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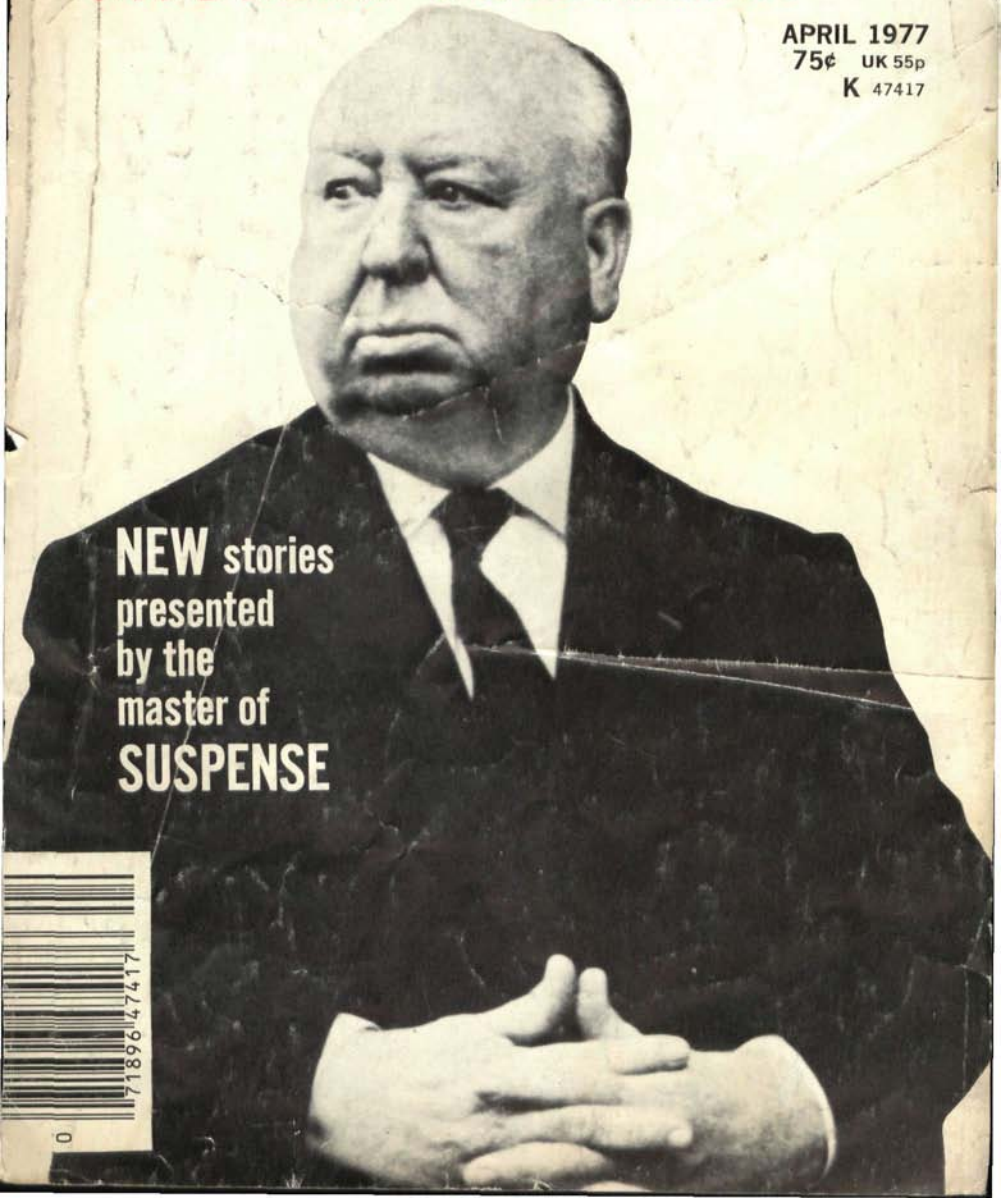

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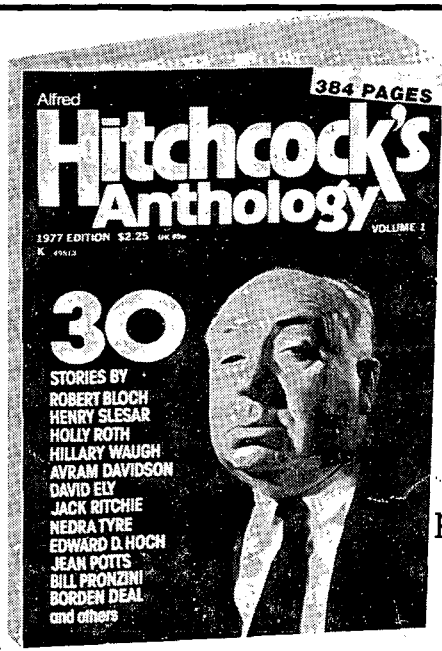

