

"Ogilvy himself supplied the answer to that," said Square, "although I did not see it at the time, of course. He told me there was a mark on Kingston's neck that was plain to be seen, and could not have been caused by a fall down a ladder. It is safe to say, therefore, that others must have seen the mark as well—the surgeon's mates for example—and questions may have been asked if Ogilvy had ignored it."

"And of course," added Bishop with a wry grin, "how better to draw suspicion away from himself? What murderer would identify his own crime?"

"Quite so," agreed Square.

"So Ogilvy is indeed a latter-day Sawney Bean," said Bishop with a merry smile. "He is Scottish, after all."

Charles Mossop is retired after a career in post-secondary education and writes historical fiction set in Napoleonic Europe and Ming China. His flash fiction has appeared in Flashshot, and a short story, "Magistrate Lin and the Testimony of the Household Gods," is forthcoming in Over My Dead Body.



>>

The kid's father is in jail and his uncle is moving in on his mother.

The Penitentiary Son

Timmy Waldron

Illustration Copyright © 2006 Teri Santitoro



The last bus into Trenton stopped at my street a little after midnight. I thanked the bus driver with a wave and he nodded to the mirror in recognition. After stepping off the bus I tried to breathe as little as possible. Weeks had gone by since the city trucks had come around for garbage collection. The rancid smell of trash carried on the cool breeze blown in from the Delaware River was soothing and sickening at the same time. I pulled my KFC shirt over my nose; the smell of chicken fat was so thick on my clothes it made me just as nauseated as the garbage. I took a deep breath and broke for my apartment building. I hoped I'd get inside before my lungs hit their limit. As I got closer to home I noticed a soft light shining

through the cracks of my mother's window shade. My mother worked on average ten to twelve hours a day; she coveted her sleep. If her light was on at this time of night, it meant she wasn't alone. I decided not to go up and instead walked down the street a few blocks and took a lap around the prison. Sometimes my home was more unpleasant to me than the smell on the street.

A local artist was commissioned to decorate the outside walls of the penitentiary. The artist painted portraits of white, black, and Asian children playing in a green park. There were happy clouds, perfect rainbows, and an idyllic blue sky to hold them all. The children were exaggerated caricatures, two-dimensional and inconsis-

tently drawn. The idea was that this would look as if the kids in the neighborhood had spontaneously gotten together and decided to make this ugly prison beautiful. I've always hated the way it looked. One of the happy young cartoons is picking flowers; she is fading faster than the others. I looked left and right, then I urinated on her.

It had been almost a week since I'd seen my father. He had been in Trenton Penitentiary for nine years and unless God came down and split the prison open, he would be there for at least ten more. It was the first time I'd seen him since he first went in. I'm pretty sure he had no idea who I was at first glance; I barely recognized him. My father, in my mind, was a thick Russian, ten feet tall and all muscle. Prison had run him down in ways I couldn't bear to imagine. His eyes were hollowed out, arms frail and speckled with purple bruises the size of fingerprints. Dad slumped in his chair like a catatonic and stared off into the distance like I wasn't even there.

"I told you never to come back here," he said. I was surprised how well he spoke English. When he went inside he could hardly string a sentence together.

"I have to talk to you; it is important."

"Does your mother know you're here?"

"No."

He finally broke his catatonic stare and looked me in the eyes. He even cracked a smile. "You've gotten big."

"Mom was in the hospital." I fumbled my words out nervously. "She's okay though, she just collapsed at work. I drove to St. Francis Hospital to pick her up. This professor I'm working for gave me his car." My father leaned back in his chair as I continued. "Anyway, I had to go through all this paperwork. No one would tell me what happened. I had been there almost an hour before I got to talk to the doctor, so I was completely freaked out by then. This doctor tried to calm me down and told me mom was fine and it was just exhaustion. He also let slip her pregnancy was a big part of it and she need to take it easy."

"Who she been with?" my father asked.

"I don't think she is seeing someone, really," I

told him.

"Who?"

"We owe Uncle a lot of money." The guard came to collect him before I could explain everything, but Dad knew enough. I thought he would be furious but he took the shock of it all better than I did. Dad winked at me before being escorted away. It was just like I was a kid and he was leaving the house for work.

I finished peeing on the happy child painted on the prison wall and decided it was time to head home. The bolt on the main door to our building had been broken long before my mother and I moved here. I guess the landlord figured there was no need for a lock since no one who lived here would have anything worth stealing. Footsteps creaked above me. I had a pretty good idea who would be coming down the stairs and I didn't want to see him. I took a step into the shadows under the staircase. It was a little nook used by the landlord to hold mops and buckets for a janitor that was never hired. If I took another step I would become completely invisible but I hesitated, half in and half out of the light.

"Kid, how you do?"

"Good, Uncle, how are you?"

"Ah, I don't complain." He tilted his head from side to side, then rubbed his neck. "I just come by to drop off some moneys. You keep grades high, understand?"

"I will try, Uncle."

"Good kid." He tousled my hair, then continued out the door. "See you Sunday for dinners."

I was eight years old when I first went to prison. My father had just been transferred from the prison hospital down to Trenton Penitentiary. Dad had been shot three times by a man who owned the car he was trying to steal. That man was no longer alive. Back then I was still being told the whole ordeal was one big mistake. After a while we just stopped talking about it altogether. Mom and I were making our visit on a weeknight. I only remember because I was mad at her. She forced me into my church clothes for the second time that week. As on Sundays, Mom spent over an hour in the bathroom getting ready. She would always pretend

that stepping from the bathroom into the living room was like appearing from behind the curtain at an award show. Mom would smile and nod as if she were graciously accepting the audience's applause. I would always get so mad at her; it really annoyed me, seeing my mother act in such a frivolous manner. Every time she appeared from the bathroom she would be wearing the same dress but her outfit never looked any worse for wear. Mom took great pride in her appearance, as she did with mine as well. It was very important that although we lived in the gutter we didn't look like we had come from the gutter. She did not do her usual fanfare that night. Even though I was prepared to scold her for being silly, I was utterly disappointed when she emerged from the bathroom without the usual ceremony. Something seemed so sad about that, even back then.

My memories of that time are strange. I remember nothing of waiting in the prison, nor did I recall walking through security. What I do remember is seeing my father and feeling ashamed to be near him. He had been beaten recently; there were bruises on his face and his swollen lip was split in the middle. Something had happened to his hair. He had been shaved, sloppily. There were thick scabs on his head from where the razor had pulled out pieces of his skin. My mother cried. She tried to talk but my father just shook his head and picked up a phone, then pointed to the one on our side. Mom held the phone between us. I could hardly hear my father but he sounded anxious.

There was a man sitting behind my father who seemed to be looking at us. He was cuffed and chained to the bench he was sitting on. This man, dressed in the same uniform as my father, did not look like a good man. He saw me staring at him and smiled at me. I must have looked scared because my father stopped his frantic back and forth with my mother and turned to see what had rattled me. As a child, I had a very simple understanding of who my father was. He was a strong man and although rarely present in our home, he ruled our house totally. He spoke little and had few other emotions other than angry and tired. My father turned white as the person chained behind

him raised his hand and revealed a lock of hair bound together in a rubber band. They locked eyes for a moment, and the chained man made a kissy face at my father. My father turned his head quickly back to us. Sweat appeared in beads all over his forehead, just as if he was suddenly struck by a fever. Before hanging up the phone he told us never to come back. We did as we were told.

I let myself into the apartment; all the lights were off except for the bathroom. Mom was taking a shower. I threw my keys on the kitchen table. They slid into an unmarked envelope. These envelopes always popped up after one of my Uncle's late-night visits. I pulled the mattress out of the sofa and began to undress. By the time my mother came out of the shower I was already pretending to be asleep.

My alarm clock was my mother kissing me on the cheek before she left for work. Every morning she would be out the door before I'd be out of bed. I didn't have class until 10:00 a.m. but Professor Lemner was paying me as a research assistant. I still had to keep my job at KFC because he didn't have enough money in the budget to give me more than a few hours a week. Lemner was the head of the Russian studies department at Trenton State University and the main reason I was able to attend college.

When I started working with him I knew little more than what my parents had told me about Russia, but I had the language down, and Professor Lemner's research was being slowed by the language barrier. Lemner had to do a great deal of fieldwork for a book he was writing and he labored with his Russian. I helped him sharpen his pronunciations, read the reports coming in, and most importantly I spoke with the field workers over the phone. When I was growing up, my parents could hardly speak English. They always felt so handicapped by their Russian but for me it was a gift. All I had to do was communicate with people, and for that I received a partial scholarship to attend Trenton State.

Professor Lemner was rarely in the office before noon; he gave me a key so I could come and go as I needed. Most of my morning went

to finding Cousin Joseph. For all my father knew Cousin Joseph was dead. They hadn't spoken for years, but if anyone could help us out it was him. Cousin Joseph was the man who paid for my father and mother to leave Russia and gain citizenship in the states. He set my parents up with a cheap apartment in Newark and eventually helped us find a nice place in the safe, swank town of Princeton. My family owed a lot to Cousin Joseph and he often collected.

My father did many jobs for Cousin Joseph. I imagine very few of them were legal. After my father was arrested we were asked to leave our home in Princeton and ended up in one of the more moderately priced areas of Trenton. Cousin Joseph was never more than a specter in our lives before Dad went inside, but when his subtle presence left our lives a great deal changed. I knew he would not be easy to find; all Dad had were a few addresses, some as vague as city blocks. Hopefully Cousin Joseph was a creature of habit. Hopefully he was not dead.

Sunday dinner was always an unpleasant obligation, but it had grown more repulsive in recent years. My Uncle, even back when I still loved him, always struck me as a poor imitation of my father. Uncle owed my Dad a lot. Just as Cousin Joseph brought Dad over, Dad brought Uncle over. He let him live with us and even got him a job sheet-rocking. Dad also spent a great deal of time cleaning up Uncle's mistakes. Because of that Mom never cared for him much. But he did help us through tough times. Mom was broke, I was a kid, and dad was in jail. If it wasn't for Uncle we'd have starved in the street.

"Where is that wine I brought over?" Uncle spoke in Russian to my mother. "We should open it, should we not?"

"I think it is in the cabinet over the sink." My mother stared at her food, toying with it as she answered.

"Good, then get it, I should like to have it with my meal." He had become bolder in his manners and his words. There was a time when he was ashamed –ashamed of who he was and how he acted, but that time had passed. Uncle had moved up in the world, and we had not. He

used to owe us, but now he owned us. Mother got up from the table and retrieved the bottle. My Uncle didn't move an inch to help; he just sat and waited as if in a restaurant. Mom set the glass of wine down next to him. Uncle let out a disapproving sigh.

"Leave the bottle near me. I am very thirsty." Mom did as she was told. He looked her up and down as she returned to her seat. "You look like a stuffed sausage in that uniform." My mother looked up ashamedly but said nothing. We sat silently until Uncle was halfway finished with his bottle of wine.

"Kid, how is school?" He would never speak Russian with me. I never understood why, maybe he thought it made him sound cool, like an adult talking to a child and using slang.

"Fine, Uncle."

"Those books I buy you are good, no?"

"Yes, Uncle, they are good. Thanks for helping."

"You get smart off them and someday work for me." My mother looked up quickly and gave him a sharp eye.

"Ah, see how your Mother look at me? See, kid?" Uncle pointed at her with his fork. "She not like how I put food under roof, how clothes are put on your back. She is too good!"

"Quiet." My mother spoke up.

"Mind yourself, Mary; don't forget who makes ends meet around here." Uncle's Russian tongue turned hateful quickly. He stood up and knocked his chair over. Uncle kept tight hold of his fork as if it were a weapon.

"That's enough, Uncle, time to go." I got up from my chair and he was on me. The old man moved fast. He had the fork pressed into my neck. His other hand had a firm grip on a tuft of my hair. I lost my footing and backpedaled until I hit the fridge. Uncle stayed on me the whole way, in control of every step.

"Don't forget yourself, kid." He talked quietly into my ear like he had a secret to share. "Without me, you stop school, you cook chickens your whole life and your Mother goes homeless. Don't forget this."

"It's okay," my mother stammered. She picked Uncle's chair up off the floor and began to tidy up the table. "Let's sit down, okay? We're all fine."

There, let's all sit, please." I was paralyzed with fear and Uncle saw right through me. He let out a little laugh and let go of me. The fork dropped to the floor.

"I go, kid, the stink here give me stomach pain." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of money, then threw it onto the kitchen table. "You don't know how good you have it." Uncle made his way to the door.

"Let me look, come here." Mom checked my neck. "It will bruise a little. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. You okay?" Mom nodded and gave me a hug. This could not go any further; Uncle had become too bold. Money would be a little tight with him gone, but that would be better than this.

I called Lemner and told him I wasn't going to make it in today. Any assertion from me was never received well. He stammered a bit and then stated he needed me to run the survey numbers through one of the survey programs. I told him it would be impossible since he had a meeting with Hanna and an appointment with his wife immediately following. Professor Lemner had no such obligations that day but he got my point. I was allowed a day pass.

There are places in the world I'd always wanted to visit; Newark was never very high on that list. My first stop was a garage Cousin Joseph owned back when my father was running errands for him. I was immediately deflated to see it was no longer a chop shop but a cab stand and by the look of it, a crappy one at that. There were a few people skulking about the Johnstown Cab Company mostly mechanics by the look of them. There was a large bald man sitting on a chair reading the *St. Petersburg Times*.

"Can I help you?" one of the mechanics asked lazily.

"Yes, I'm actually looking for the man who used to own this building."

"What's his name?"

"Cousin Joseph. You know him?"

"He got a last name?"

"Voinovich," I said, embarrassed I did not know his last name. I gave him my last name as a substitute.

"Naw, man, I don't know nothing about your

cousin." He turned away from me and called back to another mechanic working on a cab. "This dude's looking for his cousin. You know some guy named Joseph?" The mechanic shook his head and went back to work. "Sorry, man, can't help you."

"How about you, sir? Know anybody by that name?" I asked the large man in Russian.

"No." He answered and went back to reading his paper.

I hit the other spots on Dad's list and received less information than from the Johnstown Cab Company, which is to say none. The sun started down and I turned for the train station. I had work tonight and couldn't afford any more time looking for Cousin Joseph. About a block from the train station I noticed a Johnstown Cab waiting in the line for passenger pickup. It was the big bald guy from the shop. He waved off two fares in the short time it took me to approach.

"Come here, kid," he called to me. "I can help you out."

A week had gone by and I hadn't seen my uncle. This was not unusual nor was it unwelcome. He kept a close eye on his warehouse around the shipping deadlines. That's when he had the most cars around and the most to lose. But no matter how much he had going on, Uncle never failed to stop by the apartment when I was working the late shift.

Bob and I exchanged waves and I hopped off the bus. The smell of trash didn't really bother me any more; I was used to it. My mother's light was on. My Uncle could not stay away. I walked through the main door and slipped into the shadow of the stairwell. With my eyes fixed on the door I slid my backpack around my side and stuck my hand in the front pocket. The .38 was small, not too heavy, a comfortable weight. I ran my fingers along the barrel and found the safety, then clicked it off. I pulled back on the barrel and cocked the gun. It didn't catch at first so I tried again. With the telltale click, I was all set. A door slammed shut and the stairs began to creak with each footfall.

I had taken the .38 for practice early in the week and the results were not good. The short barrel and my inexperience saved a Coke can

from eight shots at twelve feet. I was about ten from the door. Uncle stepped off the staircase and I cleared my throat. He turned; I saw he was squinting. He looked directly at me, but I had put myself into a place far too dark to be seen. I raised the gun and fired. The shot missed, blowing out the glass in the door behind him. Uncle jumped at the sound and turned for the exit. The smell of trash flowed into the hallway just as water would rush into a sinking boat. I stepped forward and fired again. This time I hit him. He fell into the door with his back to me. I kept squeezing the trigger as I walked toward him. Five of the next seven shots found their mark. The smell had changed in the hall. The burnt smell of gunfire clung to me, and I think Uncle had soiled himself. I stepped over his body and flicked the lights on and off. A car pulled up almost immediately. The bruiser from the Johnstown Cab Company popped the trunk and got out of the driver's seat. I walked over to the car as the old man in the passenger seat put his window down.

"You did well," Cousin Joseph told me. "Give the gun to Milik. It will disappear with the body." I nodded and turned to Milik. He already had Uncle over his shoulder. Milik dropped Uncle in the trunk like a sack of potatoes. The shocks of the car sunk under the weight, then bounced back. There was a child seat in the back of the car that caught my eye.

"You got a kid?" I asked him. Cousin Joseph laughed and shook his head no, then lit a cigarette. I walked to the trunk and looked down at Uncle. He was still alive, but it didn't matter. They were going to take him to Duck Island; it was a factory compound on the river. I dropped the .38 in the trunk and looked down at my Uncle. He looked scared. His face was frozen with his mouth agape. His eyes twitched as if searching for something – help I guessed. He looked like a victim, but that's what people look like when they get what's coming to them.

I closed the trunk on him and the car took off. Cousin Joseph had paid the night watchman at Duck Island and would be allowed access to the furnace. It burned hot enough to melt steel. I was in Cousin Joseph's debt, but it was worth it. Uncle would be ash by dawn –after that a

growing distant memory. I went inside, took the bucket and mop from under the staircase and started cleaning up the blood. There was so much that at first I only seemed to be moving it around. I felt a vibration in my jacket and nearly fainted. Cousin Joseph had given me a cell phone. I guess he had also set it on vibrate.

"It's done, understand?"

"Understood."

"Someone will be by in a few minutes to fix what broke, understand?"

"Understood."

"And to clean what's dirty, understand?"

"Understood."

"Get some sleep. Someone will be around to pick you up tomorrow, understand?"

"Understood." The phone clicked off without another word. Zombie-like I walked upstairs, entered the apartment, and hit the shower. As I washed Uncle's blood from my skin I thought about my family. My father was still in jail. My mother was asleep in her bed with the bastard growing in her belly. I sent my sorries to each one of them in a prayer.

I have been working on my writing for a few years and have had the luck to appear in the print editions of Snow Monkey #15, Monkey Bicycle #2, and Word Riot's first anthology. My work has appeared online at Pindeldyboz (forthcoming), EYESHOT, Hack Writers, The New Yinzer, Thieves Jargon, Rouse, Soma Literary Review, The Journal of Modern Post, Mcsweeney's.net, and Fiction Warehouse.



Meet the Staff at FMAM

WEBMASTER / REVIEW CO-ORDINATOR
CATHERINE CHANT

Although my title says Webmaster, I am also a writer. I write young adult and romantic suspense novels, as well as short stories and the occasional non-fiction article. But in my previous life, before becoming a full-time writer (and a full-time mom), I worked for fifteen years at Boston College as a computing & communications consultant, technical writer and web manager. So my role as Webmaster isn't that much of a stretch for me.

In 2004, when I returned to fiction writing after a ten-year hiatus, FMAM gave me the opportunity to utilize my computer skills while continuing to pursue a writing career. My association with FMAM began when I submitted a short suspense story for consideration. I received a prompt rejection, but the staff was so supportive and encouraging that I stuck around on the listserv, basking in the camaraderie of the contributors, the staff and the fans. I was so impressed by how welcomed everyone at FMAM made me and other new writers feel that I decided to give something back when they sent out the call for a new webmaster. That job later evolved to include coordinating the book review requests that came in via the website as well.

When I'm not webmastering (I also maintain



my RWA chapter's website, From the Heart Romance Writers), review coordinating, or encouraging my own little Hemingway to pen new adventures for Winnie-the-Pooh, I'm writing. I have a young adult time travel romance that I'm currently submitting to agents and I'm working on a follow-up young adult title. I also have a completed romantic suspense on my shelf that just needs a little tweaking before I start sending out those queries.

Oh yes, and I'm also editing—things other than the FMAM website and my own work, I mean. I recently joined the staff at Chippewa Publishing. It's a time-consuming job, but rewarding. Not only in seeing the finished product on release day, but also I find that through editing/critiquing manuscripts I strengthen my own writing and storytelling skills.

FMAM was the first to offer this not-so-fledgling writer a leg up when she returned to the world of fiction writing after a long absence, and from there I have continued to grow. FMAM will always be special to me, and I look forward to watching it increase its readership as mystery fans everywhere discover the terrific stories lurking within its pages.

In each issue we'll introduce you to one of FMAM's fabulous team. In your next issue of FMAM—pdf or print—meet our Copy Editor, Mary Schenten.

>>

A man having an extramarital affair is too clever for his own good.

No Strings Attached

Mark SaFranko

Illustration Copyright © 2006 Gavin O'Keefe



Clever, I remember thinking at the time. *Very, very clever.*

Because I had it all figured out. First I'd send up the red flags of infidelity, then, after enticing Monica into taking a closer look, I'd actually go out and have the affair. Very clever indeed.

The first part of the plan wasn't in the least tough to pull off. Everything I needed was right there on the Web for the taking, courtesy of the Sharpey Investigation Agency: "Signs of Infidelity—30 Clues to Cheating Spouses." Indicators like "sudden increase in time away from home," "decreased sexual interest," and "subject attends more work functions alone" were the easiest to fake, and therefore the ones I employed most consistently to arouse my wife's suspicion. Still, it took some doing because

she's such a fundamentally guileless soul, and I'd never before given her reason to mistrust me. It was only later, when I resorted to tactics like "getting laundry done independently" and "asking about spouse's schedule more often than usual," that she finally woke up.

"Are you having an affair, Richard?" she asked me one evening after I'd dragged in a few hours late for dinner, and Diane, our fifteen-year-old, had already gone to bed.

I pretended complete shock. I'd actually been taking in a movie at the local multiplex, but of course I didn't tell her that.

"An *affair*? No way, honey! What on earth would give you that idea? We've been married for how long? Twenty years! And in all that time, when have you ever known me to be interest-

ed in another woman?"

She gazed at me steadily with her beautiful gray eyes, which hadn't dulled even though she'd crossed the threshold of menopause. I thoroughly understood the expression on her face: she wanted to believe me with all her heart, but she had to rely on her considerable native intelligence and intuition to guide her, since that's the kind of person she is. After a few more questions about my increasingly errant behavior—all of which I answered calmly and truthfully—she appeared to accept my explanation and the subject was dropped.

Nevertheless, I could have sworn I caught glimpses of something—someone—shadowing me whenever I was out and about. The appearance of the same midnight-blue Chevrolet sedan in the parking lots of the dry cleaner in Roseland and the Chinese restaurant in West Caldwell snagged my attention. Then one day I discovered an invoice from the law offices of Simon and Levandowski in the bottom drawer of Monica's desk when I was hunting for a box of staples, and any doubt was erased.

At the bottom, under "*Findings*," was this:

"After extensive investigations over more than three months, it is our conclusion that the subject, Mister Richard Marzten, is not involved in any extramarital activity whatsoever. His behavior and activities, while at times less than predictable, are in our view innocent—in other words they are the behavior and activities of any normal, law-abiding man of his age, occupation and lifestyle...."

Beautiful. Perfect.

The strange thing was that I genuinely loved Monica—as much as any man can love his wife after twenty-two years, if time hasn't eroded what was there in the beginning, if familiarity hasn't bred outright contempt, if there's even a scintilla of romance left.

In my case, you'd also have to throw in the fact that Monica is twelve years older than me, that her once-svelte body has turned matronly, and that she hasn't gone in for a facelift or tummy-tuck, and what you'd come up with was a severe case of boredom.

If there hadn't been a child involved, it would have been easy to ask for a divorce, but I didn't necessarily want one. In fact, I *didn't* want one.

Because there was another complicating factor: Monica is rich. Filthy rich.

And she'd made *me* rich by inheriting an ungodly pile of money when her father, one of Newark's erstwhile great slumlords, passed away just before we were married (no pre-nup, incidentally). It allowed us to purchase—without a mortgage—a fifteen-room Tudor mansion with heated in-ground swimming pool in posh Essex Fells, cheek by jowl with professional athletes and CEOs and renowned medical specialists, and gave her the freedom for various charitable undertakings and the time for a long season of clay-court tennis.

And that same windfall permitted me the leisure to work, as my whims dictated, as a freelance editorial consultant. The rest of our time was spent traveling—to Paris, London, and various resorts all over the globe. All in all a very nice life, and one which I had little interest in disrupting. I had no desire whatsoever to downscale at the age of forty-three.

I let some time pass before launching the next phase of my plan. The way I wanted it was with no strings attached. First, I opened a post office box in the hamlet of Pine Brook, which is on a strip-mall-lined stretch of highway five miles to the west of Essex Fells. Then I planted an ad in the *Village Voice*:

Happily-married, well-fixed male seeks extremely, extremely discreet married female between 25 and 35 for hot, sexy afternoons. I'm game for some secret adventure—are you? Not out to change the status quo. Just looking to shake it up a little. Photo and e-mail address a must. Will only make contact if interested.

Within three days the PO box was stuffed to overflowing. The ones I wasn't interested in—the fatties or those who displayed symptoms of mental imbalance—I immediately tossed into the trash.

"Gretchen" was who I settled on meeting first. The lady knew how to write an intelligent letter all right, but it was her photo that sealed it for me—she was absolutely stunning. Whether or not Gretchen was her real name was anybody's guess. Which was okay—I was going to go by "Jonathan" until we got to know one another—if that happened.

We agreed to meet at the bar of a Malaysian restaurant on Spring Street in Soho. Gretchen in person was downright exquisite, even more lovely than her snapshot. Jet-black hair cut in a bob that cupped her cheeks, ice-blue eyes, and she was buff and well-dressed, right down to her five-hundred-dollar Jimmy Choo sandals. There was nothing of the high-priced prostitute about her, and she was startlingly intelligent and possessed of a sharp sense of humor.

The entire package made me feel a bit ill at ease at first. I'd deteriorated from well-toned and handball-fit over the years to a trifle soft, as my life of ease had progressively taken over. The thought of Gretchen taking off her clothes in my presence was almost too overwhelming to imagine.

We talked about everything from the latest novels and films to the opera to the fortunes of the New York sports teams. We actually had a lot in common—a fondness for theater, travel, haute cuisine. And like me, Gretchen had unlimited access to all of it, because she happened to be married to a wealthy, but much older, Long Island estate attorney. The problem, of course, was the generation gap: it made for problems in the bedroom.

"I know exactly what you mean," I sympathized.

I stared at our reflections in the long mirror behind the bar and my heart fluttered like a lovesick kid's. "Should we...go somewhere?"

"How about the Soho Grande Hotel? It's just a couple of blocks away."

Of course I knew the place. We got up. I laid a large bill on the bar. My fingers were trembling.

"Jonathan" and Gretchen became a regular, if judicious, item. Between assignments we communicated with each other via various e-mail addresses only, changing handles frequently to avoid possible detection. We quickly developed an understanding, and mutually vowed we'd never fall in love with each other, no matter what, since we had entirely too much to lose in the event our relationship ever got out of hand. "No strings attached" was our motto. Just the way I wanted it.

Maybe because it was secret, maybe because it was forbidden, but it was the best sex I ever had: uninhibited; inventive; and incredibly exciting. I prided myself on the certainty that I wasn't about to lose my self-control, and that my wife and daughter noticed nothing unusual in my behavior, even after the affair had been going on for months.

So far as Monica was concerned, given the keen preparation I'd done beforehand, what could possibly happen to raise her suspicions again?

The way I saw it, I was covered in the best possible way. Barring a major misstep, I could even deny knowing anyone by the name of Gretchen, let alone having an illicit affair with her, in the event it became necessary. I was happier than ever at home, and my work thrived. I felt a sense of renewal in every area of my life.

Which was why it disturbed me when Gretchen grew teary one Thursday afternoon after I explained I couldn't possibly break away to meet her on the coming weekend.

"I would love to, baby, believe me, but I have to take Monica to a dog show in Pennsylvania on Saturday, and I've got a meeting with a client on Sunday I couldn't possibly postpone. You have to understand that."

Gretchen finally got herself together, but the scene lingered in my mind. It was the first time anything remotely like it had happened, and it unnerved me more than a little.

I heard nothing from her over the next few days, which was unusual. My thoughts ran wild. Was she about to break it off? Had she gotten stuck on me against her will, and was she now trying to back off? *Had she met someone else?*

Whatever—if it had to end, then it would have to end, and it would be best if that happened before there were any complications. As I'd reminded myself from the outset, I was prepared to let her go if I had to. There'd be other women. I had the system down now. All I had to do was go back to my list or run another ad.

When I heard nothing from Gretchen after a couple of weeks, I began to breathe a little easier, though I missed the touch of her perfect body, the elegant beauty of her face, her class. Frankly, I couldn't stop thinking about her. It

dawned on me it was like I was being ditched by someone I was blindly in love with. But the alternative—fighting against it—was folly. And madness.

I was just about to commence the search for a new liaison when the phone rang one September afternoon. Diane was at school and Monica was attending a meeting of the executive council on the arts.

"Richard Marzten?" From his unctuous tone I knew this was no ordinary call. "My name is Norman Wellington. I work for a private investigation agency out on Long Island."

The mere mention of the words "Long Island" filled me with dread. I would have hung up, but there was no way I could, and Norman Wellington had to know it.

"I see...." I didn't demand to know what the private investigator wanted, because I could conjure up a carload of possibilities. "How did you get my number?"

Wellington chuckled smarmily. "Ah, Marzten—we have so many ways of shaking privileged information loose these days it ain't even much of a challenge."

I got up from my chair and stood at the window that gave out onto the driveway. What would I do if Monica rolled up in her Mercedes? If I hung up, Wellington would simply hit his redial button.

"Actually," he went on, *I've been watching you.*"

"You have...?"

"I certainly have. I've been retained to perform surveillance on you and Mrs. Leonard Trecker—Gretchen."

My epidermis erupted into a cold sweat. Hearing Gretchen's name pronounced by anyone other than myself made her existence *real*. All too real. And the fact *my* own real name was known —

"Marzten?"

"Yes?"

"I think you and I should get together and talk."

I tried to swallow. My throat was as dry as sand. The easy, innocent glide of a cardinal across the driveway seemed crazily incongruous with the moment.

"Why?"

"Because I think you should fully understand the ramifications of what you're dealing with here."

"Where...and when?"

"Room 708, the Soho Grande. You know it, right? Shall we say tomorrow at three?"

What did this oily underwear-sniffer want with me? One part of me argued with another part of me not to go.

But it's nothing, I assured myself as I pulled my fedora down and darted across West Broadway. *It's just a meeting, and what can this clod Wellington really do to me? If he accuses me of something, I'll just deny everything—everything, like I would with Monica.*

I stopped in front of 708 and put my ear to the door. Dead quiet. A happy thought occurred to me: what if Wellington hadn't shown up? What if the whole thing had been some kind of nasty joke, or misunderstanding, maybe even a veiled threat or reprisal by Gretchen for that weekend I'd refused to see her? What if whatever Wellington wanted to talk about had already been cleared up?

Sure.

I was a fool. Nothing bad ever went away on its own. I raised my fist and knocked softly on the door.

Wellington was not at all what I expected. He was a punk, only about five-five or six, somewhere in his late thirties, the type of underfed specimen who looked lost in his clothes, who worked just a little too much styling gel into his hair. It wasn't that he was repulsive; I could see from his lean features how women might find him attractive.

"Marzten—come on in."

He turned his back on me and sauntered across the room. Then he switched off the burbling TV, dropped into an easy chair, and crossed his legs, the picture of confidence and command.

"Have a seat."

He was dressed in a conservative suit, as if he were about to attend a meeting of the board of directors. On the cherry wood footstool in front of him was a squat glass half-filled with clear liquid. Water. Or gin. Or vodka.

I was too nervous to sit. Whatever was going on here, I wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible.

"Relax," coaxed Wellington in a put-on wise-guy voice I immediately detested. "This is gonna take a little time. You don't want to stand there for a half-hour, do you?"

I glanced behind myself and spotted a matching chair.

"Something to drink?"

"No—thanks."

"Suit yourself."

"Why did you want to talk to me?" I managed to croak. I looked around the surprisingly cozy room with its golden walls and ceiling. What was I searching for—a video camera? A tape recorder? There was nothing except for a lamp, a desk, and a double bed, the kind Gretchen and I had made love on.

Wellington scoffed. "Frankly, talking to you doesn't interest me in the least." He smiled patronizingly. "My purpose in bringing you here is to explain to you the fix you're in."

A nerve in my right hand went berserk at that moment, causing the index finger to twitch violently. "And...what fix might that be?"

Wellington grinned. "Not all that bad, if you wanna know the truth."

"No?" I felt a sharp pain in my chest. I was having trouble catching my breath.

"First I'm gonna educate you on some history," Wellington continued high-handedly, nestling his skinny hindquarters more snugly into the seat.

"It was just about four years ago Leonard Trecker first asked me to follow his wife." Wellington must have noticed the confusion on my face. "Oh, come now, Marzten—you don't really think you're the first to get into Gretchen's pants, do you?"

I looked at my clenched hands and said nothing.

"Hey, I apologize if it's a disappointment to you, but that's the way it is. In fact, I happen to be one of the guys who got there before you did."

Wellington laughed. I felt myself flush, first with humiliation, then with embarrassment and anger. Knowing this scummy twerp had

been to bed with Gretchen made me feel as if my delusions about myself were collapsing like a house of cards.

"See, when Trecker hired me to tail Gretchen, I couldn't help but develop a thing for her myself. Let's face it, Marzten—what man wouldn't? All you gotta do is take one look at her, for Christ's sake, right? So rather than blow the whistle, I did something different...something I never planned to do, incidentally—I confronted her after one of her trysts with the guy she was screwing. I told her what I had on her, and she, uh, *persuaded* me not to rat her out to her husband, who happens to be not all that understanding when it comes to his wife's need for freedom and variety. Well, it didn't take much to persuade me."

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. But by now I was mesmerized. Whenever a man is duped, he has a compulsion to know just how far he's been taken for a ride.

"Anyway, I found myself a little ticked at the jerk who'd been...*enjoying* her. And, as now I had no intention whatsoever of telling Leonard Trecker the truth about his wife. I set up a meeting with the greaseball—his name was Tony something or other...and we...came to an agreement."

What was Wellington talking about? No clue. All I knew was I was sinking under an immense weight, and if I didn't get out from under it, I was going to be crushed like an insect. As a matter of fact, an insect was all I was.

"And that's how it was with the next two, Gene and Larry. Occasionally it hasn't quite worked out, because the guy in question was single and didn't have anything to lose, or he had nothing to come to the negotiating table with."

Still no clue.

"See, Marzten, I'll be the first to admit it's a honey of a deal for me. Every time her husband suspects her of hanky-panky, he calls me and I step right in and make the acquaintance of someone like yourself. And the arrangement keeps the old fellow happy—he's assured his wife is true blue, and I draw another fat paycheck. Another two fat paychecks, actually. Thankfully, Gretchen doesn't mind going along

with the charade. She gets what she wants, I get what I want. And after I caught on to what she was all about, I understood it was better to just let her go her merry way. Why ruin a good thing, after all? I'll bet you didn't know sometimes *she's* the one who places the ad, did you? You can dress an alley cat in fine clothes, but it doesn't change the fact she's an alley cat. So I take my petty jealousy out on guys like you, I suppose."

I still didn't quite get it, not all the way, but I was starting to catch on. A galvanizing current of anxiety ejected me from the chair. "Wh-what is it you—"

"Do I have to spell it out? I didn't think I would, not to a smart guy like yourself. Unless maybe you're not all that smart after all. Okay, let me put it to you as plain and direct as I can: for the right money, I don't talk about you and Gretchen to anyone. Like to Leonard Trecker, for instance, since I'm sure you don't want your name dragged into a messy divorce case. Or...to your wife. See what a nice guy I am, Marzten? I could have come to your front door, but instead I invited you here to talk things over."

"How much do you want?"

"Before I set a price, I should inform you I know where you live; I know how your wife is fixed, and all that. So I'm completely confident that you'll come across for me."

"I—I have to use the bathroom...."

I wasn't ready to listen to dollar amounts—I was seeing too much red. I darted into the john, switched on the light, and locked the door. The low roar of the exhaust gave me the illusion I had some privacy to think. Of course, when a man needs a window to crawl out, there isn't one to be found.

Okay. If Monica catches on, it's all over. I'd already lost Gretchen. That's what the teary scene had been about a few weeks ago—Wellington had been sicced on Gretchen again by Leonard Trecker. She understood our little fling was going to have to end, and she'd been distraught over it. Unless I paid this human vermin off, there would be nothing *left* to lose.

Like a sleepwalker I reached for the crystal vase on the runner above the washbasin. I plucked out the three flowers, dropped them

into the wastebasket, then drove the piece mouth-first into bottom of the basin, shattering the glass.

There was a rap on the door.

"Marzten? Didn't fall in, did you?"

I ripped a hand towel off the rack and nestled the shard in it. With my left hand I unlocked the door and threw it open. Then I drove the jagged glass straight into Wellington's face.

The towel flopped over his face as I drove him into the floor. With all my strength, I pressed my thumbs into the gully beneath his Adam's apple until his arms and legs ceased thrashing spastically.

After a while I felt for his carotid artery. But if there was any life pulsing through Norman Wellington, I couldn't find it.

"*Jesus Christ—what did I do?*"

I kept repeating the question, as if I might actually have an answer to it. Because killing someone wasn't me at all. I hadn't planned it—it had been the last thing on my mind when I went to the hotel.

Now here it was a full twenty-four hours later, and I was at home pretending to work. But I couldn't concentrate on a solitary thing except for the portable TV that sits on a corner of my desk. I hopped from channel to channel in search of the news alert that would trumpet my crime to the world.

But more hours passed and nothing happened. My wife came in. Diane got home from school and we all sat down to dinner.

When my daughter went to bed and Monica was reading in the bedroom, I holed up in my study with a bottle and resumed my channel surfing. The strain was already getting to be too much. It wasn't that I hoped to be caught; I just didn't know how long I could endure the tension of waiting for *something to happen*. I felt like a schoolboy who isn't prepared for a math test—there's no way to avoid it even though he knows taking it spells disaster.

About twenty minutes into the 11:00 news there was something that made me jump straight out of my chair. The camera panned the Soho Grande Hotel at the same time the anchorwoman reported a murder victim had been discovered in one of its rooms. In such an

upscale establishment, this was nothing short of shocking. Police were investigating, and they weren't giving up details.

I stared at the screen. *Now what? What was I supposed to do?* I could think of nothing but going for another bottle and drinking myself into numbness.

Which is what I did. Or tried to do. Afterwards I crawled into bed next to Monica and lay staring into the darkness. I wished I could shake her awake and talk about what happened, but when her fleshy leg bumped into my toes, I recoiled. *Confess?* What was I thinking? *Maybe I was losing my mind.*

By the time morning light penetrated the drapes, I hadn't slept a single wink. Somehow I dragged myself out of bed. "I'm not feeling all that well," I said to Monica over breakfast, "but I'm going to my study anyway." But work was the last thing on my mind. I locked the door and planned my escape: Mexico. France. Morocco. Every time the telephone rang, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

There was nothing new to be learned from the TV. In fact, as the day wore on, the slaying of Norman Wellington wasn't even a story anymore, having given way to the war on terror, rising gasoline prices, a coup in sub-Saharan Africa.

Late in the afternoon, after deliberately avoiding a check of my e-mail throughout the day, I logged onto the last address I'd used to communicate with Gretchen Trecker. To my horror, there was a message.

'Jonathan'—I know who you really are. I know your real name is Richard Marzten. Norman Wellington found out everything about you, and before he went to meet you, he told me. It was you who killed him, wasn't it? The police have been to my husband's office asking questions. Call me as soon as you get this message. If you don't, I'm going to call you. This is so sad. So very sad. I was falling in love with you.—G

I could hear the telephone ringing out in the kitchen. This was the main house line that was publicly listed under my name and one my wife and Diane were prone to answer. Seconds later Monica was knocking at the door.

"It's for you, dear."

I gestured desperately at her to cover the receiver. "Who is it?"

"May I ask who's calling?" Monica parroted into the mouthpiece. She shrugged and held the instrument out to me. "She won't say."

"T-tell her I'm not here...!"

"She says it's important."

Of course I knew who it was. Reluctantly I took the phone. Gretchen's voice was strained, frantic. It was over for her, she said. And it was going to be over for me, too.

I kept my eye on my wife who was watching the blood drain out of my face.

"We have to talk," I said after hanging up. I told her about the affair, leaving out certain hurtful details. I confessed to killing Norman Wellington, pleading it was a mistake in judgment, an act of desperation. 'Manslaughter' was the word I used. Because I needed someone in my corner and my wife was the obvious candidate. Maybe, just maybe, she *would* understand.

"I know it sounds preposterous, even insane, but I did it to protect us—you, me, Diane."

Monica looked painfully old to me at that moment. For one horrifying instant, I felt like I was coming clean to my mother instead of my wife.

"If you'd talked to me before you had this affair, Richard, I would have told you that you were better off at home. But I suppose it's a little late for learning lessons." Her eyes were cold and hard, like I'd never seen them before. "Oh, dear. Now we'll just have to cook you up an alibi, won't we?"

My heart leapt with the unspeakable relief of someone who's just won a reprieve from the gallows. At the same time I couldn't help but be aware of how there were entangling strings everywhere I looked now, steel ropes and cables even, and I was flailing in them like a big, helpless fish.

Gretchen Trecker was arrested for murder today. I know it's only a matter of time before she talks and I'm dragged into the sordid mess. What am I thinking? She's spilled everything *already*—she's had to, in order to save herself. I'd bet anything the police are on their way for me right now. When they get here, my fate will de-

pend entirely on my wife. If she swears I was at home when Norman Wellington was killed, I might have a chance. Otherwise—

By the way, Monica's put two and two together and decoded my ruse for throwing her off the scent of my infidelity, and I've copped to my earlier deception. As we sit in front of the TV watching a clip of Gretchen being deposited in a squad car outside her Long Island mansion, she says "I'll try to protect you for as long as I can, Richard. For Diane's sake, mostly. But I don't know *how* long I can do it. I mean, if there's pressure from the police, or.... This time I think you were just a little too clever for your own good."

I smile, a little sadly. I can't disagree. "You're right, honey."

I move closer to her on the sofa.

"What are you doing, Richard?"

"I was going to kiss you," I whisper.

"No. Oh, no. I don't ever want you to touch me again. In fact, until you find another place to live I'm going to move your things into one of the guest bedrooms. We're finished, you and me. Obviously I can't trust you."

I'm angry, infuriated even, but I keep my head. I know what this means. It means Monica's not going to give me an alibi if the cops turn the heat up. It means she'll talk the minute they start to back her into a corner. It means I can't trust *her*.

"Sure, you can," I tell her.

I slip my hands around the wrinkled flesh of Monica's throat and begin to squeeze.

"Richard—stop. Richard...what are you doing? Richard! *Richard!*"

Killing someone is easier the second time, a lot easier, much easier than I thought it could be. I'll figure out what to do with Monica's body later, when she's dead. Maybe I'll put her in the trunk of one of the cars and take a nice little ride out to the Atlantic Ocean, since it's only an hour away. With the autumn sun shining, it's a perfect day for that. On the way I'll cook up something plausible to tell Diane.

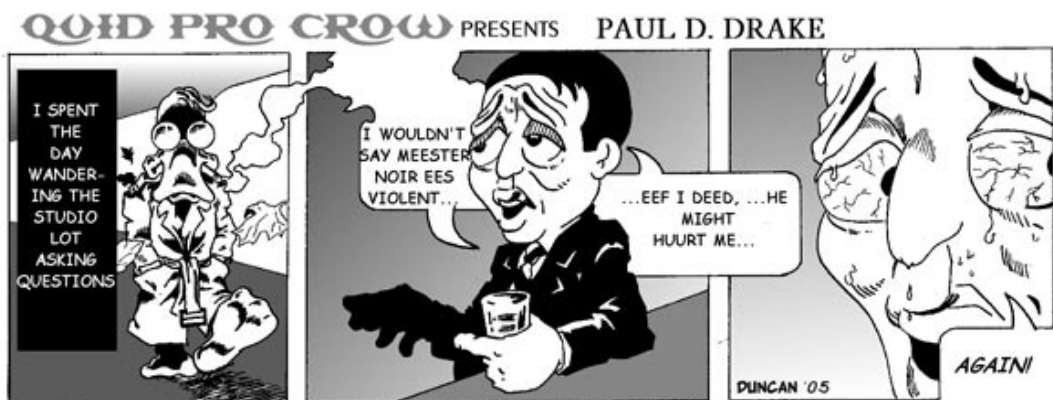
On second thought, if they're going to come for me, I'd better move fast.

I squeeze harder, harder.

There, that's it.

The important thing is that there are no witnesses. Now it's my word against Gretchen's. They can't pin anything on me, can they? I'm clean. Hell, there's even a report up in Monica's desk to prove it.

Mark SaFranko's stories have appeared in dozens of magazines and journals, including Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. He has been cited in Best American Mystery Stories 2000 and nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His novel Hating Olivia will be published in September, 2005 by Murder Slim Press in the United Kingdom.



>>

The wretched man is defined by a handful of moments in his life when temptation is too strong to overcome.

The Deep Six

Lox Crabtree



Illustration Copyright © 2006 Gin E.L. Fenton

Her name was Betty. It might as well have been Kay or Ellen or Dottie—any of those who'd come before. A hint of the bright eyes of her youth, an over-rouged mouth that had been kissed more times than a baby's cheek, and a stain on her soul that could only grow darker with time.

She knew the drill. No hearts and flowers. No promises of a little cottage in the country. A few drinks, a few laughs, and few nights in the sack. For me, somebody to keep the sheets warm and to listen to my life's story. For her, someone to pretend with—that the world wasn't a quagmire of lost hope and dreams sometimes came true.

It seemed the day would never come—when

the dark cloud that covered our land would begin to dissipate. No matter what the papers were saying—that the war would soon be over and Johnny would come marching home. It was 1945 and people were still sacrificing—some dying, some surviving, most living a bare existence that gnawed at them deep down where the light couldn't get at it.

Betty was a survivor. Long before her man had been killed by a Jap sniper's bullet, she'd joined the thousands of women in the factories. Doing a man's work for a man's pay and expecting to have a little peace and comfort and joy at the end of long, hard days. She could party with the best of them, and after she got the letter from the War Department, she partied

even harder than most. The lame, the crippled, the emotionally unstable—the 4F-ers like me—were her stand-ins for what she'd lost on that distant beach somewhere in the Pacific. My excuse for using her wasn't that noble.

I was a struggling private eye with two ex-wives and an unsympathetic bookie looking for regular payoffs. Cases were scarce and most of the money I made usually went to them. My saving grace: I chose women who were willing to pay their way—and mine. I wasn't proud of it; it's just the way things were.

On the night it happened, Cab Calloway and his orchestra were playing on the old Philco radio, and Betty and I were getting dressed to go out. In the light of what was to come, all our other troubles, real or imagined, would pale in comparison.