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VOLUME 22, NO. 4

ALFRED HITCHCOCK
mystery magazine

CONTENTS

NOVELETTE

LIKE A DOG IN THE STREET *by Lawrence Block* 104

SHORT STORIES

AUGUST IS A GOOD TIME FOR KILLING *by Joyce Harrington* ... 5

THE ATTACK *by Arthur Maling* 22

WHAT KIND OF PERSON ARE YOU? *by Bill Pronzini and Barry N. Malzberg* 34

JOURNEY TO KILL *by Stephen Wasylyk* 38

THE SLEEPER *by Tonita S. Gardner* 52

VICTIM OF CIRCUMSTANCES *by Patrick O'Keeffe* 59

TINTING BASE *by Bruce M. Fisher* 74

A LOVELY BOTTLE OF WINE *by William Bankier* 85

THE UNEQUAL SONS OF DEIRDRE *by Mary Amlaw* 92

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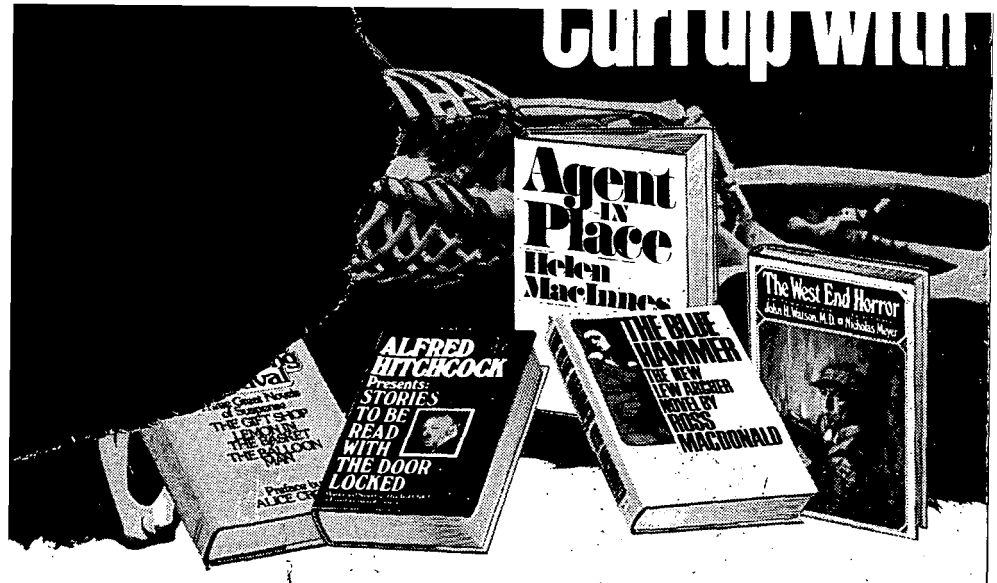

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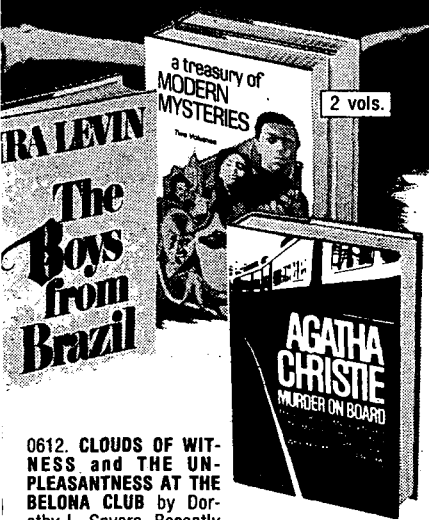

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April 1977

Dear Reader:

Have you ever painted a house? Have you ever spent time in a hospital planning how life will be better when you return home? Have you ever left a marriage and moved to another town to rebuild your life? Or started a new job determined to realize its full potential, and your own? Have you even had hopes of changing the face and character of the world itself?

Well, April is the month of new beginnings, and the stories in this issue reflect the danger and excitement that often accompany change. All told with refreshing originality by some of AHMM's most innovative writers.

Now it's time for *you* to turn over a new leaf, to the first chilling story in this latest issue. Good reading.

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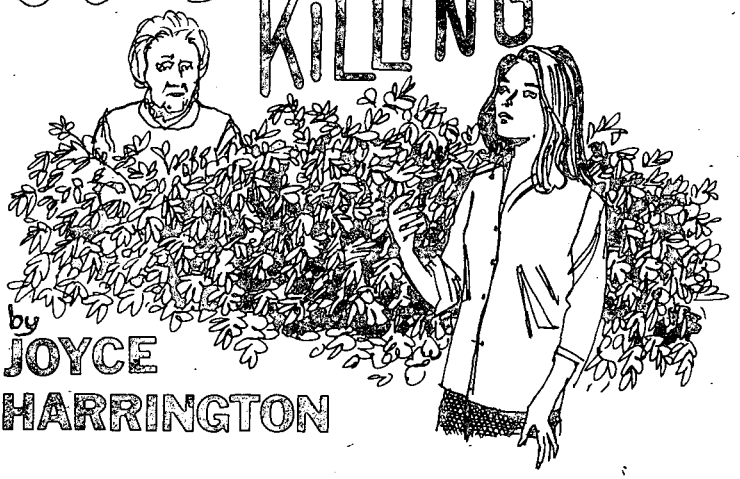
It is indeed a wicked month . . .