Gas rationing and bald tires on her car meant we'd have to find another way across town to the nightspot Betty had in mind. No taxis; they cost money. We'd hitchhike, she said, raising her skirt high above her knees, showing the bait. It'd worked before, she said, and tonight would be no different. Neither one of us knew just how wrong she would be.

After twenty minutes of hard walking—there was an unusual chill in the air and a brisk wind whipped at our faces—Betty caught the attention of a man in a Ford coupe. He was looking for company and only mildly objected when he discovered there were two of us. She got in beside him; I begrudgingly took a back seat.

"Where you headed, dreamboat?" he said, leering at Betty.

When she told him, he laughed, stared down at her exposed legs, and maintained he had a similar intention.

"Sounds good to me, doll. I was thinking along the same lines." He glanced back at me. "What say I get the first dance?"

I shrugged; Betty nodded.

Five minutes later we were outside the city limits, headed toward the roadhouse known simply as Lila's Place. A dance hall, a juke joint, a place to forget, for a little while, the ever-present cruel and unforgiving days.

Jack Carter, he said. Traveling liquor salesman. And he reached into a satchel on the

floorboard to prove it. As he brandished the bottle of bonded liquor, his face collapsed into a grimace and he slumped forward against the steering wheel. We skidded off the road and into a field of tall grass where Betty was able to turn off the ignition before we hit either of the tall oaks that loomed ahead.

It had all happened in a wink of an eye, and I was groggy from slamming my head against the front seat.

Betty was screaming loud enough to wake the dead. "Danny! Danny, get out and help me!"

As I opened the driver's side door, Jack Carter fell onto the ground, face first. I felt for a pulse. "You better scream louder, Betty...if you want to wake this one."

"But...what happened? What—?"

"Who knows? Heart attack, maybe. Whatever...his dancing days are over."

She sat on the edge of her seat, rubbing her knee and cursing the fact that she'd torn her nylons against the dash. "What are we going to do, Danny?"

I looked out across the field, through the twin beams of the headlights. We were twenty yards from the road. "Five miles back to town. Five miles in the other direction to Lila's. Take your choice."

I lifted Jack Carter's head. There was a gash in his scalp where he hit the door handle as he fell.

"We've got to get him...take him back—"

It hit us both simultaneously. Take him where? To a hospital? No need. To the police? What good would that do? And who's to say we didn't knock him the head?

I reached into his pocket and retrieved his wallet. Jack L. Carter, Detroit. He was a long way from home. A traveling salesman, he'd said. No roots. Unlikely anyone besides clients even knew he was in town. His first day here, he'd said. I thumbed through the thick wad of bills. Close to eight hundred bucks.

"Is there a phone number there, Danny? Someone we can call?"

"Nah," I said, putting the wallet in my jacket.

Maybe it was the bump on my head; maybe it was the pack of ravening wolves that was

constantly howling at my door. In a brief second, I'd crossed the line. I'd made up my mind to do something I would've never thought possible.

"Help me get him up, Betty."

She eased across the seat, expecting that I meant to put him back in the car. We'd take him back to town, she was thinking, turn him over to somebody. Mark the night off as a stroke of bad luck.

"Get his feet, honey."

She did as I said, then shot me a look of surprise as I started backing away from the car.

"What are we doing, Danny?"

"There's a pond down below those trees. See the water glimmering in the moonlight?"

"You're crazy!" she said, dropping his legs. "We can't—"

"You want to try to explain to some cop how we got this guy to pick us up, how we decided to roll him for his dough, then got cold feet and brought him in?"

"That's not how it happened. It was just bad luck. The guy—"

"Who's gonna believe a down and out shamus and a party girl? We rolled him for his money...or we were going to. There's a gash in his head. One of us put it there, that's what they'll say. And no matter what, they'll put us in the slammer while they sort things out. You'll lose your job. I'll lose my license."

Automatically, in the fear of the moment, she reached and grabbed his legs. As we struggled toward the pond, she babbled her reluctance in short, sobbing statements that more resembled questions and were swallowed up by the sound of loud-chirping crickets and whining locusts.

I emptied his pockets, took his watch and rings, then we dumped him unceremoniously into the water. Betty cried the whole time.

When we got back to the car, my heart was pounding, my pulse racing, more in anxiety than from exertion. Betty was quiet now. She slid across the seat and put her head in her hands. I picked up the keys off the floorboard where she'd dropped them, cranked the coupe and backed up. Moments later, I swung out onto the road, turned left towards town.

My mind teemed with 'what-ifs': what if we'd been seen from the porch of some nearby farmhouse? What if someone had noticed us getting into Jack's car...and later reported it when the whole thing made the papers? What real difference could any of that make now? My only answer was to speed up, to get back to town and ditch the car as soon as possible.

We walked back to Betty's after leaving the car in a dark alleyway a few blocks from her apartment. She waited till we got back to unload on me.

"We have to call the police, Danny," she said, throwing her purse across the room. "If we don't—"

"And tell them we took his wallet and liquor and personal belongings for safe keeping, just in case he came back to life and needed them."

"Tell 'em you panicked...tell 'em—Danny, your head, it's bleeding. What—?"

"Hit it against the front seat. I'll be okay."

"Not unless we call the cops, Danny." She clutched at the front of my jacket. "Please... we've got to. It's the right thing to do."

"It's too late for that. No way now to explain what we did. Here, let's have a drink. Maybe it'll calm you down."

"I don't want a damn drink! I want this nightmare to stop...to be over." She ran to the bathroom.

I dug into Jack's satchel, took out a fifth of bourbon, opened it and drank straight from the bottle. It was the good stuff; it burned all the way down.

Moments later, Betty reappeared, her eyes red and puffy, mascara streaking her face. Before I could stop her, she grabbed the phone, ran to the bedroom, trailing the long cord behind.

"Come out of there, Betty! Don't do it! I'll go to jail...you'll go to jail."

"I don't care," she screamed through the locked door. "I can't take this."

I shoved, kicked against the door to no avail. It was stout oak and she'd lodged a chair or something under the knob. I scrambled across the room trying to find the other end of the cord to pull it out of the wall. It wouldn't budge

either; it was hidden behind a cabinet that must've weighed four hundred pounds. No pocketknife. No time to look in the kitchen. Frustrated, I went back to the bedroom door and tugged the cord hard, pulled with all my might. I wrapped it around my wrist and jerked it again. It seemed to give some, but not much. I banged on the door.

"Let me in, Betty! Don't do this...please."

No sound. I put my ear to the door. Was she even then whispering a frantic message into the phone? I backed up, then ran at the door, slamming into it with my shoulder. Again and again I threw myself against it. Suddenly, the jam gave way. I pushed through, dislodging the chair and shoving it aside.

She lay across the bed, the phone turned upside down, spilled from its cradle. The cord was wrapped around her neck where she'd gotten tangled in it as she attempted her call. Even as I loosed the cord, I knew she was dead, strangled when I'd put everything I had into pulling it from her hands. Her eyes bulged, her tongue protruded from her mouth. I dropped the cord and turned away.

I stumbled into the other room, collapsed onto the sofa. It was minutes before I moved, and then to snatch the bourbon, turn it up, feel the fiery liquid scald my throat. I switched on the radio. It was so quiet now. Too quiet—like a morgue. I had to squelch the silence. Sorting through the static, I found music. Cab Calloway again.

Thirty seconds later, they interrupted the song, made the announcement. I could hear the nightclub erupt into a crescendo of whistling, clapping, shouting. I looked toward the bedroom at Betty's lifeless body and I smiled—a weak, pathetic thing that quivered lips against teeth.

I glanced at my watch. What had happened in the last two hours? A man had died, been trashed like so much garbage. A sad and lonely woman had been killed attempting to make something right. And the war had ended. Two hours in one man's life—that's how I'd be judged. A thief. A murderer. Not even a casualty of war, just attrition. Something that happened over time; a consumption that seeped

its way in from that place inside us all—that place so dark that light can't get at it.

I gulped another swig of bourbon; spit half of it onto my shirt as I began to laugh uncontrollably. Like poor old Jack Carter, I'd been deep-sixed. By choices, the wrong ones. And finally, the worst one of all.

The radio blared the National Anthem. Johnny was marching home. Two hours too late for Jack Carter, for Betty. Perhaps a lifetime too late for me.

I walked back into the bedroom, put the phone in its cradle, then looked over at Betty. Another choice to make. Probably not my best one. Certainly not my first one. I picked up the receiver to call the police. I could barely hear the dial tone for the loud celebration over the radio. Slowly I put the phone down, gathered up the satchel, my coat, anything that said I'd been there. I closed the door behind me, walked hurriedly into the night.

Somewhere out there—in bars all over town—people were starting to party. Party like the world would never end and all their dreams would soon come true. I wanted to be there, lose myself among them, pretend for just one night...that when Johnny came marching home he'd bring the light—and the gnawing darkness would end forever.

In addition to being a tugboat captain on the Mississippi River, Lox Crabtree is a retired oilfield production specialist. He has written numerous freelance articles for Mississippi newspapers and his present passion is fiction writing. He's had several stories accepted for publication in The Writer's Hood, Nimue's Grotto, and Futures Mystery Anthology Magazine. He is currently an editor on the Muse Marquee Newsletter staff. Lox can be contacted at conerlyReb_45@yahoo.com.

Writers and Readers Network

Bringing Writers and
Readers together

www.writersandreadersnetwork.com/

Starfire

by Dr. Mary O'Gara

>>

Mary O'Gara is an astrologer in private practice in Albuquerque, NM. Her short story "Trouble on the Home Front" is included in the anthology, *THE TROUBLE WITH ROMANCE*, published by TrebleHeart Books. Visit Mary at: www.iowapoet.com or see her new book at: <https://www.trebleheartbooks.com/GrandDames.html>

TIME TO WALK IN BEAUTY

NATAL CHART

Venus Direct

February 3, 2006

2:19 AM

Standard time

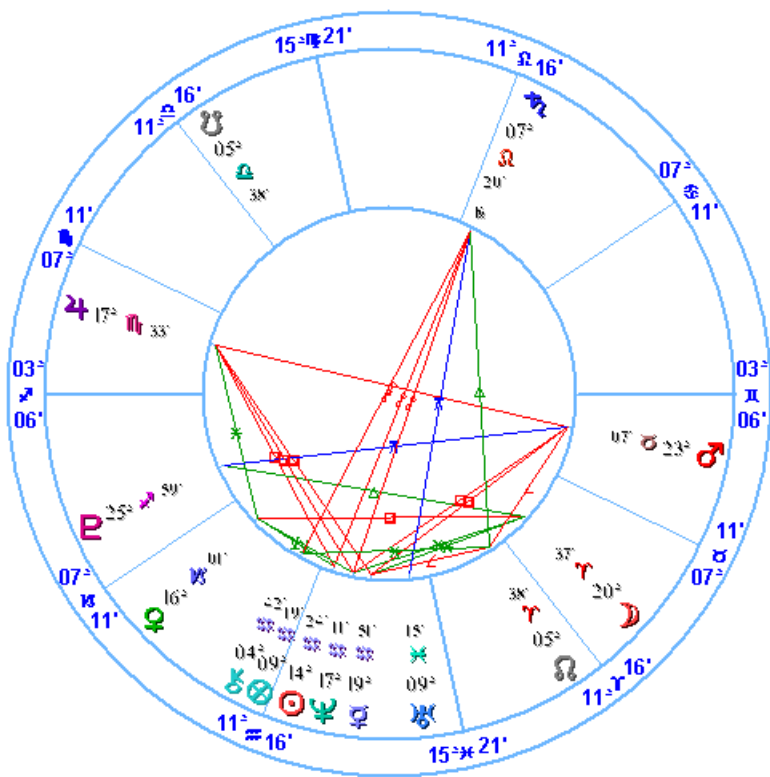
Albuquerque, New Mexico

35N05'04" 106W39'02"

Time Zone: 7 hours West

Geocentric

Tropical Porphyry



Mary O'Gara
1208 San Pedro NE, #153
Albuquerque, NM 87110
Phone: 505-872-4990

The Brigham Young University Museum of Art defined its exhibit of Navaho work with these words:

Encompassing beauty, balance, order and harmony is the essence of the Navajo philosophy and thesis of this exhibition. Given there is no word in the Navajo language for religion or art, "hózh ó" describes both and is considered the essence of the Navajo philosophy.

The Navajo Night Way Ceremony includes a prayer that focuses on finding the beauty in our lives even when we walk through the night, the time of fear and danger in Navajo tradition. The story of the Night Way Chant is told by the Dineh (the Navajo people) at The chant includes the famous prayer about walking in beauty:

In Beauty may I walk.
All day long may I walk.

Through the returning seasons may I walk.

It is finished in Beauty.
It is finished in Beauty.

The lines I have quoted were translated by Sister Pamela Clare CSF. The full poem is on her website at Another site attributed a slightly different version of the prayer to the ceremony about Coyote, the trickster, but in the southwest I've always heard it referred to as Night Way.

The principle here is that we create beauty by creating order, harmony and balance in our lives. Beauty is more than decorative; it is the foundation on which a life is built.

Venus rules personal values (from art to money to relationships) through her two signs: Taurus with the keywords I Believe and Libra with the keywords I Relate. Since Aries, the sign preceding Taurus, has the keyword I Am, we can understand Taurus as saying "Because I am myself, I believe or value." Libra, of course, is about how we interact with, balance with, and relate to those people and things we value. Libra values include both discernment and judgment.

Venus goes direct on February 3, 2006, after a long season of retrogrades. Mars retrograde, from October 1 to December 9, 2005, was a time of reaction and releasing people and situations from our lives. Mercury retrograde in the midst of Mars retrograde gave us time to re-think and plan for our changing lives. Then just before Christmas, Venus turned retrograde on December 23rd.

Venus retrograde, unfortunately for some investors, is a time when ridiculously bad buys

look like bargains. Shoppers and lovers have the same problems. It's such a deal—never mind that it's the one color I can't stand. Sure, and all those cowboys are going to stop drinking and riding off into the sunset once they have a taste of love and home cooking. What were we thinking?

The other side of Venus retrograde is that we do start thinking about all those evaluations we made during the approximately 18 months since the last Venus retrograde cycle began. We re-evaluate relationships and recommit to them—or we revoke the commitment. We figure out that Bozo Enterprises is never going to make it back to the price we paid. We understand why even the least demanding charities refuse to pick up some of our donated treasures. We come to terms with our own bargains and the emotions behind them.

We may not reform. We just understand. We sign and go on.

But this time, we really may reform. This Venus direct chart has some unusual—and not necessarily—comfortable potentials.

Nine of the ten planets are gathered within a semicircle. Jupiter is the leading planet of that group and Jupiter in Scorpio represents an expansion of desire and the potential for rising from the ashes of our old ways and turning into the risen Phoenix. Bringing up the trailing end is Mars in Taurus, ready to take action on our real values, no matter what it costs us. (Do be careful with that no matter what it costs attitude; Mars can go through resources faster than Paris Hilton in a new shopping center.)

On the other side of the circle, Saturn stands alone and retrograde in Leo. Saturn's isolation is emphasized by its being the only retrograde planet in the chart. Saturn rules restriction and condensation. We're used to thinking of Saturn as density and blocks and barriers of all kinds, but Saturn is also the means of bringing our personal creativity (Leo) into form.

Focus is a vital ingredient of manifestation, and Saturn provides the focus as Venus goes direct for manifesting whatever we have chosen during the 42 days she was retrograde. Jupiter in Scorpio provides the consistent emotional desire to fuel the process, and Mars in

Taurus provides the willingness to give up one resource to gain another.

The Moon in Aries promises to help us stay focused on our personal desires and the things that will benefit us personally. That's not always a good thing when we're discussing values and relationships. Moon in Aries can be selfish and demanding, but it does suggest we won't let Mars sacrifice anything we really value.

The Moon is already in the third decanate of Aries when Venus goes direct. The third decanate bringing in a blend of Sagittaria philosophy, love of learning, and willingness to contract with others.

The Moon was last over (conjunct with) Uranus in Pisces, suggesting we may all have come to some unexpected emotional decisions while Mercury was retrograde. We may have had new insights into our values about issues of worldwide concern, or we may have been surprised into new attitudes in personal relationships. Either way, that emotional change of direction is the background and foundation for many of the choices we will make as Venus moves forward.

The Moon makes only one significant aspect after Venus goes direct and before the Moon goes void: an inconjunct to Pluto. Many astrologers would discount the inconjunct as a minor aspect. If you discount the inconjunct and say the Moon is void, then Venus direct is more likely to be an internal shift that manifests slowly over time. If you consider the out-of-rhythm inconjunct to Pluto, you have to anticipate permanent transformation and change, sometimes as abruptly as hurricane damage or radiation burns.

Personally, I like to balance both alternatives about the void Moon. Most results of Venus going direct, I think, will be small, sudden and unexpected changes of direction. We may all be surprised as we find ourselves changing course in small but significant ways. We'll need to focus deliberately (Saturn) to maintain those changes.

Other changes will come along slowly over time and will be so slow developing that new habits will be set almost without our conscious

awareness. Suddenly you just don't want another cigarette or another dessert. Suddenly you're tired of relationships that go nowhere and quit flirting with impossible people. It just happens.

But in some parts of the world, if Pluto is well placed by house or close to an angle, we may see sudden transformation that awes us with its horror or—something we've forgotten in recent years—its absolute beauty. That beauty could come from a sound and reasoned Supreme Court decision or the discovery of a new spiritual philosophy. It can be personal, but it has implications beyond one person or tribe or nation.

With the Moon already void before it aspects Pluto, the Pluto manifestation is virtually impossible to predict. We could predict it in one place. Where I live in Northern New Mexico, Pluto will be in the first house of appearances and personal presentation; I'm planning to spend some quiet time studying the spiritual traditions that are most meaningful for me, allowing them to permeate me with the thoroughness of Pluto transformation. In another place, Pluto might bring about a major creative shift for an artist or the rise or fall internationally of an important currency.

It's a time for small steps, consistent steps. It's a time to make small changes that reflect our changing values. Exercise for ten minutes every day. Replace ice cream with fruit for dessert. Meditate for five minutes in the morning. Write even one page in your journal. Keep a blog. Write one thank you note a day.

Each of those suggestions is a small way to walk in beauty in our world. Venus is beauty, order, balance, harmony and the rhythm of relating. Saturn forms habits.

Whatever you start now, may you finish it in beauty.



FMAM
MYSTERY
www.fmam.biz



>>

An attractive couple gets more than just bed and breakfast at The Lookdown Lodge in the Florida Keys.

The Lookdown

Frank Foster

Illustration Copyright © 2006 Teresa Tunaley



TERESA TUNALEY 05

Feeder bands, the weather people call them. They're the spirally cabooses of hurricanes - squalls, sometimes bright red on radar - that foil outdoor plans when a passing big storm has faded from the lead news story.

Bud Yurovich was watching one of the bands come in from the Atlantic, across the reef, and toward Little Torch Key where he sat on his porch drinking his morning coffee. He could feel the energy which telegraphed the approach of the squall. It was like someone had opened a refrigerator door. He guessed the gusts were maybe 35 or so, and the white caps mottled the water's surface which moments ago had been the Florida Keys' trademark blue-green.

He scratched the blond hair on his head, tugged on his near white beard, and cursed the

hurricane which had near-missed the Keys. All in all, he figured it would cost him five days of work—up to \$2400 including tips. He'd canceled today's charter when he saw the forecast last night. Oh well, would have been a lousy day anyway. In squally weather the bonefish and tarpon drop off to deeper water where they're hard to find. If there was one thing worse than losing a charter, it was taking the client's money and not finding them fish. Captain Bud Yurovich had a reputation to maintain.

The phone rang.

"You hanging on to a palm tree?" the jocular voice on the phone asked.

Bud Yurovich recognized the caller and brightened.

"Nah, it ain't that bad. Just a squall coming

through. Feeder bands. How in the world are you, Joe?"

It was one of his favorite clients, Joe Malone from Orlando. Malone and his wife, Puddin, were expert fly fishing anglers and were regular pursuers of bonefish and tarpon on Bud's skiff, which he had named *This Bud's For You*. Joe Malone's call was to confirm that he and Puddin were coming down for the two-day sportsmen's lobster season and staying over to fish with Bud.

"Didn't you say something last time about a new place for us to stay?" Joe Malone asked.

"Yeah, The Lookdown."

"The what?"

"The Lookdown Lodge. Named after the Lookdown fish. You know, those bright-colored little buggers that nibble stuff off the coral reefs? Got their name 'cause they always seem to be looking down their noses? You've seen them snorkeling."

"Oh, yeah."

"Melvin and Grace Smythe own it. I've kinda known 'em around the Keys since they came down from the Berkshires up north. They had a B & B up there, too. They're a little weird, but the house and location are great; it's right on the water. If you and Puddin don't like it, I'll move you someplace else."

"Okay, we're supposed to turn left here," said Puddin Malone, reading from the notes her husband had made during his last phone conversation with Bud Yurovich. "It's at the end of this street."

The Lookdown Lodge on Cudjoe Key was the last house at the end of a secluded road whose terminus was at the ocean.

"What a marvelous spot," Puddin said with excitement.

"Damn sure better be at two hundred clams a night," Joe said. He turned his GMC Yukon in the driveway, the tires crackling over the shell surface.

As they emerged from their air-conditioned vehicle, they met a searing blast of July tropical steam bath. July was a little late for bonefish and tarpon, but the two day sportsmen's lobster season was always the last Wednesday and

Thursday of the month. It was a spectacle: thousands of small boats dotted the Keys, flying their red dive flags and dragging snorkelers around at idle speed looking for Florida lobster.

They left their bags in the car and climbed a curved stairwell which had a veneer of conch shells and fish pattern tiles and went to the main level of the house. They rang the doorbell, the button of which looked like the eye of a ceramic Lookdown fish. It struck Joe that the Lookdown fish was looking down, all right - directly at his crotch.

"Strange-looking house," Puddin said while they waited.

"I know," her husband said. "All angles, with a few curves just to confuse you. What were their names again?"

"Melvin and Grace."

The front door was a massive mahogany-looking slab. A carved, arched-back mermaid with bare breasts protruding prominently served as the handle. It opened, and Joe and Puddin stood looking at a lanky man with long, dark, wavy hair which glistened with an overabundance of oil or lotion. Other than one earring which dangled like a miniature wind chime, the only thing he wore was a red Speedo bathing suit. He was quite Caucasian, but his skin was so tanned he could have passed for mulatto.

"Grace, they're here!" he hollered over his shoulder.

"Joe and Puddin Malone," Joe said.

"Right. Come on in." His tone was flat but cordial enough.

Joe and Puddin stepped into a round atrium with tropical plants everywhere. On the wall was a framed super-enlarged photograph of a multi-colored Lookdown fish, nibbling away at a coral reef. Joe looked closer at Melvin and decided he was past fifty and that his hair was dyed. He was convinced of it when Grace appeared, because she was definitely past fifty, if not sixty, and was not wearing her bikini nearly as well as Melvin was wearing his Speedo.

She waddled and jiggled toward them in small-heeled sandals which clapped loudly on the Mexican tile floor. "I'm Grace and this is Mel-

vin," she said with an outstretched hand.

As Joe took her hand, he tried to look at her eyes instead of the folds of wrinkly flesh hanging out of her green, flower-patterned bikini.

"Grace," he said, half-bowing and forcing a smile.

"You two are so young and so cute," Grace said. "And you're our only guests right now so you're going to get plenty of attention. Unless, of course, you don't want it. After all, we're here to please *you*." She smiled.

"We do like to be pleased," Puddin said, smiling back.

"But we spend most of our time on the water," Joe added.

"Oh, yes, lobster season," Grace said, holding her index finger in the air and raising one eyebrow.

"And bonefish and tarpon fishing after that," said Joe.

"Right," said Grace. "Well, here's the way it works around here. We serve wine and conch fritters at 6:00 every evening, and a full breakfast is at 8:30."

Joe said, "I'm not sure how available we'll be for all that. We'll probably be away at first light after the lobsters and may not be back for the wine."

"Oh," Grace said, disappointment evident on her face. "Well, that's a shame."

"So where's our room?" asked Joe.

"You're welcome to look at all the rooms," she said, "but we already have you in the Yellowtail Room. You'll see it's our best."

Joe and Puddin exchanged glances. "Yellowtail Room it is," Joe said.

"Those people are *weird*," Puddin Malone said when she and Joe were unpacking in their room—the Yellowtail Room—obviously named after the tasty snappers which are so plentiful in the Keys.

"What's so weird? This is the Keys."

"I don't know. This wacky house. The way they just...look at you."

"Hey, I saw you looking at Melvin in his Speedo," Joe said.

"Oh, that man is sooo gross," she said. "But I think Grace has her eye on you, Mr. Cutie."

He reached for her and held her so their noses almost touched. "You're the cutie," he said.

Joe and Puddin Malone, who met at Florida State, had been happily married for twenty-one years. Joe was from Orlando, Puddin from Daytona. Puddin was a petite blond with a pug nose who regularly astounded fly fishing guides with her casting. She had built a thriving interior design business in Orlando. Joe—blond, chunky, and cherubic-looking—had founded Malone & Company, a prosperous general insurance agency in Orlando.

They disengaged from their near embrace, resumed unpacking, and looked around the room which, like the house's exterior, was all multiple curves and joined angles. The furnishings were eclectic, had the effect of "designed clutter," and included numerous massive pieces from the Orient. The television was on an oak table which, on closer inspection, turned out to be a very old gynecological examining table complete with stirrups which were down in their unused position. One convex curved wall was almost entirely covered with semi-erotic paintings and exotic objects. The whole effect was so disorienting that Puddin said, "I'm not sure I could tell anybody a thing about this room, it's just so...."

"I know," he said.

They had no excuse for skipping that day's 6:00 wine and conch fritters, so they went. Melvin and Grace were still in their brief swimwear.

"Quite a house," Joe said. "Can't quite figure it out."

Grace laughed. "Nobody can. He designed and built it." She pointed to her husband. "My Melvin's a genius, really. Very innovative."

Joe took a sip of what he thought to be a perfectly dreadful glass of chardonnay and nodded. He looked at Melvin and sized him up as a techie of few words, maybe a retired engineer who'd said, "Who needs the rat race?"

"Where is *your* room?" Joe asked the couple.

Melvin pointed and said, "Up there."

Joe and Puddin looked where he pointed. They were sitting in the atrium, which was circular. On the far side was a metal staircase which hugged the curved wall, ascended it like

a line on a bar graph, and stopped on the second floor at a metallic door. Earlier, Joe had stepped outside for quick look around the place before the wine and fritters and, from his recollection, that metal door would have to lead to thin air. He said so.

"No, not really," Grace said, smiling. "If you looked closer, you'd see that's not the case."

"Well then, your room is sort of over ours," Puddin said.

"Sort of." Grace was still smiling.

After forcing down some more of the wine and trying a conch fritter which contained no conch but was more like a hushpuppy, Joe and Puddin left for dinner. They went to Little Palm Island, an exclusive island retreat which runs diners and lodging guests back and forth from Little Torch Key on their own fleet of boats. There they enjoyed superb fresh-caught yellowtail snapper *en papillot* washed down with a fine bottle of Mersault.

Back in the room, both were just tipsy enough to partake of romping, adventuresome sex accompanied by playfully naughty language they both enjoyed using on such occasions. Afterwards, while engaging in pillow talk, they joked again about their eccentric and idiosyncratic innkeepers.

Bud Yurovich finished washing down his flats skiff and thought about his day on the water. He'd put his clients on some tailing bonefish in Coupon Bight early, and in the afternoon found some back-country tarpon up against some mangroves in a little bay off Niles Channel. He wouldn't tell any of his guide friends about the tarpon and would go straight there in the morning, his first day fishing Joe and Puddin Malone.

Joe had called on the cell phone earlier to touch base and fix tomorrow's time. When Bud asked about The Lookdown Lodge, Joe's reply was, "It's okay, but a little weird." He wasn't sure what to make of that, but planned to interrogate the Malones the next day. He wondered if he should have recommended the place to anybody before checking it out more thoroughly.

He looked at his watch. It was a little after five, still incandescently hot, and the thought of

an ice-cold Budweiser began to control his very being. He hopped in his truck and made the five minute drive to the house of his friend and fellow guide, Ralph Dorsey.

Bud drove up to a house more modest than his and not on the water. Ralph Dorsey was much younger than Bud Yurovich and still trying to get his guide business well established. Bud knew Dorsey was there because his truck was in the driveway, but a knock on the screen door got no answer. It was open, so Bud went through it and knocked on the front door. Still no answer. He pushed it open and called out for Dorsey. "Hey, you out of beer—is that why you're not answering?"

"In here, Bud," Dorsey called.

He found Dorsey, a large man with a prematurely salt-and-pepper beard, in a small room hunched over his laptop computer. He was so engrossed in what was on the screen that he did not look up.

"Bud, you gotta see this," Dorsey said.

"If that's what I think it is, you know I ain't into it. You got any Budweiser or not?"

"Come on, Bud, look at this," Dorsey persisted.

Bud headed for the desk to look over Dorsey's shoulder. He was sure he would see what he believed Dorsey spent entirely too much time and money on: Internet pornography. The man had a problem, and Bud's attempts to get him off his habit had been unsuccessful.

Bud knew Dorsey's wife worked at the bakery at a nearby Publix. "You're at it again, huh? Kitty must be at work," he said as he stepped behind Dorsey.

Bud, who did not own a computer, planned to humor his friend by glancing at the screen momentarily to see the expected nude couple grinding, undulating, displaying orifices and the like, then to quickly head for the fridge and the Budweiser.

As he glanced away from the couple making love on the screen, his head involuntarily jerked back. He suddenly moved in close behind Dorsey and watched intently.

"What site is this?" Bud said tightly.

Dorsey's eyes were still on the screen and he didn't pick up on Bud's tone. "See, I *thought*

you'd like this."

Bud clapped his hand on Dorsey's shoulder and spun him around. "Goddammit, I said what site is this?" He said it violently, looking at Dorsey with eyes red as coals.

Dorsey was the much larger and younger man but he cowered. "Geez, Bud, what's got into you? It's just some good porn..."

Bud's hand was still heavy on Dorsey's shoulder. "No it's *not* just some good porn. I *know* those people. They're my clients, for Christ's sake. I'm fishing them in the morning, you horny bastard. Now tell me everything you know about that website."

Ralph Dorsey spread his hands and looked back at the screen. "Hell, I don't know, Bud, it's just one of the sites I use." He looked back at Bud. "Where are your people staying?"

"The Lookdown. Why?"

Dorsey shrugged. "No reason, just curious."

"Wait a minute," Bud said, and he looked closely at the screen again. "That's where that is, isn't it? That's one of the rooms at The Lookdown."

Dorsey looked at the screen and shrugged again. "Beats me."

"Get me the number of The Lookdown," Bud said.

Dorsey complied, and Bud dialed the number on his cell phone.

"Uh, yeah, this is Bud Yurovich. That you, Grace?" He paused and listened. "Yeah, I'm looking for your guests." Another pause. "Okay, when they get in please have them call me on my cell phone right away. It's about our fishing tomorrow."

He snapped the phone shut. He hadn't wanted to telegraph anything. "Damn. They're not back from lobstering yet. Gimme that phone book."

Bud furiously looked up another number, made a call, and in forty minutes the Monroe County Sheriff's Department deputy-in-charge for the Middle Keys, Matt Adams, rolled into the driveway. A friend of Bud's, he was a man whose square-jawed good looks were spoiled by teeth which should have been fixed when he was a child. Bud reluctantly showed him what was still on the screen.

"You get hold of a judge?" Bud asked him.

"I got hold of The Sheriff. *He's* supposed to be getting hold of the judge. Any way you slice it, we're looking at sometime tomorrow before we can get a search warrant."

"I know, I know," said Bud.

His cell phone rang and he flipped it open. "Joe, thank God," he said. "Now look. I just want you to listen to me. Don't say one word or ask any questions. You're gonna have to trust me. I want you and Puddin to get dressed to go out to eat, but I want you to somehow slip out to your car with your toilet articles and another change of clothes, because you're spending the night at my house. Whatever you do, don't say anything to Melvin or Grace. I'll be waiting for you at my house."

"This better be good, Bud," said Joe Malone as he strode into Bud's house with Puddin in tow. "And what's the sheriff doing here?" His face was in a murky scowl. Puddin's was tight and anxious.

"There ain't nothing good about it, my friend," said Bud gravely. "You and Puddin need to sit down." He looked at Matt Adams, the deputy. "Maybe you could, like, check and see if you're getting a radio call or something?" he said, tilting his head toward the front door. The deputy nodded and walked outside.

It was one of the toughest things Bud Yurovich ever had to do. He had debated on how to phrase it and finally decided to just blurt it out.

"It looks like Melvin and Grace Smythe secretly filmed you and Puddin making love at The Lookdown and then put it on the Internet," he said.

Puddin gasped and covered her face with her hands. Joe just leaned forward in his chair, his brow suddenly bunched up in a massive furrow as he tried to digest what he'd just heard and formulate what to say.

Bud shook his head from side to side looking at the floor. "Joe, I don't know what to say about this. It's my fault. I should have made somebody besides my favorite client a guinea pig with those weirdos over there." He looked up at the couple. "What can I say? I'm—"

"What are you talking about, Bud? How do

you know...?"

"Guide friend of mine has an Internet porn problem. I went by his house for a beer and he showed me." He tried not to look at Puddin. "I... just sort of glanced at it for a second to make sure who it was."

Puddin looked up, her eyes red and wet.

"I have to see," Joe said.

"I figured," Bud said and tilted his head toward the kitchen. "My friend's laptop's in there. He's cued it up."

Puddin didn't want to look. She sat with Bud while Joe was in the kitchen and silently wept. Bud went outside and asked Matt Adams to come back in.

When Joe Malone re-entered the room, his face was a hellish mix of pain and fury. He turned to Deputy Matt Adams. "So when do you arrest those two sickos?"

"Afraid we can't just yet, Mr. Malone," the deputy said. "The Sheriff should have a search warrant tomorrow. We'll all go in the place and see what we find."

The mahogany door with the bare-breasted mermaid opened. Grace Smythe, in a blue-flowered bikini, looked at four uniformed sheriff's personnel, plus Bud Yurovich and Joe and Puddin Malone. When she saw her callers, her face collapsed.

"Oh," she said. "I already sent my check for the Policeman's Athletic League."

Deputy Matt Adams said, "Not very original, ma'am. You the owner of this place?"

"Yes."

Adams displayed the search warrant and pushed his way past her into the house with the three other uniforms. That left her looking at Joe and Puddin Malone with Bud in the background.

"You two were naughty last night," Grace said to Joe and Puddin in a playful tone. "Stayed out all night, didn't you?"

Bud stepped in front of the Malone's. "Put a lid on it, Grace," he said. "How can you make jokes after what you've done to these people?"

"Haven't the foggiest what you're talking about, Bud."

"You will in a minute."

Grace calmly said, "Can I get anyone coffee?"

Bud Yurovich leaned closer to Grace Smythe and put his face inches from hers. "You can shut your fucking mouth is what you can do. Where's Melvin?"

"At Publix. Should be back any minute."

Joe and Puddin kept silent. Along with Bud, they followed the searchers around the house, identified their room, and pointed to the curved metal staircase which they had been told led to the Smythe's room.

The search turned up nothing.

Joe and Puddin were stunned, as was Bud. Matt Adams wore a frustrated expression. They stood in the Yellowtail Room. Grace Smythe sat on the deck reading a book.

"We've looked everywhere," Adams said with a wave of his hand. "Took all the stuff off the bedroom walls hunting for a peephole or a place for a camera. Found nothin'. We've searched every room in the house."

"No, you haven't."

All heads jerked around to face Puddin, who spoke for the first time since they entered the house.

"I'm sorry?" said Adams.

"I said no, you haven't. There's a room we can't see."

"Ma'am, I'm sorry, but..."

"Hold on, Matt," Bud said. "She's a decorator and—"

"Bud, this ain't about furniture and wallpaper..."

"My wife is not just a decorator, she's a designer," Joe Malone said. "She's what they call an ASID. It's like a degree in design, including structural. I suggest you listen to her."

Puddin walked toward the curved, convex wall in the Yellowtail Room from which Matt Adams and his crew had removed the erotic art and *avant-garde* objects. She pointed to it. "There's a room behind that wall, and I think it's directly below the Smythe's room. Let's go up there."

They all ascended the curved metal staircase. Bud thought the Smythe's bedroom was the strangest he had ever seen. There were mirrors everywhere, including the ceiling, the bed was round, and erotica predominated.

"I'm telling you, there's a room below this one we haven't been in," said Puddin.

Bud looked at the new-looking carpet on the floor and thought for a few long moments. Then he motioned to Matt Adams to follow him outside the room. Alone with Adams in the atrium, Bud said, "Look, I need a little time. Less than an hour. Can you guys sort of, you know, keep searching for a while?"

Bud remembered from their last conversation Ralph Dorsey did not have a fishing charter that day. He was relieved to see Dorsey's truck in the driveway. He didn't bother knocking this time, just walked in. Dorsey was hunched over his computer again, but not so engrossed he didn't notice Bud's entry into the room.

"Hey, Bud. What's up?"

"What's down is the question, Ralph."

Dorsey did a double-take and said, "Huh?"

Bud walked over to the desk which held Dorsey's laptop and swept the computer off the desk onto the floor, where it landed with a clatter. In the next motion, he sat on the desk where the laptop had been.

"The fuck you doin' man? That's my lap—"

Bud's shoe struck him square and hard in the chest, upending Dorsey's chair and sending him to the floor in a heap. Bud slid off the desk, picked up the laptop with both hands, and with one motion wrenched all the cables from it. "You mean this laptop?" he said, and hurled it against the wall as hard as he could. It landed with a sickening clatter and fell to the floor. "That doesn't look like a laptop to me. That looks like a bunch of laptop parts."

Dorsey picked himself up and was now on one knee. Bud pulled him to his feet and slammed him against the wall where the computer had landed.

"It's you, you piece a shit, and you didn't tell me," Bud yelled in Dorsey's face.

"I...I didn't do anything," Dorsey squeaked.

"Yes, you did. You told the Smythes we were on to 'em. And now you're gonna tell *me* something."

"Tell you what?"

"Where the camera room is. It's under their bedroom, isn't it?"

Dorsey said nothing. Bud slammed his head against the wall.

"Where is it?" he yelled. "You're *going* to tell me one way or the other, so you may as well do it now. I may be able to get the Sheriff to cut you a break." Bud tightened his grip on Dorsey's shirt.

"Okay, okay. There's a hidden room right under their bedroom."

"Have you been there and seen it?"

Dorsey nodded.

"Why couldn't we find it?"

Dorsey tried to shrug that he didn't know, but Bud slammed his head against the wall again. "You tell me. Now."

"They...they have a way to cover it up with carpet. I, uh...I could show you."

Then Bud remembered from less than thirty minutes ago. The Smythe's bedroom was the only one in the house with wall-to-wall carpet. And it looked new. Should have figured it out, he told himself.

Less than thirty minutes after he left the Look-down Lodge, Bud Yurovich walked back in with Ralph Dorsey. He had called Matt Adams, who was waiting in the atrium with his team. Joe and Puddin and the Smythes were sitting there, too.

When the Smythes saw Dorsey, both their faces went ashen. "What is he doing here?" Grace Smythe asked in a voice no longer smug.

"Shut up, Grace," said Bud.

Everyone went upstairs except the Smythes, who remained in the atrium with a deputy.

"Here," said Ralph Dorsey. He seemed to be pointing at the round bed.

"Where?" said Bud.

"It's the bed, but first you gotta take up the carpet."

With the help of Melvin Smythe's tools, they rolled back the Berber carpet. The carpet had been kept on hand by the Smythes to use if they needed to conceal their access to the filming room. When the carpet came up, they saw it. The round bed was on its own track, allowing it to roll away onto the hardwood floor. The frequency of the bed's movement had left permanent indentations in the floor—thus the need

for the carpet camouflage.

They rolled the bed away to reveal a spiral staircase, hugging the wall much like the one in the atrium. They descended the staircase to the round room beneath. Several holes on the wall next to the Yellowtail Room had been ingeniously plugged. Melvin Smythe had used dowels, previously prepared and fitted for the occasion, and stained on the other side. They matched so well that they escaped the initial detection of Adams' team. One look at the dowels, the sophisticated camera equipment and recording system was all Adams needed.

"Go read 'em their rights," he said. "I'll be there in a minute."

Bud was sitting in the atrium with Joe and Puddin when the Smythes emerged from their bedroom, having been allowed to change from their swimwear to street clothes. They were led, handcuffed, toward the front door.

Grace Smythe looked over her shoulder at Joe and Puddin. "You really were one of our cutest couples. And so passionate." She looked directly at Puddin. "Your little scream was—"

"Get 'em out of here," Adams said sharply.

After the Smythes were hustled out the door, Adams turned to Joe and Puddin. "I'm sorry

your visit to the Florida Keys has turned out this way. I know you're glad it's over."

Puddin's eyes welled with tears and she said in a rising voice, "It's *not* over. Those horrible people have put Joe and me on computer screens all over the world. Having...*sex*." She cupped her hands over her face and sobbed.

"No, they haven't."

Everybody turned to Ralph Dorsey, who had been sitting there waiting his turn for interrogation and subsequent arrest.

"What did you say, Ralph?" asked Bud.

"They're not on the Internet."

Bud said, "But I saw it on your laptop."

"I know, but it wasn't on the Web. Grace gave me a CD. I was supposed to make the contact and get it on the Net. Hadn't done it yet. I still got the CD, and you already smashed my hard drive." He looked at Puddin. "So you can stop crying, lady. Me and Melvin and Grace is all that ever saw you, and we're all going to jail."

Frank Foster, sportsman and the former chairman of a publicly-traded company, has completed his first mystery novel. He has secured the representation of a New York literary agent and is hopeful of publication. He lives with his wife in Lakeland, Florida and Cashiers, North Carolina.



MONKEY TRAP

by Lee Denning

"Monkey Trap" is a metaphysical fable about the agonies of love and power, wrapped around a story of unrelenting action and suspense during the evolution of a new humanity.

"...With well drawn characters and a wealth of detail, it's a book you may want to read again to get the full force of it. ... A great read." Annette Gisby, editor of Twisted Tales.

"...MONKEY TRAP is full of twists and turns, undercurrents and subplots, technical and scientific detail and jargon that under the talented hands of this father-daughter writing team will enthrall any Sci-fi fan.

"...this trade paperback, with its artistic cover design, quality paper and print, is a two thumbs up must read bookshelf keeper. Don't miss Lee Denning's MONKEY TRAP."

Reviewed by Charlene Austin © August 2004 for Writers and readers Network.

www.monkeytrap.us

Twilight Times Books, P.O. Box 3340 Kingsport, TN 37664.

www.twilighttimesbooks.com/

JEROME AND THE SERAPH

A FANTASY BY ROBINA WILLIAMS

"Robina Williams has tackled the oldest and most troubling question known to thinking and spiritually concerned humans. "Jerome and the Seraph" is a charming and deceptively simple story, filled with delightful puns and serenely sly humor. It is a book to cherish." ~Pat H. Fredeman, author of *Paradise Regained*.

Brother Jerome has a fatal accident in the cemetery of his friary and has a few problems adjusting to his new existence. Is this a new world, or a very old world?

Robina Williams lives in northwest England, near Liverpool. She has a M.A. in Modern Languages from Oxford University and an M.Phil. in English Literature from Liverpool University. Her M.Phil. research thesis traced the influence of nineteenth-century painting on the writings of Wilkie Collins. Paintings feature in her fantasy novels "Jerome and the Seraph" and "Angelos."

Visit her website: www.robinawilliams.com/



Copies can be ordered directly from the publisher,
Twilight Times Books, P.O. Box 3340, Kingsport, TN 37664
and also via the Internet at
<http://www.twilighttimesbooks.com>

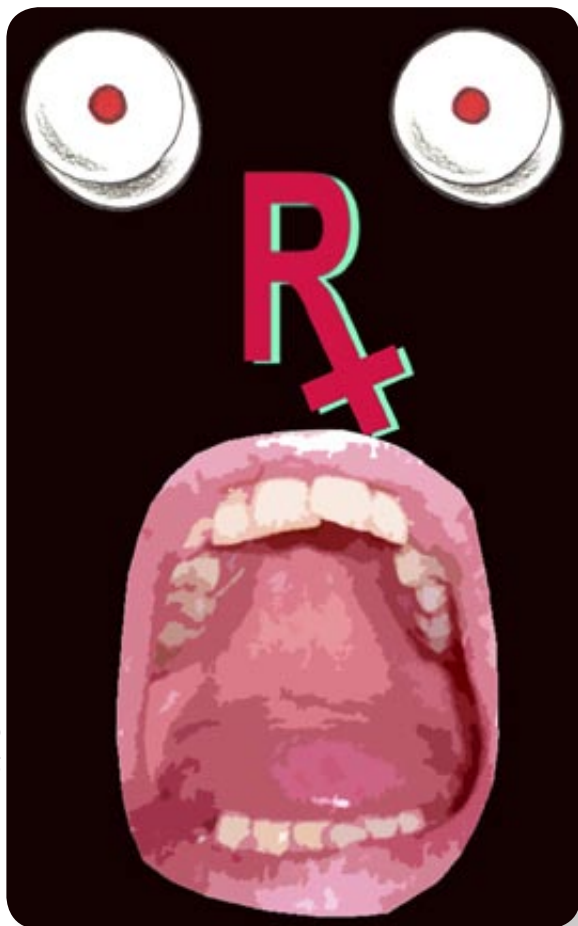
>>

For the doctors and nurses it was routine, but for Alan it was anything but...

A Minor Fear

John Hawfield

Illustration Copyright © 2006 Gavin O'Keefe



The fear was there. It seemed silly that a grown man could be enslaved by an irrational fear, but it had always been with me and was, to me at least, always valid. It was not one of demons and devils dancing a Faustian waltz of horror upon a stage of fog. Nor was it a fear of pain. No. This fear was a feeling that things were not what they appeared to be. That underneath the veil of what was considered reality was a layer of flesh rotting from deceit. It was a feeling of mis-

trust that hung over my everyday life, like a seemingly benign cloud that would one day open and drown me in its downpour.

The fear was always there.

Yet I got through each day by reminding myself that these feelings were just irrational. That, as mother always told me when I was a little boy and terrified of going to school because I was certain Mrs. Thompson was an alien from another planet and wanted to steal my brain

away for some God knows what ritual on her home planet, I was being stupid. There were times when I was so afraid of the bullies on the playground that mother would have to spank some sense into me, as she always said.

Strangely enough, though, the fear wasn't there at first when I walked through the doors of the hospital for minor surgery to treat a hernia that threatened strangulation. I was oddly at ease and didn't have to keep reminding myself there was nothing to worry about. This was a hospital for Christ's sake, full of people with degrees that said they understood diseases with complex names and knew exactly what to do to treat them. These were people that cared about one's well being and did what was for the best no matter what. What safer place could one be?

For the first time I could remember, the cloud wasn't hanging over my head as I strode into the admitting ward full of confidence and trust in those whose hands I was about to place my very life, handed my pre-filled paperwork to the admissions nurse, took a seat, and began to flip through an outdated issue of *Psychology Today*.

After a while I started to notice just how hard the seats were. One would think a hospital could afford something a little more comfortable. But at least my discomfort didn't seem to bother my hernia which really never gave me pain, so I was lucky the doctor found it right away –before it became a problem. Still it felt like someone was sticking a knife up my bottom and rooting around.

That was the trigger.

Thoughts crept into my head of what could happen when one is under the knife. But, those thoughts were just nonsense. Weren't they? No, they weren't nonsense. But, I had to trust these people.

It was like I had become two different children seesawing back and forth between anxiety and logic, both battling over who was to be King-of-the-Hill, on a fertile playground that conjured up thoughts beyond the slip of the knife.

I tried to focus on the magazine but to no avail.

What if they are actually doing things to people?

What sort of things would they do (flipping

the page)?

What wouldn't they do?

Look, these are the people we trust (flipping the page).

How can we trust them?

We have to (slamming the magazine shut). They've gained our trust by being in a position of authority.

And, they are the ones that have all control over us while we sleep.

Maybe it was the endless flipping of the pages, or the shifting in my seat trying to find a comfortable position while my mind battled bullies, but it must have been obvious something was bothering me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the admitting nurse watching me closely.

Calm down.

"Is this your first time in a hospital?" a voice questioned.

I hadn't noticed her before, sitting two chairs down from my right. She smiled at me, waiting for a response.

"Sorry. I probably seem a little nervous, huh?"

"A little," she said with a slight laugh. Leaning over she stretched out her hand, "I'm Sarah."

"Alan," I answered, taking her hand in a polite, albeit not too, handshake.

"Nice to meet you."

Her touch was gentle and surprisingly warm given the relative coolness of the hospital. For that matter, hospitals can be downright cold places, and this one was no exception. The stench of rubbing alcohol hung in the air-conditioning system, even finding its way into this closed off region far from the need for sterilization, adding to the chill. Tropical foliage plants set artistically around the room looked out of place against the arctic white walls and foreign in the chilly air, and so did Sarah. Her red hair stood out like the Japanese rising sun against a field of white. I had seen her somewhere before, maybe at the grocer's or on the street—maybe only in my dreams.

"So, what are you here for?" she asked.

"Oh-um-well I have a hernia they need to fix."

I was nervous just speaking simple pleasantries with her, the familiar quiver in my voice that was so prominent when the teachers

would call on me for the answer to a question, or when mother wanted to know what I was doing in my room for so long, was back. But, who could blame me for not wanting to fully draw back the curtain and expose the view to the playground below where I was currently being beaten for milk money. Besides, she was very pretty which would make anyone nervous.

"They said it's a simple operation. I should be out of here tonight, tomorrow at the latest."

"Simple operations. Those are the ones you have to worry about," she said with a wink. But the joke was lost on me as I must have become noticeably more agitated.

"Sorry. Bad joke. I guess I'm a little nervous, too," she said, fiddling with the chain of a locket around her neck.

What followed was an uncomfortable silence as if someone had farted during a State dinner.

"I'm finally having my tonsils taken out," she said, breaking the silence. "Can you believe that? I'm 32 years old and having a procedure little kids have done."

"At least you can have all the ice cream you can eat afterward."

Before she could say anything more a stocky nurse wearing a uniform fresh out of a Hemingway novel, all white with sharp pleats and a crown with a bright red cross on the front—a uniform that must have been favored only by the older staff and the non-professionals—came over saying, "Follow me. You'll be in room 212."

My operation had been scheduled for 3:00 PM; it was now just half-past nine.

As I followed the nurse out of the admitting ward, I turned back to Sarah and said, "Look me up if you get a chance. You know what room I'm in."

"212, easy to remember." She waved as I went through the door.

It was a Spartan room with everything in its place. Blinds covered the only window and had been drawn closed cutting off my view to the outside and allowing only the barest amount of sunlight to enter. On the bedspread lay a pale-blue, lightly patterned hospital gown. The nurse told me to change into the gown and someone would be along shortly for surgery prepara-

tions. I undressed fully, feeling a bit of shame at my nakedness and feeling utterly alone. Yet at the same time there was the sense the whole world was watching my every movement—the walls had grown eyes, wide and scrutinizing, examining my naked body, laughing at me.

Now dressed in the gown, I lay back on the bed and closed my eyes. I could hear voices from deep inside the hospital, murmuring from behind closed doors, coming up through the sink's drainpipe. In my mind they were voices of warning, tinny and distant, telling me to flee while I still could. I opened my eyes, shook my head, and the voices stopped—replaced by the strong chill in the air that felt like slivers of ice stabbing into my body, impervious to the thin material of the hospital gown. Shivering, I crawled under the blankets and wrapped myself up into a protective womb. After a while I started to doze.

It was maybe twenty minutes later, maybe longer, when a nurse entered my room and roused me from my half-slumber. Silent and unsmiling, she read my chart. Maybe it was her silence, maybe it was her almost featureless appearance under the same costume-like uniform that had been worn by the admitting nurse, but the mattress began to feel like a bed of needles pressing hard against the exposed flesh of my back where the gown would not completely close—the surgical sharp points piercing tiny holes, drinking the blood that trickled into yawning holes for collection. The strangest thoughts tend to come to mind when I'm overly stressed.

Finally she looked up from the chart and gave a crooked smile.

"I see Dr. Lyons is your surgeon."

"Yes," I replied.

I had met Dr. Lyons briefly during a visit with my family doctor, Dr. Jeffery, who had discovered the hernia and decided surgery was the only option. Jeffery had explained that Dr. Lyons was considered to be one of the best surgeons in the country, making it a point to emphasize "the best" knowing of my little problems. He had said Dr. Lyons was a close friend, specializing in transplant surgery, and

would as a favor perform the operation. I had known my family doctor for most of my life, ever since I was a child when my mother had drug me into his office, kicking and screaming, for an ear infection. She knew him well enough before that, giving his daughter piano lessons at one time. Mother had died during a transplant operation.

"I'm sorry, but the doctor has been called off for emergency surgery. We'll have to reschedule your procedure for late tonight."

"Couldn't we just make it another day then?" I asked, not wanting to stay one minute longer than necessary. Plus, the thought of someone just coming off of all day surgery then cutting on me was not a settling one.

She smiled again, the same crooked smile, then went over to a cabinet along the wall that stood at the foot of the bed. Inside were a variety of instruments and concoctions that all seemed foreign and somewhat sinister to me. She selected a little amber colored bottle and poured out two tablets into her hand, made a note on the chart, then handed me the pills.

"Here. Take these. They will help you relax and maybe get some sleep." Not that I wasn't sleeping before she arrived and woke me up to give me pills that will help me sleep.

I held the pills in my hand—both white with a red dot in the center—as the nurse looked on expectantly, waiting for me to take my medicine like a good little boy, that damned crooked smile still plastered to her face. I watched as her smile grew bigger, slicing around the circumference of her head separating it into two halves that popped open, as if hinged in the back, exposing a tiny demon inside of her head laughing and pointing at me, asking me if "Baby wants his mother back."

Tentatively I placed the pills onto the tip of my tongue and reached for the cup of stale water sitting beside my bed. The voices in the drainpipe were screaming now: Don't swallow! She can't be trusted. Just push the pills to the side and spit them out when she's gone.

I swallowed. Satisfied, she left the room.

I awoke to a darkened room; sunlight was no longer sneaking in through the cracks in the

window blinds. The hospital had a stagnant, after-hours calm, the kind of calm that surrounds a funeral home viewing room when the body is laid out for the first time, and no one is around but just the two of you.

Sitting up in bed, I felt both hunger pains and—for the first time—the pain from the hernia, which shot through my body like adrenaline being pushed through a needle into a stilled heart. What time is it? The room was spinning a bit as I searched the nightstand beside my bed for a clock and found it contained neither a clock nor a phone, only the nurse's call-button which I pushed. No phone, so much for calling out for pizza.

I rubbed my face with the palms of my hands—tried to push away the sleepiness—and felt two little bumps plastered to the side of my right cheek. Pulling the lumps free from my face I could just make out the two little white pills with the red dots in the center. I must have left them lying on my pillow, and they stuck to my cheek while I slept. Quickly I hid them inside the pillowcase so the nurse wouldn't see them when she arrived.

Where is the nurse?

I pushed the button again, listened to the darkness, and watched for the faint glow of light streaming in from under the door to be broken by the shadows of approaching feet. But none ever came.

"Hello?" I tentatively called out into the darkness, answered only by the stillness of the room. More time passed, and still there was no nurse. I began to draw myself out of bed when the slightest of knocks came at the door followed by a low voice.

"Are you in there?"

The voice was familiar, and it took a few seconds as I stood at the side of my bed to recognize who it was.

"Alan," Sarah called me by name this time, still in a hushed voice.

"Sarah," I answered with relief at a friendly voice. "Yes, I'm in here. Hold on a second."

I searched the room for my clothes not wanting her to see me in my gown. But they were gone, having been spirited away by some orderly while I slept.

"We don't have a second!" She made clear. With that, I opened the door and her body rushed past me, closing the door swiftly and silently behind her. "We need to leave now. They mustn't find us."

"They who? What are you talking about?"

"The people that work here. Get your things."

"Umm-this is all I have. My clothes are gone."

"Fine," she said pressing her ear to the door, listening. She seemed to be satisfied that whatever, or whoever, it was she was listening for was not there.

"Come on. Follow me and I'll get you out of here."

She opened the door, peered out into the hallway to make certain no one was in the hall or at the nurses' desk, and started to bolt. But for some reason my hand, as if guided by someone braver than I, caught the door and prevented her from passing.

"Now wait a minute." I closed the door then demanded an explanation. "What's going on here?"

"Keep your voice down." She quieted me harshly. She paused, listened once more at the door. "Look, I've been sneaking around watching them. They tried to give me pills to calm me down, but I didn't take them. It's all pretend, Alan."

"What do you mean it's all pretend?"

"This hospital! They've made up this elaborate show so people don't know what's going on: the admitting ward, the doctors, the nurses, wheeling patients through the corridors with IVs dangling. It's all fake! They give us pills to deaden our senses, help keep us unaware."

She smirked, then added, "The only thing real here are the bidders."

"The bidders?"

"The parts have to be fresh. So the bidders line up along the walls, waiting for the auction to begin. That's how I found out. I could hear them shouting out numbers through the walls. When it's all done the bodies are zipped up in a bag and taken to the morgue-still alive! I've seen the morgue. It's filled with them!"

She listened at the door again.

"Dr. Lyons is behind it all. Your doctor, Alan."

"Behind what!"

"You don't get it, do you?"

I shook my head no, feeling as if my mind was about to explode and come gushing out my ears like spit-up oatmeal. The voices in the pipes were screaming now with laughter, but Sarah didn't notice.

"Alan, they're harvesting organs."

"Oh that's ridiculous," I exclaimed in disbelief. Even so, I could feel the tiny hairs standing up along the back of my neck as if a specter was blowing an icy breeze against my flesh through pursed lips. I knew it!

"Alan, you have to trust me," said Sarah. I heard her words repeated from far away-one of the voices in the pipes or behind the walls-followed by childish giggling. "I'm telling the truth. Do you trust me?"

I don't know why, but I nodded a yes.

"Good. Now follow me."

Sarah checked the hallway again, it was clear.

"We can get out from the roof," she said motioning toward the elevator at the end of the hall.

"Why the roof?"

"Because they are watching all of the other doors. There is an auction going on right now, and the only exit not being watched is the roof."

We entered the elevator, and she pushed a button. The door closed behind us and the elevator began to groan its way up.

"When we get to the top." Sarah couldn't complete her sentence. Somewhere in the hospital an alarm went off. All of the buttons and lights on the control panel lit up and began flashing as the elevator stopped.

"What just happened?"

"They're on to us. Help me open this door," she said. "Maybe we are between floors and can climb out."

We positioned ourselves on each side of the narrow fissure between the two stainless steel doors. Our fingers dug in hard as we strained against the door's mechanism. The sides began to budge a bit, then finally gave up resistance and slid open freely. With luck, we had come to a stop just above another set of doors leading

out to a different floor. Those doors slid open more easily into a dimly lit wing of the hospital.

Paint peeled from the walls, broken doors hung loosely on rusted hinges, cables snaked from open ducts in the ceiling emitting a slight hum, barely perceivable to the human ear. There were papers strewn across the floor, amid shards of broken glass that glittered in the flickering light like faux diamonds sparkling for the fools that bought them.

Gingerly we inched down the hallway –the crunch of glass under our feet –toward a set of stairwell doors –toward any chance of escape.

“Alan, one of us has to get out of here no matter what. We have to split up.”

My instinct was to put an end to this nonsense right now, but at the same time I trusted her implicitly. I would have done anything she asked of me.

I nodded, “Which way do you want to go?”

“You take these stairs, and I’ll double back. I remember seeing another set of stairs along the other side of the building. Try to reach the roof.”

I hung my head, uncertain of what to do.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “We’ll see each other again. At the top.”

She gave me a quick, reassuring hug and then was gone. I opened the door and began climbing the stairs toward the roof.

From a few floors above voices began echoing down. They were on the stairs, coming my way. I knew I needed to reach the roof, but there was no chance of doing that now. I’d have to make my way down into the depths of the building and then try to find a way out from there.

Turning, I ran down the stairs. They must have heard my descent. Now the stairwell was filled with the echoes of many feet pounding hard against concrete. I could feel dull vibrations rumble through each step as I went faster and deeper in the bowels of the building, all while thoughts screamed in my head.

Body parts.

What will they do to me?

Auctioning body parts.

They’ll kill me if they catch me.

You knew better than to be here.

I’ve got to get out of this.

Mother can’t help you now.

I’ve got to find Sarah.

Why do you really trust the girl?

Cold sweat poured down my face and neck. Each foot miraculously found the next step without tripping as the light in the stairway dimmed toward darkness. And as the light faded, so did the voices trailing after me.

Within a few more seconds I had reached the bottom of the stairs as well as the limit of light. Shrouded now in black, my hands felt in front of me and were met by hard cinder blocks.

Now what?

I closed my eyes and sank down to the floor, shivering, not wanting to open them so I could escape whatever horror waited in the dark for me –like a child hiding under blankets to keep the monsters away. Many minutes passed with still no sounds from the stairs above. I opened my eyes.

My vision had become more adjusted to the lack of light. Now, I could see a short passage bending off to my left. I rose to my feet and followed the passage until its end, at which stood a door outlined by a faint glow that escaped through the crevices between it and the door-frame.

I placed my ear against the door like Sarah had done and listened for any movement on the other side. There was a laborious sound as if someone was carrying something heavy, followed by the slam of doors, and then nothing more. After some time of listening, still with no more sounds of movement, I felt it safe to enter the room. I fumbled with the resistant handle before it finally gave and allowed me to open the door and enter a room bathed in pale green light against even paler green walls. Behind me, before I could reach for it, the door closed, its latch making an audible click into the locked position. There was no handle on this side of the door making it too late to turn and go back.

The vast room was filled with stainless steel tables upon which lay black, satiny bags, each with a zipper down the front. I was in the morgue Sarah had spoken of with its endless

supply of bodies submerged in a sea of green. I began to sidle through the rows of tables toward a set of double doors with round windows set into the centers. These must have been the doors I had heard slamming shut while I was still out in the stairway-slamming shut after orderlies had brought down a fresh body. I took my steps carefully as to not disturb the dead, fearing they would wake up.

Halfway through the room, they did.

The bags began to rise up; muffled groans of agony permeated the black material. Inside each bag the outlines of hands and arms pushed against the fabric, clawing, wanting to be borne back into the world of light.

Running, turning over tables and pushing lumps of flesh enveloped in dark cocoons out of my path, I reached the doors. They were locked. I hurled my body against the steel, pounded my fists, as figures closed in behind me. I could smell their death; taste their decay in my mouth. I yelled, calling for Sarah –for any-body –to come to my rescue.

Through the doors' windows I saw the hospital staff converge to watch the show like a crowd watching the monkeys at a zoo, the wavy glass distorted their faces in grotesque shapes.

My eyes searched the room, looking for another way out. Instead I saw her along the wall.

"What's wrong, baby?" Mother asked, trying to push the entrails back into her body. "Look what they did to me." Her eyes bled from their sockets as she gazed around the room, trying to focus. "We'll do the same to you," she hissed.

"No!" I turned away, covered my face in my hands and cried out Sarah's name. I pleaded "Sarah-Sarah-Sarah-" between bursts of sobs through clutched fingers until I heard her voice behind me.

"Alan."

I felt her hands on my shoulders, turning me around slowly, almost caressing me into a feeling of safety. Mother's dead eyes, wide and hollow, stared into mine. Her skin had washed away into a thin sheet of white set against a pillow of auburn.

"You've been a very bad, stupid boy!" Her face twisted wildly as a guttural growl emitted from

deep inside of her. She pulled me toward her, mouth opened wide as if to swallow me whole. I screamed.

The scream still echoed in my head as I woke from the nightmare into reality. I was in my hospital room, and it was daytime. The window blinds were no longer closed, allowing bright sunlight to beam into the room and further enliven a cheerful arrangement of flowers in a vase that wasn't there the night before.

Dr. Lyons raised his eyes from the charts in his hands, "You'll be happy to know the operation was a complete success."

"Operation?" I questioned, trying to shake off the panic from the nightmare and a drug-laden sleepiness.

"Yes. We did the procedure last night. Don't you remember?"

"No. I don't remember." I was groggy and uncertain of anything at that moment. "It must have been those pills the nurse gave me. They really knocked me out."

Dr. Lyons smiled, "Well it's over now. You should be on the mend for about two weeks."

The surgery was a success! I had made it.

"Wow, Doctor, I didn't remember a thing. And it's funny, but I don't feel any pain. Shouldn't I feel something?"

"You won't for a bit. It's the pain killers you're on."

A nurse came into the room, startled by my waking scream.

"Is everything all right, Doctor?"

"Everything is fine, just a little post-operative dream." He consulted the chart again. "It's time for the patient's medicine. Please make sure you give it to him." The doctor replaced the charts onto the foot of the bed and left the room as the nurse busied herself in the cabinet.

"Knock, knock," came a familiar voice from the door. Sarah stuck her head into the room. "Hey. I was hoping you were still here. I guess everything went well then."

"Yeah, I guess it did. But I don't remember a thing except this wild nightmare."

The nurse came over to the bed and handed me the pills, "Here you are."

I took the pills from the little paper cup; they were the same little, white tablets with the red dots in the center that I had taken previously.

"I'm not sure if I should take these things again, not after what they did to me the last time."

The nurse gave her crooked smile and handed me a cup of water.

"Now drink up."

I did, allowing the pills to wash down my throat. I had been childish to worry, and this was my way of proving to myself all of my fears were just simple foolishness. I wanted to leave the fears out on the playground where they belonged.

"Do you like the flowers I sent?" Sarah asked.

"You sent those? They're very nice. Thank you."

The nurse went back to the cabinet, arranging bottles and instruments, taking inventory.

"So how about your tonsils?" I asked.

"It was moved back, which is why I'm still here." Sarah then gave me a puzzled look and said, "You mentioned something about a nightmare."

"Oh it's nothing. I just had this wild idea from the beginning that something was going to happen to me here. I've always had a problem trusting people, and I guess it all came out while I was under for surgery." I yawned. "Anyway, it doesn't matter now. This is truly the best I've felt in years. It's funny, but as scared as I was about being here, I really feel safe."

Sarah smiled.

"Thank you again," my voice coming out somewhat more muddled.

"For what?" she laughed.

"You know, for being here. And for those flowers."

They were pretty, just like her.

"Those pills are starting to take effect," she said. "I'd better be going."

I tried to shake away the grogginess but couldn't.

"Yeah, I'm getting really sleepy now. Sorry."

"Don't be," Sarah said standing up and going over to the cabinet. The nurse was still preoccupied with its contents. Sarah spoke quietly with her, maybe asking how long it would be before

I'd be up and around again.

"Sarah," I said as Dr. Lyons reentered the room, "I hope everything goes well for you, too. Don't be nervous. You're in good hands here."

I felt my body growing numb, my arms relaxed behind my head.

"Is the patient all set, nurse?" he asked.

"Everything is fine," she answered. It was odd how much, in my drugged haze, her voice sounded like Sarah's.

The fog of sleep was filling in across my mind. Dr. Lyons came over to my bedside.

"You know, Alan, I actually met Dr. Jeffery through your mother."

"How do you mean, doc?" I asked, trying to focus, my hand brushing lightly along the pillowcase in hopes that the effort would keep me awake for just a few minutes longer.

"You see, back in those days Jeffery drank heavily. I warned him against it, but you know how it is. Before too long, well, his liver was about gone."

I tried to say something, but my voice came out muffled and distant.

"Funny thing is, your mother turned out to be a perfect match for the donor organ."

I felt the two tiny lumps inside the pillowcase.

"Your father was an alcoholic," he continued. "So you know it's just a matter of time before all alcoholics are back at it. And, well, let's just say the need for another operation arises."

Sarah and the nurse turned back around to face both of us. In the haze that now filled my vision I could see Sarah holding something shiny in her hand. Maybe it was a gun. Maybe they were on to the doctor and knew what was going on here. Yes. They were. I was sure of it. They were sneaking up on the doctor. I could tell.

"So," Dr. Lyons continued, "we figured like mother, like son."

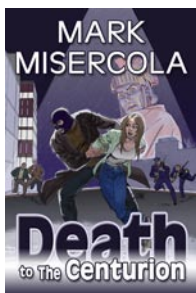
Sarah and the nurse were now directly behind him, the gun poised in Sarah's hand. I could see beyond them—through my dimming vision—a group of men lining up along the wall; each carried a number and a clipboard. In the middle was Jeffery.

I waited for Sarah to make her move, to put

an end to this.

Sarah passed the doctor, came over to my bedside, bent down, her locket with the initials "S.J." spilled out from between her breasts. She brought her lips close to my ear. Her warm breath was soothing against my skin, and she whispered, "Like father, like daughter."

John Hawfield lives in Mid-Michigan with his wife and two children. He is active in Lansing area Writers' Workshops where he can be found nicking the coffee and doughnuts, and disrupting a reading with bursts of laughter at inappropriate moments.



**Suspense
Available now!**

**DEATH
TO THE
CENTURION
MARK MISERCOLA**

"Death to the Centurion" is a page-turning thriller, from novelist and life-long comic book fan Mark Misercola, about corporate intrigue, insider trading, underworld ties, and murder.

Richard MacAllister, a young comic book writer, finds himself being stalked after he is ordered to kill off the world's greatest superhero in a desperate bid to rekindle interest in the character and save his publisher from bankruptcy.

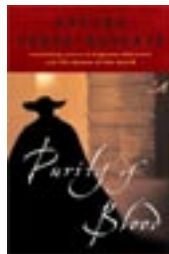
ISBN: 1-931201-26-9
Trade Paperback. \$16.95 U.S.
~ visit ~
www.twilighttimesbooks.com



Twilight Times Books
Kingsport, Tennessee



by harriet klausner



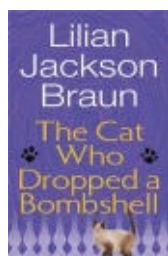
Purity of Blood
Arturo Pérez-Reverte
Putnam, Jan 2006,
\$23.95, 288 pp.
ISBN: 0399153209

In 1623 Madrid Chief Constable Martin Saldana arrives at the crime scene of a strangled woman sitting in a sedan chair in front of the church; she holds a pouch containing fifty escudos and a handwritten note stating: "For masses for her soul". He confides to his friend Captain Diego Alatríste that he is unable to resolve who murdered the woman and what motive caused the homicide.

Don Francisco de Quevedo asks Alatríste to help him before the soldier returns to his hometown of Breda, Flanders where hostilities have once again broken out. Francisco's daughter Elvira is being held at La Adoracion, a convent that is a harem for the dangerous Father Juan Coroado. The duenna who brought Elvira and two other novices there

simply vanished. Adding to Francisco's fears is that he and his daughter are not "not of pure blood", which makes them fodder for the Inquisition fire. Alatríste accepts the assignment as he is not one to idly stand for the abuse of power, but soon connects Coroado's concubine center to the plaza homicide with both linked to the Inquisition

The sequel to the wonderful seventeenth century sword-buckling CAPTAIN ALATRISTE, is a terrific action-packed tale that starts off with the plaza homicide and never slows down until the final confrontation. Besides the heroic escapades of the lead protagonist, who has some set backs during his rescue attempts, readers obtain an in depth look at Inquisition Spain, but the historical tidbits are cleverly interwoven into the fabric of the adventures. Once again Arturo Pérez-Reverte provides a fabulous fast-paced thriller starring a wonderful super soldier who delays his entry to the war flaring up back home to risk his life trying to rescue a damsel in distress.



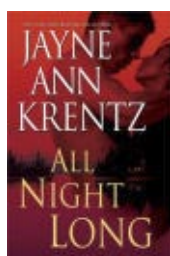
The Cat Who Dropped a Bombshell
Lilian Jackson Braun
Putnam, Jan 2006,
\$23.95, 208 pp.
ISBN 0399153071

The town of Pickax, four hundred miles north of everywhere, is celebrating the sesquicentennial (a century and a half of existence) with plans being made for three parades, family-reunions, and two auctions (one centers on people bidding on kittens). Newspaper columnist Jim Qwilleran, the richest man in the northeast central United States and the owner of those adorable Siamese cats Koko and Yum Yum, intends to immerse himself in the festivities so that he can write up articles for his column.

The wealthy Ledfields ask Qwill, through their attorney, if their nephew Harvey could sketch his barn for his college entrance portfolio. When Harvey arrives to do the designs, Koko leaps down three stories and lands on Harvey who hates cats. Koko also swipes a

picture of Harvey and puts his claws through it. Qwill senses the cat doesn't like the man but wonders why. When the sesquicentennial activities begin, Koko gives a piercing yell in the middle of the night, which Qwill knows means someone was murdered; an out of town visitor was killed when he and his brother were hunting rabbits. During all the activities the Ledfields are in seclusion because their allergies are bothering them. First Mrs. Ledfield dies and soon Mr. Ledfield succumbs to the same ailment. Their deaths put a pall on the celebration.

After twenty eight "The Cat Who" books one would think that the series has run out of lives but nothing can be further from the truth. The CAT WHO DROPPED A BOMBSHELL is a purrfectly delightful cozy and Koko the cat with ESP delights the audience with his amusing antics. Readers who like a fun cozy with delightfully eccentric characters including the felines should look no further than Lilian Jackson Braun's latest novel.



All Night Long
Jayne Ann Krentz
Putnam, Jan 2006,
\$24.95, 416 pp.
ISBN 0399153055

In the small Northern California town of Dunsley, Irene Stenson missed curfew because her best friend Pamela Webb deliberately kept her out late. When she finally arrives home she sees the murdered bodies of her parents on the kitchen floor. Their deaths were deemed murder-suicide and Irene left town and never returned or spoke to Pamela.

Seventeen years later, Pamela e-mails Irene asking her to come back to Dunsley because she has something important to tell her. She checks in at the Sunrise on the Lake Lodge and is immediately attracted to the owner Luke Danner who finds himself very interested in his boarder. When Irene arrives at Pamela's house, she finds her former friend dead, a bottle of empty pills and liquor near the body. The sheriff rules it a suicide but from the urgency

of Pamela's message Irene thinks she was murdered. As a reporter she starts her own investigation because she believes there is a link between her parents' deaths and Pamela's demise. Luke helps her and saves her life quite a few times because it is obvious someone is willing to kill to keep Pamela's secret hidden.

A Jayne Ann Krentz novel is always a joy too read and ALL NIGHT LONG is no exception. The protagonists are drawn true to life and are not as quirky as Ms. Krentz's characters usually are but that is because they are dealing with dark, troubling and dangerous situations and emotions. The mystery is very complex and filled with red herrings and unusual twists and turns. There is a secondary character, one of Luke's brothers, who deserves his own story.



What Fire Cannot Burn
John Ridley
Aspect, Jan 2006,
\$6.99, 432 pp.
ISBN 0446612030

During the Age of Heroes, mankind was willing to let the metanormals be the policeman for mankind but when two of them fought and destroyed half of San Francisco and killed six hundred thousand people, humanity turned on them with a vengeance. Overnight, they were declared non-human, their rights stripped away and those that turned themselves in were sent to a special facility or transported out of the country.

Soledad O'Roark of the Pacific MTac, a division of the LAPD, is dedicated to fighting and killing mutants, but is injured during a nasty battle. While she recovers, she is transferred to the DIA, the unit that gathers Intel on mutants and hands it over to MTac for them to catch or kill. A man from I. A. approaches Soledad asking that she infiltrate a rogue cell within DIA that is killing mutants illegally. She infiltrates the group because she believes she can gather real Intel; the mission goes south so Soledad's comrade in MTac, Eddi Aoki, takes her place and finds she is dealing with a serial killer and an illegal cabal with a vision much different

than the powers that be.

John Ridley is an expert when it comes to writing excellent, exciting, and entertaining urban fantasy. Humanity is already questioning the laws that says metanormals are not human (just like today many are questioning the Patriot Act) believing it is biased and overkill since there are many good metanormals who want to live ordinary lives and help humanity just like there are bad mutants who use their powers for their own gain. This is an action created work but the characters are fully developed so that the audience feels as if we are part of a very special reading experience.



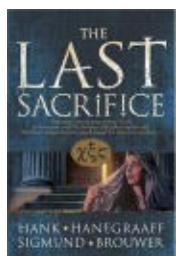
The Session
Judith Kelman
Berkley, Jan 2006,
\$24.95, 368 pp.
ISBN 0425205568

She loves her job working as a therapist on Riker's Island and the small victories mean more to her than the money she would make in private practice. After working with Jeannie for months, the inmate who hid under her cot and hardly said a word marches in to P.J.'s office and tells her she is getting married. Seeing no harm in allowing that to happen even though it wouldn't be legal, the ceremony is marred by a fire alarm drill that upsets the inmates. After things calm down and the patients are settled down, Jeannie is found murdered and P.J. is fired for allowing the ceremony to happen in the first place.

Through her former boss, she meets a woman who believes P.J.'s talents shouldn't go to waste and refers clients to her until she can get a job in the forensic field of psychology. When she goes to Jeannie's funeral she meets her late patient's son and Aunt Lottie who believes the husband Charlie Booth killed her. Lottie shows the therapist a scrapbook of pictures chronicling Charlie's abuse of his wife and son. Unable to think of a little boy in that monster's care P.J. decides to find the proof that Charlie is a killer so the little boy will be taken out of his care and winds up almost becoming the

murderer's next victim.

The heroine will endear herself to readers as she goes against the advice of her twin sister, her ex-husband, her former boss and the police to get justice for Jeanie and freedom from fear for her son. When she finds that she doesn't have the evidence to put Charlie away, she takes the little boy into her home because Lottie is in the hospital and there is no one else to keep him safe. Her courage and determination will insure fans will want to read more adventures starring this heroine. Judith Kelman has written a riveting, exciting crime thriller.



The Last Sacrifice
Hank Hanegraaff &
Sigmund Brouwer
Tyndale, Oct 2005,
\$19.99, 344 pp.
ISBN 0842384413

Once Vitas was part of Nero's inner circle until at a feast he tried to choke the emperor because the ruler planned to have his way with his wife Sophia, a follower of Christos. He was supposed to be sent to the arena to die but a group of powerful Romans set in motion a plan that would have someone else take his place while he was sent to Alexandria, with John, THE LAST DISCIPLE who wrote the letter of revelation on Patmos.

The people who saved Vitas believe he has a chance of killing Nero once he gathers the puzzle pieces that they sent to various people in the empire and deciphers them. Vitas doesn't know that his Sophia mourns his death, not even receiving comfort from her belief in Christos. Damian, Vitas' brother and a slave hunter is looking for John to return him to Rome but Vitas convinces him to help him on his journey to Caesarea and Jerusalem to find out just what his saviors hope he can accomplish to rid the empire of an insane monarch.

This second book in The Last Disciple's series is an exciting thriller as Vitas tries to stay one step ahead of his enemies while trying to figure out what role he is to play in toppling

Nero from the throne. The authors have done such a good job of historical research that the audience will feel like they actually witness the events that occur in the novel. Thus readers will find this book so educational and entertaining they will finish it in one sitting.



Forever Odd
Dean Koontz
Bantam, Dec 2005,
\$27.00, 334 pp.
ISBN 0553804162

In Pico Mundo, California lives a man with two powerful paranormal gifts. He can communicate with the dead and using psychic magnetism that can visually hone in on whoever he is looking for. One night Odd Thomas sees Dr. Jessup; he knows that the man is dead and that his adopted son Danny is in terrible danger.

When he reaches the Jessup home, he finds the battered body of the doctor on the floor but Danny is nowhere around. His psychic magnetism leads him to the tunnels of the Maravilla Flood-Control Project where Danny and his kidnapper traveled. He eventually finds the trail that leads him to the destroyed Panamint Resort and Spa Casino where explosives are taped on Danny. The ringleader Datura used Danny as bait to get Odd to the casino because she wants him to produce a ghost for her. As back-up she has two strong men under her spell to do her bidding. Odd saves Danny hustling him into a safe place while he plays with these vicious hunters in the hopes that a plan for getting Danny and him free of these psychopaths will come to him.

This novel takes place a year after the events in ODD THINGS and readers find the vulnerable, likeable, and emotionally drained Odd Thomas still working with the authorities to put the bad guys behind bars. The villainous woman whose beauty hides an ugly heart and soul will creep out the reader with her perceived belief that she does the right actions. Dean Koontz is at the top of his genre with a sequel that his myriad of fans will treasure.

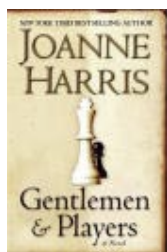


Turning Angel
Greg Iles
Scribner, Jan 2005,
\$25.95, 512
ISBN 0743234715

Former Houston prosecutor Penn Cage returns home to Natchez, Mississippi to become a writer. He loves his hometown and thinks it is a place to get away from the crime and corruption of big city life. He begins to get an inkling that his town is a microcosm of big city life when he and his friend Drew Elliot learn that the golden girl of the St. Stephen's Preparatory School, the class valedictorian, Kate Townsend, was found murdered with her body partially naked.

Drew hires Penn but also confesses that he and Kate were in love and he was going to leave his wife for her. Evidence shows that Kate was raped and other circumstantial evidence paints Drew as the killer. Penn investigates Kate and is shocked to learn that she had a connection to the town's drug supplier. Penn who didn't even realize yet there was a drug problem in the area comes under fire from the drug selling crowd. Penn wants to clear his friend and clean up Natchez by running for mayor if he doesn't get killed first.

Greg Iles has written a crime thriller that is full of non-stop action and characters that represent a cross section of America. The protagonist goes to extreme measures to help a friend and almost dies in the process of seeking the truth. Readers feel sorry for Penn who is disillusioned by people he thought he knew yet he has a core of inner strength that allows him to overcome every obstacle the criminals, the corrupt D.A. and police throw at him. **TURNING ANGEL** is a compelling reading experience.



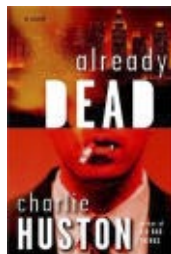
Gentlemen & Players
Joanne Harris
Morrow, Jan 2006,
\$24.95, 432 pp.
ISBN: 0060559144

Only the elite attend St. Oswald's boys' grammar

school in Northern England. Popular classics teacher Roy Straitley, in his ninety-ninth term, recognizes that truism as he for instance could never have attended this upper crust school for the affluent, but though his roots differ from that of his students the headstrong proud instructor loves teaching here as he has for three decades.

However, this year is different though it has just begun; Roy remains utterly loyal to St. Oswald's, but fears his time is over and considers retirement as the electronic age has made him feel like a dinosaur and the German department displaced him from his long timer office. He might adapt to email though he doubts it and relocation though he hates it, but five new faculty members prove difficult. One of the newcomers Snyder, the long time handyman's child, hides his identity returning as a teacher with plans to destroy St. Oswald's. As the violence Snyder perpetuates grows increasingly dangerous, an academically cocooned Roy and his peers ignore the omen that murder may follow.

Readers know from the start that Snyder has an Everest gripe with his mistreatment when he lived here as the son of a worker as he and Roy share narrative honors. Roy is a fabulous crusty aging teacher who considers retirement. On the other hand Snyder's anger from alleged childhood affronts at home and from the school fuels his obsession but fails to come across as a potentially deadly antagonist as his alibis condoning his sociopath behavior seem weak. Still readers will appreciate this game of chess between an in check Roy vs. Snyder seeking checkmate, which he defines as the demise of St. Oswald's.



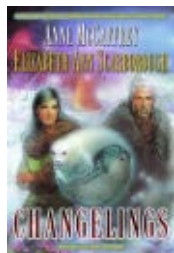
Already Dead
Charlie Huston
Del Rey, Jan 2006,
\$12.95 288 pp.
ISBN 034547824X

He looks like an ordinary man, can see his reflection in the mirror and has a girlfriend. She has HIV and won't make love to him but he doesn't tell her

he's a vampire who can cure her by her drinking his blood but that would mean she catches the vampire virus and would become like him. The vampires group together in clans but Joe Pitt is an independent, working for the powerful Conclave and the Society.

He sees zombies and follows them into a deserted warehouse and kills them all except the one human who wasn't bitten. His sense of smell is so strong that he smells a carrier, someone who transmits the disease but doesn't succumb to it. The Conclave asks him to come to their headquarters where their security chief tells him he has to find and kill the carrier that night or things will go bad for him. He is also expected to meet the wealthy and powerful human Merilee Horde who wants him to find her runaway daughter Amanda. During his investigation, he is hunted and almost killed so many times he loses count but he finally realizes that his cases intersect and someone wants to kill him to keep him from discovering what that junction point is and what it means for the vampires.

ALREADY DEAD is an intriguing vampiric romantic investigative tale starring an interesting protagonist whose morality is different from those of humanity yet seems similar especially when it comes to his girlfriend as Joe proves he can love someone. The cast starting with the lead character makes the audience believe that the paranormal is normal while Joe's sleuthing is fascinating to follow as he struggles with both of his assignments. Charlie Huston provides an engaging supernatural who-done-it that readers will appreciate.



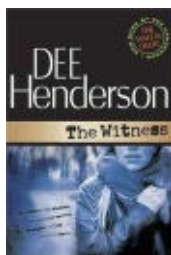
Changelings
Anne McCaffrey and
Elizabeth Ann Scarborough
Del Rey, Jan 2006,
\$19.95, 258 pp.
ISBN: 0345470028

The Irish and the Inuit with a sprinkling of other races have been relocated from old Earth to the terraformed planet of Petaybee, a cold desolate place. The powers that be had no idea that by terraforming the

planet it would awaken the planet and make it become sentient enough to modify over time the humans who live there so they can adapt to the planet's harsh conditions more easily.

Sean and Yanaba are deeply in love and quite unexpectedly they give birth to twins that have the same genetic mutation as their father. The twins turn into seals when they enter water and this proves dangerous because a visiting scientist who saw them change wants to capture and examine them. For their own safety, they are sent to a space station where people of all races and cultures live and work in harmony. Petaybee is giving birth to another landmass and Sean is exploring the area when underwater creatures capture him. His only hope is his children who can communicate telepathically with him and most other creatures of Petaybee but first they must neutralize the danger from a scientist who has a special interest in the shape shifting twins.

The inhabitants of Petaybee, regardless of race or culture, live in harmony with the sentient planet who cares for them and helps them in too many ways to count. Discord comes from out-worlders who want to examine the unusual aspects of the planet and the mutations among the general population. CHANGELINGS, the first book in this second Petaybee trilogy, is full of action, danger, and adventure.

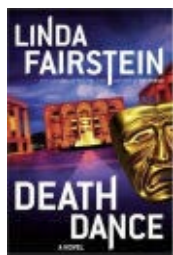


The Witness
Dee Henderson
Tyndale, Feb 2006, 378 pp.
ISBN 1414308124

Deputy Chief of Police Luke Granger is in a shopping mall when a female tells him there is a woman in the ladies room who needs help. He rushes over there; a shocked Kelly Brown (who is really Amanda Griffin who is on the run) informs him to go to the storeroom in Bressman's Jewelry where he'll find victims murdered by one of the worker's ex-husband. She also tells him that she can't stay because she is being chased by someone who wants her dead and she has been on the run for five years.

Three years later, Amanda Griffin contacts Luke, telling him that the crime lord who wants her dead is in jail even though some of his loyal men are willing to kill her after they get the ledgers that belong to Robert Wise. Mandy came back because her sisters inherited a lot of money which is in the news and makes them a target of her enemy. Luke assures Maggie that he will keep her family safe so Mandy decides to stay awhile. Two deaths related to their sisters' inheritance occur and the man who tried to kill her in New York City is in town. Another death occurs and Mandy decides that she will find the killer who is trying to destroy her and her loved ones.

Dee Henderson has the magic touch when it comes to creating characters readers care about. The audience will find themselves crying, rooting for the killer to be found and hoping Mandy can find some happiness after eight years of running from a killer not knowing where to go so he can be safe. The deaths that occur weigh on her and the guilt almost destroys her but Luke, who cares about her, helps her carry her burden and her need to find the culprit. *THE WITNESS* is an exhilarating thriller that has enough action, romance and intrigue to grab and keep reader interest.



Death Dance
Linda Fairstein
Scribner, Jan 2006,
\$26.00, 416 pp.
ISBN 0743254899

As the assistant district attorney in charge of the Sex Crimes Prosecution Unit, Alex seeks to convict Dr. Selim Sengor for the drug facilitated rape of two Canadian women. Alex wants him denied bail since he could leave the country and return to Turkey but a judge who doesn't fully understand what rape is, lets him out on his own recognizance.

While Alex works that case, she also investigates who murdered dancer Natalya Galinova with her detective friends Mike Chapman and Mercer Wallace. At first they thought she walked out of the Metropolitan Opera House

after having an argument with Broadway businessman, Joe Berk over a juicy role in one of the plays produced in his theatres since she is getting too old to play the younger parts. That hope is dashed when her body is found broken in a ventilation shaft, the victim of a homicide. A couple of days later Joe is almost electrocuted but the authorities determine it was an accident. Illegally gotten DNA points to Berk as a suspect but Alex has no probable cause to request it through channels. The closer Alex gets to closing out both investigations, the more she puts her life in danger.

One of the very best qualities of Linda Fairstein crime thrillers is that it accurately reflects real life. Not every case comes to a satisfactory conclusion as suspects disappear before they can be convicted and judges don't always hand down a ruling that makes a prosecutor happy. Readers get a behind the scenes of dance in New York with all the petty jealousies and jockeying for position just as they learn that date rape drugs do not lessen the realities of the crime. Ms. Fairstein is a great storyteller who uses real life experiences to create a storyline that is realistic and which stars likable heroes battling criminals and at times the system.



The Damned
L.A. Banks
St. Martin's, Feb 2006,
\$14.95, 496 pp.
ISBN: 0312336241

Family members meet beloved dead mothers who should have been in heaven, but instead were liberated from hell to bring terror to humanity; one touch is all it takes to change a sane person into a raving lunatic or if they are fortunate death. All hell is breaking loose complements of Lilith, the Unnamed One's consort. She has freed the minions from the layers of hell as a preliminary skirmish in the inevitable war.

Even the Neteru-Guardian team has felt the impact with members lost due to the touch of a living dead loved one. Lovers Damali and Carlos interrupt their interlude to stop Lilith

and to obtain the key reference The Book of the Damned before all is lost. However to prevent Lilith from furthering her diabolical scheme they must cut off her head; a task that is not just daunting, it is impossible. Failure meets pandemic infection of humans with the hell spawned madness.

The sixth Vampire Huntress Legend tale is an action-packed thriller that grips the audience from the start when the daughter asks her mom why she is not in heaven with a response that only THE DAMNED could provide and never slows down until the final confrontation at the gates of hell. The mother-daughter relationship sets the tone of the tale. Carlos is heroic as he knows what must be done but though expecting to fail courageously sets out to do the job. Surprisingly the usually confident Damali spends a lot time doubting her relationship with her lover and the mission. However, Lilith is the fascinating one in a macabre sense as she liberates the minion to attack living loved ones. This is one series readers can bank on as being powerful and fun.



Full Moon Rising
Keri Arthur
Bantam, Feb 2006,
\$15.00, 304 pp.
ISBN 0553804588

Riley and Rhoan are two hybrid siblings, half vampire and half werewolf with the wolf side dominating both of them. They keep their nature secret because the werewolves look down at the rare hybrid. Both work for the Directorate of Other Races, an organization that polices the supernatural and keeps humans safe from the ones that are evil. Riley enjoys sex with different partners because the heat of the moon demands she have sex as the full moon rises or she will be hit with moon madness, a state where she is not in control of her faculties and can commit damage without know she is doing it.

Although she has two fantastic sex partners, she is aroused when a sexy powerful vampire knocks on her door asking to speak to Rhoan who is out on an assignments. When she senses

he is in danger, she with the help of her new vampire friend Quinn rescues her brother from a place that is collecting sperm and eggs from the supernatural community against their will. This ties into the disappearance of several guardians who are part of the Directorate and an illegal cross species clones project to create the perfect soldier. As Riley, Rhoan, their boss and Quinn investigate, attempts are made on their lives and Riley will soon learn the pain of betrayed by those she trusted most.

Keri Arthur is one of the best supernatural romance writers in the world and the best to come out of Australia. After the audience reads this book, they will want to read her backlist (see [imajinn books.com](http://imajinnbooks.com)) because they are as good as FULL MOON RISING. There is enough romance, action and intrigue to satiate the most discerning reader.. Character development is incredible making readers want to read future books starring Riley, an incredible person who will do what is necessary to keep her loved ones safe. There are several loose threads dangling so readers can be assured of at least one sequel and this reviewer can hardly wait.

Harriet Klausner was chosen the number one reader in the entire USA by BOOK Magazine. What does that mean to you? She reads constantly and knows what's out there and wants to let you know, too.

Harriet says, "I particularly take pleasure from almost all the sub-genres of mystery to include comic books starring Batman and Ms. Tree. I do not enjoy non-fiction, especially biographies (Boring) or most westerns. Being a hyper-speed-reader (as my husband calls me), I sometimes read two-three novels in a day. I enjoy writing a short synopsis of what I read and evaluate the tale. I take immense pleasure telling other readers about newcomers or unknown authors who have written superb novels. Finally, my husband has told me that my epitaph will read 'Give me literature or give me death.'"

>>

A lonely crime boss's wife discovers love isn't what she imagined it to be.

Her Eye In The Sky

Ron Savage



Illustration Copyright © 2006 Vivian Prince

She's falling in love with his graying temples, his voice that rumbles through her chest, his cut-you-in-two blue eyes, and those stories—oh, my God, those stories—the ones where planes fall from the sky and babies die in fires. Film at eleven. She adores how he says that, film AT eleven, the little half smile peaking the corners of his mouth. Then the music rises: violins, trumpets, French horns, drums, a reeling crescendo. Fade to The Channel Six Eye in the Sky graphic, and the logo, "Yours in the tri-state area. Yours because we care."

Alone in her king-sized bed with the Laura Ashley sheets and buckwheat pillows, Phoebe Rossman listens to the TV news as she begins

typing her "Why I want to Win a Dinner and Conversation with anchor Ivan Lockheart" letter on a new Apple Titanium. He does care, she knows it, she feels it. Though Mr. Lockheart doesn't love her yet—and please, let's not go counting our chickens—he certainly has the capacity to love, and to love her better than that lying two-face shmekel she married.

After six months of connubial ambushes, her bam-bam thank you ma'am groom, Maxie The Rose Rossman is, well, God can only guess—just never home. Maybe she's seen him a few less times than the thumbs and fingers she uses for counting, but it's nothing a person can say with assurance.

At 32, she's become what gives her the creeps, her dear but hideous mother: the woman who hooked the invisible man and liked her wine a glass or two more than necessary. We always marry what we know, not what we want, isn't that the saying?

Imagine being trapped on the lower east side in your three-story Village brownstone, surrounded by plasma TVs and Hummel figurines, by Chagalls and dangerous rugs.

Imagine looking outside at an endless parade of ingratiating dentists and boys who yearn for a life in the theater. Her Maxie the whirlwind, her Maxie with the Curiously Strong Peppermint breath and a tongue forked enough to stab a lamp chop.

"Come on, Phoebe, darling, buy us one of those precious brownstones in the Village," he says, while fondling parts of her that weren't much more than strangers before he'd shackled her heart.

Now men who smell like onions and cigarettes are invading their home on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, rearranging the downstairs. They've sealed off the windows and polyurethaned the pine floor. They've papered the walls with pictures of wild dogs and horseback riders who wear red coats and tote firearms and bugles. They've imported long mahogany tables topped in green felt.

Phoebe wants to know: "What are you doing, Maxie? Who in God's name are all these men? What's happening to our home?"

He tucks a finger beneath her chin, gently kisses her cheek then whispers, "It's a casino, my darling, a palace of dreams. Terrific, isn't it? I'm about to make you an incredibly rich woman."

"I *am* an incredibly rich woman," she murmurs, letting him kiss her again.

The new Mrs. Rossman is writing about these peculiar events to her fantasy boy, Eye in the Sky Lockheart, as part of the deal. "Tell us YOUR story," was how the Channel Six announcer had put it. "If your news is news to us, you'll win a big night on the town, Dinner AND Conversation, with our very own Eye in the Sky, Ivan Lockheart." At this moment she's doubting herself, feeling like the oldest news in the world,

the girl who married a daddy runner up and now must sidestep him for another man. Granted, her story isn't an airplane falling from the sky, or babies dying in fires; it isn't the SARS virus coming soon to the tri-state area, or a long awaited east coast invasion of Killer Bees. Phoebe knows things, though; she hears things.

Beansy Butler also has a casino, types the discontented bride; she, propped up on her buckwheat pillows, the Apple Titanium dropping her words across its screen like tiny footprints. And he's just a block or two away, on Waverly. The competition, Maxie calls him. Did the Eye in the Sky know who gave Beansy-Weansy his start up money? Here's an answer that ought to take the night beyond burgers and fries: How about the Prince of Vice himself: Lieutenant Alvin H. Furlong—Mister Clean, The Cop of the Year. Now Phoebe's thinking, God, this is so Liz Smith, so Cindy Adams. She absently grasps the glass of chardonnay on her nightstand and does an audible sip while looking for questionable syntax. Maybe she should click "send" and toss the Nose for News an appetizer, an e-mail hint of the entrée to come. As she imagines Ivan Lockheart in the midst of an information drool, Phoebe taps the key and the e-mail vanishes into cyber darkness.

Maxie The Rose has decided to grace her with his presence. About time, too, what's it been...a week, ten days? How darling of you to drop by. His signature—the smell of rose water cologne—wafts up a beat or two before he appears in the bedroom. She begrudgingly gives him a glance then returns to the TV and her Eye in the Sky.

"Where've you been?" Phoebe mutters. This is followed by another quick sip of chardonnay, as if fortifying herself for his creative response.

"Efforting our future," Maxie The Rose says, not a speck of hesitation. He talks like that: efforting the future, thinking the problem, collaborating the deal, et cetera. The man's a veritable potpourri of gerunds.

Maxie's at the walk-in closet now, repatriating his navy Varvatos to its wooden hanger, his Thomas Pink silk shirt to the dry cleaning basket near the door. "Beansy Butler came to see me today," he says, slipping into a yellow and

white striped linen robe. "Assembling some get-out-of-town money, I'm guessing. Wanted two grand, that moron twit."

The estranged groom home and talkative, she can't believe her good fortune. With the blasé reach of a gunslinger, Phoebe aims and clicks the TV remote, her Eye in the Sky winking to black.

"You always bring me an adventure," she says, big smile, eyes wide and waiting, the poor little rich girl from Westport.

"I didn't give him the money, of course."

Prioritizing survival skills, that's what should've occurred to Beansy. Did the twit think Lieutenant Alvin H. Furlong would back his casino for free? Hey, read the badge, does it say Saint Francis? Furlong wanted 25 percent off the top, and he ordered two thugs, the Fat Moshakie brothers, to do nightly pickup and delivery. But what truly irked Beansy Butler was the additional \$50,000 "defense fund" the lieutenant instituted to free his degenerate friends. That particular coin came directly from Beansy's pocket.

"...so tonight our Mr. Butler was getting numb on Scotch," Maxie's saying. He opens the armoire next to the closet, retrieving a white bath towel. "Now we have an inebriated furious twit...who notices Patrick Manchette—big reporter at the Times—two, maybe three bar stools down. Dumber than dirt Beansy decides to trot his moron self over there and tell all: the set-up money from the Cop of the Year, the twenty-five percent off the top, the fifty large...you hearing me?"

"I'm hearing," Phoebe says.

"Tells all, okay?" Maxie The Rose doesn't wait for an answer. As he lumbers toward the bathroom, he's talking: "...Manchette says to Beansy, 'Wait right there. Let me get the photographer.' To make a long story short, the moron's in the Times tomorrow, nice picture and everything, discussing the Cop of the Year."

"You should've given him the money."

Maxie The Rose does his Look to Heaven eye roll, like help this woman, Lord. He says, "No—no, if I give Beansy the money, I'm stuck with Furlong. And, if God forbid something should happen to Mr. Wonderful Furlong—who knows

what, life's a crap shoot—I'm stuck with Beansy as the competition...which is, let's face it, no walk in the park, either."

"...what're you gonna do?" It's her very own tri-state lotto question. Phoebe tries to sound casual.

"Oh, I've got a plan," her hubby says. "You just need to keep yourself home tomorrow night." He shuts the bathroom door.

She mumbles the "S" word. Then the e-mail icon starts blinking. Phoebe reaches toward the laptop, clicking the icon, and a letter from You Know Who appears on the screen.

Hi...

It sounds like you've got an interesting story to tell. Forget the contest, let's meet somewhere. Drinks on me.:-)

Your Eye in the Sky Guy,

I.L.

Phoebe cups palm to mouth, muting a squeal. She re-reads his e-mail, thinking: Where...where can we meet? On the other side of the bathroom door, Maxie is talking on his cell phone. She tiptoes over, leaning her ear to the door. What Phoebe hears is: "...the moron deserves that and worse, believe me. Uh-huh...uh-huh. Take my advice, sport, hold on to your money and stay home tomorrow night."

It occurs to Phoebe how to impress her Eye in the Sky Guy. What better place to meet than The Rialto, that restaurant just below Beansy Butler's casino. Sure, absolutely, put the darling boy right smack at the center of his story, a newsman's dream. As Phoebe writes him back—9:30 PM, The Rialto—she imagines the gratitude, those pale blue eyes sparked with eagerness, his voice recorder poised for the play by play. She even feels his words vibrating through her chest, "...this is your Nose for News man, live from The Rialto." Eat your heart out, Geraldo Riviera.

The following night, while she and Ivan—he'd suggested first names—while she and Ivan are finishing their lovely jumbo shrimp cocktails, Phoebe can't help noticing how nobody else is in the restaurant. Beneath empty tables, light reflects off the glossy black and white tile floor. True, pictures of Beansy and Lieutenant Furlong did make the Times; and

true, fifteen, maybe twenty minutes ago, this Furlong person, along with three men who resembled Neanderthals in bad suits, had marched through the restaurant and up the stairs to the casino. But they are gentlemen all; she hears no gunshots, no furniture breaking, no shouting. Yes, obviously gentlemen and they are there to reason. Ivan uses the white cloth napkin to pat his lips. His hand is quivering; a drop of sweat traces the left cheek.

"Perhaps this wasn't the place to meet," he says, eyes scanning the room, a shaky hand loosening his silk mauve tie. "Why not call the station tomorrow and –"

Then a body bounces down the steps like a marionette without strings. It's Beansy. The Nose for Newsman squeals, grabs his voice recorder, and runs toward the door. Beansy's arms and legs sprawl in weird crooked angles. Phoebe doesn't know what to do first, yell at that pompous wuss Lockheart or fix Beansy. Somebody needs to straighten them both out.

From upstairs, gunfire breaks her indecision. Immediately, she drops to the tile floor, crawling under the table. The shots are loud and continue, making the table legs vibrate. Her eyes shut tight. Dear, God...dear, God. The guns don't stop; plaster from the ceiling falls to the floor and shatters.

In the midst of this, Phoebe smells rose water cologne.

"Not the evening I had in mind," she says, as a hand grips her arm, dragging her from beneath the table. Maxie hikes her over his shoulder fireman style, heading for the front door.

"Let these morons shoot each other," he yells over the gunfire. Then he tells her how she ought to quit listening in on his calls.

Ron Savage has a BA and MA in psychology and a doctorate in counseling, all from the College of William and Mary. He's been a newspaper editor and broadcaster, and worked 27 years under the title Senior Psychologist at Eastern State Hospital in Williamsburg, Virginia. His work has been published in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Tomorrow Magazine, TallGrass Writers Anthology, The Bitter Oleander, and Crimewave 8, among others.



Who am I? What is my purpose? These are life's greatest mysteries. Enjoy Kristin Masterton's journey inward as she poetically explores

"Just what the heck is going on here?"

DEATH

**Death calls but I do not answer
Pretending I am not home**

But Death is no fool

Only I

**The one who imagines she can hide
Without cost**



THE BOUNDARY

**Surrendering to your touch – we meet at the
boundary**

Time is no more

Sensation moves me to ecstasy

**I find my place in the world beyond dreams,
Beyond space, beyond mind**

Here I awaken

**I see you
I see God
I see myself**



All merging into One

WHEN FRIENDSHIP IS MADE

Late at night when it's only you and I and the stars

And we tell our secrets
And laugh
Or cry



That's when friendship is made

And when the time comes when the hammer falls

And it's you or I who feel hurt
One by the other
And temptation screams to shoot

Yet we throw our weapons aside
Stand naked
One before the other
That's when friendship is made

Because what truly matters
Whispers the moon that witnessed our union
Late at night when it was only you and I and the stars

And we told our secrets
And laughed
Or cried –

What matters is not our bodies
Or our minds
Or who is right or wrong

What matters
Is our friendship made holy through love

SECRETS

Once we learn the secrets
It is easy to take from life
For God is infinitely generous

Yet what transforms us back into God
Is not what we can take –
But how much we can give



TIME TO DANCE

Let's get naked today
Let's take it all off!

Why be shy a moment longer?

The time to dance is so very brief here
These delightful bodies do not last

Why waste a moment with false modesty
Or pretending to be so damn good
Or so terribly bad?

I know you are afraid – to be seen

It is the fear that makes it hurt
It is the fear that keeps you fully clothed
Alone
Standing in the hallway
Looking at those BIG feet

You always did have the biggest feet
Better cover those funny looking toes
Someone might start to laugh

I know you are afraid – to undress

But why not – just this one time –
Give those tootsies a chance
To breathe

The guests are waiting
And who are they but reflections of you
Sent by God

So you can dance
And know
And love



Let's not be shy a moment longer
The time to dance is so very brief here

The time to dance – is now

In addition to writing, FMAM's poetry columnist, Kristin Masterton enjoys teaching meditation, yoga, and being a mom. Visit Kristin's website at www.namastebreeze.com or e-mail her at kristin@namastebreeze.com for questions or conversation.

Kristin Masterton

A Good Samaritan with a very different approach to 'helping' people on the road.

The Samaritan

Tom Brennan

Illustration Copyright © 2006 Paul Campbell



I found the old man in a bar off Highway 535 outside Milltown. The wrong side of sixty, bald, wrinkled white, but well-dressed once you saw past the creases. He sat hunched forward on the wooden bar, gazing up like a kid at the Red Sox and the Tampa Bay Devils on ESP.

I could have had my drink and driven away. But that's the problem with me: I can't walk away from someone in trouble. It's just the way I'm made.

So I shook rain off my coat, sat a few stools down from the guy and ordered a beer and a meatball sub. I said something about the Sox's new star southpaw, Myers.

The old guy blinked at me like an aquarium fish. "I'm sorry, I don't know very much about baseball."

I'd guessed that. The TV slung above the bot-

tles and mirrors could have shown porn or PBS and the guy would have sat there staring at it. Hypnotized. Lost.

I thought about it while I ate. I still had a choice; I could have walked away right then. Climbed into my Olds and disappeared. But the guy reminded me of my old man, from the blue-stripe shirt that needed pressing to the scuffed black wing-tips angled on the stool. Like a businessman starting the slide down, still wearing his old uniform of office clothes because he didn't know what else to wear.

When I looked over, the barman folded his newspaper, waddled to the taps and poured me another drink. I pointed to the old guy's glass. "Coors?"

The guy hesitated. He looked at the flat dregs

in his glass, then smiled. "I suppose so, yes. Thank you."

I looked around. A yellow bulb picked out the corner payphone. A few drinkers sat in the room's shadows, probably regulars from the cinder-block projects I'd just driven through. They looked into their glasses or at the TV.

They wouldn't remember me. Nobody ever does.

"Bitch of a night for driving," I said, moving down the bar. "You headed for New York?"

"New York? Ah, no. Not really." The old guy sipped his beer as if tasting it for the first time. "I'm...just passing through."

"Me too." I watched Arroyo face to face with the umpire and tried to figure how many thousands he'd earned while he stood there and argued. I gave up. "They're all the same, right?"

"Pardon me?"

I leaned a little closer. "These roadside bars. Depressing. Like someone backed a truck up to the window and sucked out all the life."

"I suppose they are." The old guy traced shapes in the condensation on his glass, like you used to see kids do with a soda.

I ignored the quick twinge in my chest and stuck out my hand. I picked a name at random. "Jim Travers."

"George Henderson." He shook my hand and smiled, then didn't seem to know what to do next.

I waited. I knew George had something to tell. The expensive, creased clothes; the gold watch on his wrist; that accent: they all added up to a story.

He dropped his voice and said, "This isn't really my milieu."

I smiled at the word. "I'd kind of guessed that."

He hesitated, then poured it all out. Married for thirty-eight years. Three kids, one dead of Leukemia at nineteen, the other two teaching in Midwest schools. George with his own successful business supplying hospital equipment. George, member of the local Elks and two-time councilman. A guy settled in his own life.

He downed half his beer in one gulp. "It happened last week. Saturday."

I waited, nice and quiet.

"Since Matthews and Castleton closed down,

there are no good furniture stores in our town. So we drove into Green Falls, had breakfast at a Denny's and started looking around the larger department stores."

He and his wife had a few things to buy. New table and chairs. A bookcase. Coffee table. But the biggest piece was a new bed.

"We looked at metal frame beds," George said, "and ones with solid bases. Some with drawers for storage. Some with motors and independent sections that rose and fell like the ones we supply to hospitals. There were plenty to choose from. Plenty."

I didn't know where this was headed but I stuck with it.

"Then we saw it: solid mahogany, with the headboard curved like a wave." George made a shape in mid-air with his right hand. "The wood glowed. It looked more like a ship than a bed; in fact, the salesman called it a *bateau lit*, French for something like 'sleeping boat'. My wife fell in love with it right then."

I watched George finish his beer. On the screen above the bar, the roar of a home run.

"And I realized," George said. "I looked at that bed and I realized."

"What?"

"I was looking at the bed that I'd die in," George said. "I'm sixty-three now. This would be the last bed we bought, and it would outlive me. Simple arithmetic. One day, they'd find me huddled in the middle of it, this big mahogany carcass."

George seemed to shrink inside himself. "It was like looking into my own open coffin."

Amazes me, it does, how people can still catch me out. "So what did you do?"

"I ran. I left Mary standing in the store. Climbed into my Cadillac and just drove. I had no idea where to go; no destination. I had to get away."

What could I say? Everyone gets frightened, sooner or later. Except the real psychos, the guys that have no idea of their own deaths. With George, it had probably been building up for a while. If the bed hadn't kicked him off something else would have. "Have you called home?"

George looked down at the counter.

"It's okay to get scared, George."

"I feel so stupid."

I thought about all the guys I'd seen dead. More than my fair share. "Okay. This guy I knew years back, Pete, thought nothing could touch him. Big, stocky son of a bitch. Never sick, never even visited the doctor. Like that film, you know the one? Where the guy walks away from a train crash and can't get hurt no matter what he does? Same with Pete. I saw three guys go at him with chunks of two-by-four. Two of 'em ended up in traction. Pete walked away."

George stared at me with wide eyes. He probably wondered what kind of people I'd mixed with. Surprises me, sometimes.

I went on, "So Pete starts to make plans: he puts money aside, thinks about getting out of the business he's in, makes a few investments, looks around for a nice quiet house out Irvington way. It's looking good for him; the future's bright.

"Then people start to tell him he's losing weight. He doesn't eat so good, no appetite. Can't drink like he used to. But he puts off going to the doctor until he's got no choice. When the results come back, you can guess what they said. Nothing the doctors could do. Pete - or what was left of him - died three weeks after he was due to move into his new house."

George shook his head and finished his beer. He thought about my story for while. I could tell he didn't get it.

"See, George, Pete forgot one thing: when you think you got your life pinned down and all planned out, it turns around and bites you on the ass. The trick is, take nothing for granted. It's all down to chance."

"You've never made any plans? Never settled down?"

"No sir. No way."

He nodded. "So you think I did the right thing."

"I'd say yes. Sure."

George thought about that while I paid our tabs. The bartender took the bills without a word. None of the drinkers at the tables watched us leave.

We stood in the dark lot. The rain had stopped but the trees still dripped onto parked cars'

hoods. I could smell gas and damp soil.

No cars passed by on the road. Nobody else moved in the lot. The New Jersey Turnpike glittered a mile away, a snaking line of yellow and red leading north to the City's bigger glow filling the horizon.

George shook my hand. "I should go."

"Where to?"

He shrugged and turned away.

I thought about my old man lying stuck full of tubes and wires in that hospital bed. Hell, maybe George's company had supplied it. Then, in my mind, my dad's face turned into George's. "Hey. Wait a minute."

George looked back at me.

"I've got something in the trunk that might help," I said. "Here. Take a look."

I popped the trunk of the Olds I'd clipped from the Orangeburg mall. The courtesy light came on. George leaned over, saw the spare tire and jack. He frowned and opened his mouth to speak.

In one smooth move I swung the blackjack and slammed it into the back of his head. It connected with that familiar damp thud. George slumped into the open trunk. I hauled his legs over the sill and curled him into the trunk. He weighed next to nothing.

I checked his pockets and slipped his wallet and watch into my coat. A car swung off the Highway and past the bar, sweeping its lights over the lot; I hunched down but the beams slid away from me.

Before I locked the trunk, I looked down at George; he could have been asleep. He never knew what hit him. It's a lot better that way. If George could have spoken, I bet he would have agreed with that. Just like my old man.

I grabbed my bag and climbed into George's Cadillac. Nice car. Comfortable if a little heavy and underpowered. At the exit, I waited for almost a minute, wondering whether to head left or right, north or south. South, I decided, for the warmer climes that all the TV holiday shows talked about. See what I could find on the way. Drive whichever way the wind blew. No plans; no responsibilities.

As I put my foot down, I thought about poor George. I didn't know which way I'd go but it

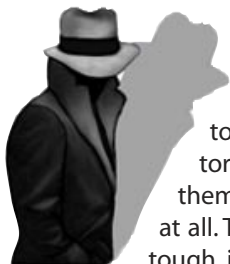
wouldn't be lying in some big wooden bed surrounded by my whining family.

No sir. No way.

Tom Brennan is a British crime writer with short stories appearing in Crimewave, Indy, Story House, and Storyteller, among others; his first mystery novel, The Debt (Five Star), is out now.

Spotlight On ... Teresa Tunaley

by Bret Wright



When the FMAM art department was asked to come up with an illustrator who consistently wowed them, there was no hesitation at all. They said that whenever a tough illustration project comes up, or a certain finesse is required, the name of Teresa Tunaley springs immediately to mind. Her illustrations and cartoons grace almost every issue of Futures Mystery Anthology Magazine ... for a reason. This talented gal has the "it" to flavor Futures just right. Her art is a little noir, a little off-center, and a lot of talent.

To say Tunaley is a little different than most is an understatement. Her life exudes the kind of existence many might find under a definition of paradise. For starters, she lives on the Canary Islands off of the Western Coast of Africa with her husband. The island life has afforded her the opportunity to explore things like diving, parascending, and quad-biking ... just the sorts of things that one doesn't normally associate with a former freckle-faced British Police Officer. But it's all just part of the dream come true for Tunaley. "I have the freedom to paint every day among these truly wonderful tropical surrounding—if I choose!"

Tunaley isn't just about fun and games, though. When it comes to art, she's all business. This talented artist has been at it since before her teens, and she is constantly thinking of new things to cartoon and illustrate. "Having worked in all genres," she says, "I would have to say that my favorite ones are children's and horror. Odd combination, I know! Cartoons pop into my head all the time, and I illustrate them just for fun ... but the real me loves to create original illustrations for author's stories, or cover art for

books and magazines."

What does she do when she doesn't have a specific assignment? "I sometimes come up with really bizarre work. I like to create dreams that I have had. My husband often wonders where it all comes from and what really lurks deep within." She says it can be frustrating when she can't re-create what she has in her head, when that one expression or situation just won't come together the way she envisioned it. "In these instances I found it easier to start over and begin a totally new illustration from a new angle."

As for advice to novices, Tunaley echoes what great artists throughout history have told their students, "Patience is a must. Never give up, and always try to produce your best work. You can never practice too much. Carry a sketch book around and capture natural settings, poses, landscapes ... make notes of the colors on the side so you can remember these when you get back to your studio."

Of her own work, Tunaley demurs, "I certainly don't see myself as in the same class as many of the famous or infamous artists. I'd be more than happy just to earn a living doing what I love best."

Teresa Tunaley prides herself on putting other's needs before her own. This trait is perhaps why editors turn to her for the really tough illustration assignments. It's also what makes her special and makes her work identifiable. "I had an editor tell me last year that she knew my work without looking at the signature. What that is, specifically, I really don't know. From the reaction of others, I seem to be able to capture what the authors envision and bring their words to life ... and that, to me, makes it all worthwhile."

>>

Even in the twenty-first century, jealousy can wreak havoc with the best-laid plans.

Brainstorm

Telett Lyketes

Illustration Copyright © 2006 Vivian Prince



It was the beginning of spring. It was the end of winter. It was everything in between. It was grass shoots ripping through soil, and leaves blasting through bud tips. It was roses crashing red through green fetters. It was the grass growing and dying; it was the grass dead. It was the leaves browning and crinkling; it was the leaves falling. It was the roses unfolding and paling; it was the roses petaling to the ground. It was the larvae, then the pupae, then the moths. Neurons fired. Axons trembled. Dendrites fluttered. Synapses opened and closed violently. Pembroke was overwhelmed by the chemically induced

images of accelerated growth. The delusional slideshow assaulted his visual cortex like some great tropical storm, wave after wave, each newer and stronger and more developed than the last. And even more bewildering, Jon Pembroke realized that he had been betrayed.

Dr. Emma Sloan, a colleague of five years, a renowned neuroscientist, a friend, a lover—she had done this to him. And he walked right into it with a smile on his face, like the proverbial lamb being led to slaughter. He had not seen it coming. Perhaps that was what irked him most. That he, a doctor, a twenty-first century scien-

tist himself—of some repute—had not the slightest inkling of what was happening. He closed his eyes tightly, as if that would block out the unwanted visions that spun through his mind on an unending reel. He was powerless to stop it. And he couldn't move.

He vaguely recollected some blurred time sequence when he sat down and allowed Emma to strap him in, connect the drips, the monitors, and the digital readouts. He remembered the choline-laced vitamin drink she had him swallow. In spite of the strawberry flavoring, it tasted like the worst kind of medicine.

"Drink it all down, darling, or it won't do you any good."

"You sound like my mother," he'd said, gulping the awful liquid, "when she was giving me Castor oil."

From that point, as the IVs began to drip into his veins, he had become giddy, like some child at the dentist's office who had just begun to experience the euphoria of nitrous oxide inhalation. Gradually, he slipped into a hazy, outside-of-body-looking-on demeanor. He watched the monitors, and he watched Emma as she flitted about with a notepad in her hand.

"Look, Jon. You can see the accelerator working. See the dyes crossing into the spinal fluid? Soon you'll begin to metabolize it all...and you'll be even smarter than I am!"

She'd thought that was terribly funny. He remembered musing, at the time, he was already smarter than she was. Hadn't he done most of the research? Hadn't he gone before the Intergalactic Medical Committee and procured the research grants? There was no question as to the superior intellect in this collaboration.

He should have known something was amiss when his blood pressure monitor started to beep.

"Stupid malfunction," Emma said. "Here...I'll just reset it all." She stood between him and the screen after that.

A fresh collage of birth-life-death images surged through his head. He was jerked unpleasantly back into the present. He opened his mouth to speak. His voice was garbled and sounded like an old, twentieth-century tape recorder in fast-forward mode.

"Those are my sentiments exactly, darling." Not that she understood, but she was enjoying herself immensely. She disappeared from sight for a moment.

I've got to regain control, he thought. He tried to separate the encyclopedic visions from his evaluation process. He strained to think back to when it all began, hoping to slow down the onslaught and divert his attention from the dizzying nausea that was welling up inside. Somewhere behind him, Emma laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. More cackle than anything else. Not like the first time he met her.

It had been a scant five years before, 2057, during the OktoberFest that celebrated the one-hundredth year since the former Soviet Union launched their Sputnik satellite and thus changed the world. Pembroke was a guest member of the Intergalactic Council of Scientific Unions. Dr. Emma Marek Sloan was likewise so honored. The gala that started with so many dry, hot-air speeches turned into quite a fun party, as the ban against drinking intoxicating beverages had been lifted for the occasion.

Even Van Geldt, the staid Euro Earth leader and the Nobel recipient for 2049, was enjoying himself. He was to ramble on the whole evening, a drink in each hand, about his theories of brain evolution and the selection processes of neurons and synapses. It was on the occasion of his fourth round of drinks that Dr. Emma Sloan happened to bump Van Geldt from behind.

"Yong Layty," he said, turning around, "ver are hue going in zuch a hurry?"

"Excuse me, professor, I didn't see you." She was obviously embarrassed.

"Van Geldt? Hue did not see Van Geldt?" He gulped down one of his martinis. "I can understand that hue vould not comprehend...vould not see the meaning of vot I say...but, not to see Van Geldt? Preposterous!"

Emma Sloan couldn't help herself. She burst into uncontrollable laughter.

Pembroke had been standing there listening to Van Geldt's spiel, and the shift from serious to hilarious caught him off guard. He, too, broke out laughing.

"Hue two...hue laugh at Van Geldt? It's okay. One day, hue will be sorry...ven hue need a

helping hand...on your way to the Nobel. Hue will be sorry!"

It had taken them an hour and three more rounds of drinks to smooth Van Geldt's ruffled feathers. In the end, he actually professed affection for them and invited them to come to his laboratory complex in Prague. More than the last vodka martini, it had been Emma Sloan's laughter that reversed his disdain. When she began to laugh at his corny jokes instead of at his pompous affectations and posturings, Van Geldt was taken in. Jon Pembroke was downright seduced. It was as if her laughter was part of some spontaneous lyric, a tune to soothe the mythical savage beast.

From that moment, Pembroke courted Dr. Emma Sloan, both for business and for pleasure. She was preeminent in her field, more than competent in her craft, and explosive in her passions. As far as Pembroke was concerned, that made her three for three.

They began to collaborate on their research and published important papers jointly. But it was after they visited Prague and Cornelius Van Geldt that it all fell into place.

"I've never been so excited in all my life," Emma told Pembroke on the trip back.

"So, you believe he's right?"

"That he's taken neuroscience forward—out of the myths and assumptions of the 1990's and the 2020's? Of course I do. And I believe that it's up to us to make practical application of it all."

"I couldn't agree with you more, Dr. Sloan. I've been saying that all along." The problem had never been belief in the theories, but practical application. That's where every twentieth-century and early twenty-first century scientist had fallen short. Practical application. Even Van Geldt only touched the surface of what could be done to change man's so-called innate intelligence.

"Dr. Sloan? Aren't we being the formal one all of a sudden!" Emma was smiling.

"Just a term of sudden respect, my dear. I love it when you agree with me."

"Perhaps that was never my bailiwick, Jon Jon."

She was teasing him now. She seldom called

him Jon Jon unless they were in bed together. Pembroke looked around self-consciously, as if one of the other passengers might have understood the significance of her familiarity. He laughed at himself.

"Is that a hint?" He looked around again. "Do you suppose we could lock ourselves in the lounge for about an hour?"

"You wouldn't last an hour, darling. And besides, the lounge on this shuttle is way too small for you and me."

He remembered the time they had done just that. Locked themselves in the lounge of the starship *Cassiopeia* while on the way to a conference in Sol City, Mars. The security police never really believed their story about the malfunctioning electrical system. But they had no way to prove their suspicions.

"A dilatory response. But I suppose you're right," said Pembroke, licking his top lip. "Maybe I can wait until we get home."

It had been like that almost from the start. Two days after their accidental meeting at the OktoberFest, they had become lovers. More than that. They fed off one another with voracious appetites. Every laboratory triumph had its bedroom celebration.

Gradually, experiment by experiment, they began to restrict their research to tests that would prove neurons in the brain could be generated. Not only generated, but stimulated by induced chemicals, then metabolized permanently into the cerebral system of delicate neural networks. New junctions could be formed, synapses that virtually increased a subject's intelligence, as could be proven by modern-day I.Q. tests.

It was a concept that had been discounted for nearly a hundred years. Most scientists believed the ability to become "smarter" no longer existed past a person's formative childhood years. The skepticism had a long-standing basis. No one had been able to produce a measurably "smarter" person. Until Sloan and Pembroke. Or, as Jon Pembroke would say, Pembroke and Sloan.

They had begun to produce, under strict scientific conditions, laboratory animals that developed new neural matter. For the first time

ever, scientifically acceptable "basic intelligence" had been increased. In rats. True to form, Pembroke took the lion's share of the credit. Even though it was Dr. Emma Sloan who had synthesized the choline "soup," as she called it.

"Seems to me you would be the perfect subject for the next stage of experiments," Emma had told Jon Pembroke.

"How's that?"

"Why, what could be more appropriate than to use the biggest rat in the lab for the final tests?"

Pembroke remembered it was right after that display of professional jealousy Emma refused to sleep with him any more. When he began to fill in the void by seducing young lab assistants, Pembroke became the target for personal jealousy as well. At least, that's how he saw it.

"The rat's getting bigger but not smarter," Emma fired at him, soon after she'd observed one of his latest seductions.

"I assume, dear, you are addressing me?"

"You're the only rat in the whole lab who's getting dumber!" she responded.

"Man cannot live by research alone, my sweet. He must have research assistants."

Emma did not see the humor, and she refused to join him in his self-congratulatory laughter.

It was three days later that Pembroke agreed to be the first human to be injected with the "smart" drugs. After all, who was better qualified to judge the results? Who should get most of the credit...the crowning glory? Pembroke was determined to leave his mark on history... even more, to make history.

Forty-eight hours into the preliminary tests, Pembroke began to notice the side effects. As his brain started to generate neural matter, he saw images. Fast-forwarded videos of things being born, growing...things germinating, sprouting. He could feel heat and cold alternately shoot through his veins. His mouth and throat became so dry he had to stifle a desire to cough.

What did it all mean? "That was weird," he told Emma, while coming down from the effects of the drugs.

"Weird?"

"Strange. I could see seeds germinating and sprouting into plants...eggs turning into embryos...all sorts of births and developments." He shook his head as if to rid his mind of the vestiges.

"What do you make of it?" Emma asked in her best clinical voice. She had a pen and note pad in her hand.

"I'm not sure," answered Pembroke. "I think it has something to do with the dosage. We'll see, I suppose."

Each day, he allowed Emma to strap him in and hook him up to the tubes, probes, and sensors. Each day, he prescribed a slightly larger dosage of the chemicals for himself. Each day, the images became more numerous, more vivid, more puzzling. Conception, birth, life. >From vegetable to animal and in-between. All flashing before his eyes instantaneously.

Emma would inquire about the visions after each session. She noted the increases and the changes, the elevated blood pressure, the residual nervousness.

"Still no ideas?"

"From a scientific standpoint?" asked Pembroke.

"From any standpoint."

"Well..." Pembroke furrowed his brow. "It's almost as if they're learning."

"They?"

"The new neurons. It's like they're searching all the other cells, scanning the information stored there...adding it to their own memory base. Or, at least, creating a link to where the data resides."

"Why?" Emma stood with one end of the pen in her mouth.

"Hell, I don't know." It made him nervous not to have a clear-cut answer. "Unless a neuron needs some informational foundation upon which to base its growth. Maybe it needs a building block, a reference of old knowledge, from which it can generate new knowledge... without which it can't justify its existence. Maybe that's why an adult organism has significantly fewer neurons than an immature one. Use it or lose it? I can't say for sure."

"Makes sense to me." Emma was writing on

her notepad.

It was the next day, the next increased dosage that brought with it the pictures of aging and dying. Over and over. Reference upon reference.

"Stop!" Pembroke cried. "Dilute the drip. More saline. Hurry!"

Emma followed orders.

"I think we need to go back to a decreased dosage, Emma." Pembroke was visibly shaken by the new waves of psychedelic images.

"But what if the new neurons need that full cycle of information—to be complete?"

"No, Emma! Listen to me. I believe, in their immaturity, they'd continue adding on, storing, generating—perhaps even replicating—spontaneously...at an ever increasing speed...until the whole system failed...exploded!"

"Impossible!"

"Well, I won't be the one to find out. Even if it takes months on a lesser dosage, to prove our point." Pembroke removed one of the tubes from his arm. "Tomorrow we go back three dosage levels. Then we can stabilize the experiment...begin to quantitatively analyze the results."

Emma was dissatisfied with Pembroke's reticence to graduate the experiment as they had originally designed it. But she agreed to the changes.

That evening, Pembroke dined with the perky blonde lab assistant—she of the extremely tight uniforms—at her apartment.

"Jon," she said as she was serving him dessert. "Do you trust Emma?"

"In what way, honey?"

"In any way. One of my earrings fell into the wastebasket today when I was cleaning up. While I was retrieving it, I found some notes she'd discarded."

"And?"

"From what I read, she's taking credit for everything you've done."

Pembroke laughed. "Professional jealousy, my dear. None of that will matter when I release my findings in the trade journal."

"She looks at me funny nowadays. She knows about us, doesn't she?"

"What if she does? There's nothing exclusive

about my relationship with Emma...or you."

"You told me it was over between you two... the personal thing."

"She thinks it is. But just you wait. When I've proved my theory, she'll be all over me like a tight pair of coveralls."

He spent the rest of the evening trying to convince her he had no further romantic interest in Dr. Emma Sloan.

The next morning, Pembroke was late to work. And so was the blond assistant. Emma was the first to notice, as she checked and rechecked the equipment for the day's experiment.

"Nice of you to drop by, Dr. Pembroke. Glad you could find the time."

Pembroke ignored her as he changed into his lab coat.

"Sorry," said the blonde, as Emma glared at her.

"Can we get started now?" Emma's voice was icy cold.

Minutes later, Emma started the drips, and, almost immediately, Pembroke could feel the fire in his veins. Suddenly, his recollections misted, then disintegrated. He was back in the electrical storm. Neurons, axons, dendrites, and exploding synapses. He could no longer hold out against the nausea, and his head throbbed with pain. He regurgitated down the front of his coat. The images bullied their way into the forefront of his mind as he struggled to focus on what was going on around him. The visual and the perceived battled for his attention. Slowly, agonizingly, the cinema stopped...then began to roll again. Birth, life, death.

"Jon, Jon? Are we having fun yet?"

Emma's voice, tipped with sarcasm, knifed through the clicking of neural transmitters and the clashing of video versus reality

"When I win the Nobel, Jon...should I begin signing my whole name...Dr. Emma Marek Sloan?"

Pembroke knew now she had increased rather than decreased the choline solution with its dyes and accelerators. That she had done it on purpose. And that the chemicals which were pumping through his veins, would soon, like a raging river, crush him under the flood. His

brain would not weather the storm.

"I sent your girlfriend home. Told them all we wouldn't need them the rest of the day."

He believed he could feel the chill from Emma's breath as she leaned over and spat the words into his ear.

Suddenly, from somewhere behind Emma, he heard a shriek, then saw her face twist into a painful grimace. As Emma slumped to the floor, he strained his bulging eyes, tried to grasp what was happening.

"Jon, Jon?" said a voice that perfectly mimicked Emma. "Are we getting any smarter, yet?"

With great effort, Pembroke focused upon the floor. Emma wasn't moving; she lay as quiet as the proverbial church mouse.

"I can see the headlines now," said the voice. "Famed scientists die in tragic lab experiment. Lovely lab assistant manages to salvage critical and earth-shattering data."

In a corner of his mind, a shadowy picture

formed. Outside of and parallel to the speeding images that wracked him, that spurred him toward a dark, yet unseen precipice. The picture was, at first, a seed...then slowly, a seedling... then a mighty, green-leafed oak. Then it aged before his eyes, became gnarled, and dropped its withered, wrinkled leaves. A wind howled through its branches. The tree groaned before the storm. There was a ripping, tearing sound as the root system gave way.

Through the muddle of it all, Pembroke heard a laugh. More of a cackle, really.

Telett Lyketes is a desperate housewife, reared by television, oppressed by men, and under no conviction the world has more to offer than a brief glimpse of Eden. After a short stint as a gaslight stripper, she has turned back to writing fiction. Her previous successes include stories accepted for The Adversaria, The Writer's Hood, and Futures Mystery Anthology Magazine.

Spot Illustration Copyright © 2006 Gin E.L. FentonSpot



© 2005 GinE.L.

Flash! >>

He'd come to hear the sermon, but that day the Devil was in the pew.

The Envelope, Please

Charles Schaeffer

Illustration Copyright © 2006 Gin E.L. Fenton



Milton Scrivener slid into the end of the pew, his usual seat, nodding at fellow parishioners. His eyes lingered for a moment on the widow, Ruan Trumbull, comforting himself that she occupied her regular place at the opposite end of the same pew. It was the last Sunday of Advent, just before Christmas.

Scrivener's professional career had tanked in an accounting scandal in June. With his unemployment insurance expiring, he was staring at a bleak holiday season. Now, in his mind, he went over the plan that would change all that. By staying on as a church volunteer, a counter, he'd been able at least to hold his head up. The counter's task was straightforward enough. After the ushers passed the offertory plate, the money—an assortment of numbered enve-

lopes, cash, checks and change—would go downstairs to the counters' room.

Scrivener and fellow volunteer Ernie Fleagle would sort, record and stow the offering under lock for delivery later to the bank. The amount was seldom noteworthy, but today was different, because it was the year-end moment when eccentric tither Ruan Trumbull would fulfill her pledge by placing a tenth of her income in the plate. The offering, Scrivener knew, as did other parishioners, would be a \$10,000 money order, unsigned, giving church leaders the option of using it as they saw fit.

Scrivener turned in his seat to assess the usher team, noting with mild distaste that one was Jasper Farkle, a stooped figure on a cane who lived in a halfway house supported by the

church. Farkle's slow-witted presence made the plan even simpler, Scrivener mused, as the offertory plate progressed along the rows of pews, pausing as each worshipper dropped in a contribution. From the corner of his eye, Scrivener watched Ruan Trumbull place her envelope, numbered 210, on top of the pile. Then as the plate passed in front of him, Scrivener fell back on wiles honed in many a poker game. In a swift motion—undetectable—he palmed envelope 210 into his coat sleeve while sliding his own envelope onto the moving plate.

When later the check was discovered to be missing, any and all of the congregation would become suspects. Scrivener felt a twinge of mild regret at that but quickly overcame it.

In the counters' room, Scrivener's partner, Ernie Fleagle, puzzled over the numbered envelopes stacked numerically. "Funny," Fleagle said, "this is the week that Ruan Trumbull donates big time But where's the envelope?"

"Maybe next week," Scrivener said, his arm held at a right angle.

At that moment the door opened. Ruan Trumbull and Farkle entered. "Absent-minded me," she tittered. "Mr. Farkle kindly led me down here to get my envelope back. I forgot to put the check in."

Scrivener blurted, "But it's not here."

Farkle's cane suddenly dropped from his hand. Instinctively, Scrivener reached down to catch it. Envelope 210 popped from his sleeve and fluttered to the floor. The others stared first at the envelope, then at Scrivener.

The author has published short mysteries in Futures Magazine, has won honorable mention in the Fire-to-Fly Contest, and placed second in the 2004 Slesar Twist Contest. His work has appeared in Harper's, Esquire, and The Nation. His short mysteries have also appeared in Web Mystery Magazine, Mysterical-E, Crimson Dagger, The Dana Literary Journal, Detective Mystery Stories, The Storyteller, and New England Writers' Network. He is a two-time winner of Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine's "Mysterious Photo" Contest.



FIRE OWL

GERALD W. MILLS

"No matter how James Foster tries to use his paranormal gift for the betterment of his fellow man, society is just not ready."

Suspense

Available now!

"Wealthy, brilliant and highly respected, Secretary of the Interior Benjamin Howland believes America can be restored to world greatness only if he takes over government and declares martial law. All it will take is a healthy dose of national panic and upheaval..."

ISBN: 1-931201-85-4

Trade Paperback. \$16.95 U.S.

AVAILABLE AT

www.twilighttimesbooks.com



Twilight Times Books
Kingsport, Tennessee

FMAM MYSTERY



www.fmam.biz

Submission Guidelines

**Email for submitting all FICTION:
MANAGING EDITOR - Barry Ergang Barry@FMAM.biz**

FMAM considers itself a stepping stone for many younger writers as well as a magazine with tremendous variety and creative power for seasoned writers and artists. Please consider that many proudly show their family the content and use appropriate language. When in doubt, feel free to inquire. We nominate for the Pushcart Prize Award each year and are honored to do so; profanity will exclude a Pushcart nomination by their own rules.

We accept submissions via email **only**. Save your story in **PLAIN TEXT**, and then **COPY AND PASTE** it into the body of your email message. Do not use attachments - often they cannot be opened at this end. Please get into the habit of checking our website for any new guidelines or just to refresh yourself. Keep in mind that even if you have been featured in FMAM we expect all the information **each** time.

FMAM will consider stories 500 to 10,000 words - send the entire story.
Pays \$5.00 on publication.

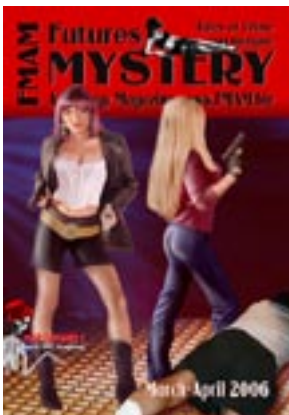
SEE FULL GUIDELINES on our website www.fmam.biz

FOR ALL WORK Submitted: FMAM is only interested in **FIRST TIME RIGHTS**. Previously published stories are eligible for most of our contests however!

Be sure to tell us if your story is a simultaneous submission.

Also, if this is your first published story be sure we know this, too!

Questions? Contact Managing Editor Barry Ergang barry@fmam.biz



Coming in March - April 2006:

LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN

by John M. Floyd

THE ENGLISH LADY - A Tobias Talmo Tale

by Rus Morgan

BLOOD MOON, BLUE BAYOU

by Chick Lang

**...and more...STORIES, COLUMNS, POETRY, CARTOONS
AND FABULOUS ARTWORK**

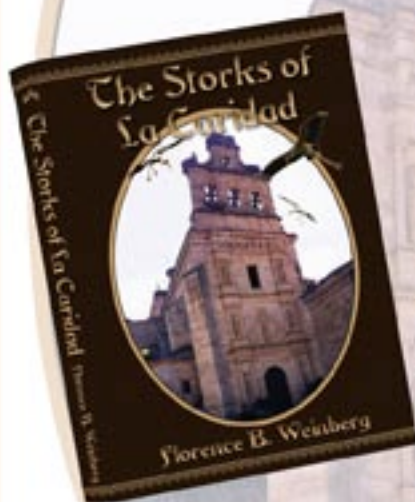
"Brilliantly written and thoroughly researched, this book explores the complexities and contradictions of the Church during this time period.

...The political struggles in the monastery ring with realism, as do the actions of the characters. The age-old struggle between good and evil is evident, but the division between the two is muddled by ulterior motives."

~ Reviewed by Joyce Handzo for *In the Library Reviews*.

Florence B. Weinberg

The Storks of La Caridad



Father Ignaz Pfefferkorn, a missionary from the Sonora Desert region of northern Mexico, is caught in the Expulsion of all Jesuits in 1767. After enduring eight years of prison and abuse, he is incarcerated in La Caridad Monastery where the abbot recruits him to help solve two murders. In the course of his investigations, Father Ignaz finds his own life in peril.

Mystery trade paperback available
June 2005, Retail \$18.50.
ISBN: 1-933353-21-X



Paladin Timeless Books
an imprint of
Twilight Times Books
Kingsport, Tennessee

Available through your favorite bookstore and online booksellers. Copies can be ordered from FAP Books, Inc., PO Box 540, Gainesville, FL 32602-0540, toll-free 888-511-5125, Baker & Taylor, Ingram or the publisher, Paladin Timeless Book, and also via the internet at <http://twilighttimesbooks.com/>.