AUGUST IS A GOOD TIME FOR KILLING



by JOYCE HARRINGTON

"August is a good time for killing," the old woman said, peering solemnly over the honeysuckle. There must have been shock on my face, for she added quickly, "I mean weeds, of course."

"Of course," I agreed just as quickly. I knew she meant weeds. What else could she mean?

"There's not much else to do in the garden in August. Strawberries are finished. Peas are petering out. Tomatoes are still bearing but

they're tired. Killing is the only thing."

"The peas were awfully good. Thank you again."

Was it true that she was a witch? Josh had refused to eat the peas; said they were poisoned and he didn't want to get turned into a frog or fall asleep for a zillion years. Fact of the matter was that Josh hated peas—canned, frozen, or fresh from Mrs. Abel's garden. Peter ate four and survived. I had eaten the rest, greedily enjoying every mouthful. I love fresh peas. Mrs. Abel couldn't have sent over a more welcome gift. And now I wished I could uneat them somehow. The ghost of those peas was rising in my throat and fuddling my brain, making it difficult to think or speak with any sense at all. Maybe they *were* bewitched.

"You should put those boys to work," she said. "And the honeysuckle is a good place to start. You have to cut it back quite severely. If you don't, it will take over."

"But it's so beautiful. I don't mind if it does take over. The boys thought you were offering them a job. To help you in *your* garden."

"Nonsense. I've gardened for years without a stitch of help, I'm certainly not going to start needing it now. But the honeysuckle is growing over onto *your* side. It's my honeysuckle, so I'm willing to take the responsibility for cutting it back. The least you could do is make your boys pull up the runners. They'll be all over the place if you don't. I assume you're too busy to do it yourself."

What could I tell her? Everything she said was a challenge. We seemed to be an affront to her sense of order—a young woman and her two sons living alone without benefit of a man around the house. Not unusual in New York City, but obviously not quite respectable in this quiet backwater town. Or was I being too sensitive? Was Mrs. Abel mean and spiteful to everybody? *Was* she, as Josh and Peter insisted, a witch?

"Well, I am pretty busy," I said. "I'm working on a book." And instantly felt queasy and self-conscious, as if I'd just mouthed some lame excuse for not having my homework done. I knew she had been a schoolteacher.

"So I heard." She dismissed my labors with those three words. "It's always been my experience with boys that if you keep them busy, they won't have time to get into mischief. I taught school for fifty years, you know."

"So I heard."

My sarcasm was wasted. She plowed on with her dreadful philosophy of how boys should be handled. It wasn't much different from her attitude toward honeysuckle. She must have warped a lot of young minds in her day.

"You must always keep the upper hand with boys. Now girls are much easier to control. Oh, once in a while you'll get a wild one—" she eyed me speculatively "—but for the most part you can handle girls with a system of rewards for good behavior."

Bribery, I thought. Just like the peas.

"I always made sure the boys in my classes had plenty of work to do. And I wasn't afraid to use the paddle."

"Were they afraid of you?" I asked.

"They respected me," she replied. "Lots of them come to visit me now that I've retired. They don't forget Mrs. Abel. They come to me for advice with their own children. And I tell them just what I told you—don't be afraid to enforce hard work and strong discipline."

I was dying to get away, but I didn't want to be rude. And a kind of horrid fascination glued me to my side of the honeysuckle hedge and kept me prompting her for more.

"Did you have any children of your own?" I asked.

"No. I've been a widow for a long time. I never thought once about remarrying after Mr. Abel died. He never came back from the Great War. They never even found his body. I have a flag. I raise it on Memorial Day." She sounded as if the flag gave her more pleasure and less trouble than the living man might have done.

"Now your husband," she went on. "He must have been a handsome man. The boys are quite good-looking. They don't resemble you at all."

I stared at the wart on Mrs. Abel's chin. Every witch worth her eye of newt has a wart on her chin; Mrs. Abel's had the requisite three long hairs growing out of it.

"He still is a handsome man. We're divorced."

"So much of that nowadays." She wagged her head and the corners of her mouth dripped sadness. "It's always the children who suffer."

"The boys aren't suffering. They're having the time of their lives." What a talent the woman had for raising hackles! She'd neatly put me on the defensive in the most vulnerable area of my already shaky emotional fortifications.

"It'll show up later," she assured me. "Mark my words, you'll have your hands full."

Mrs. Abel spoke in clichés, but she imbued them with such eager ill-will, such certainty of disaster, that I found myself glancing nervously over my shoulder to see if maybe Josh and Peter had emerged from the woods dripping blood or trailing broken limbs. The early afternoon continued blamelessly still and sun-filled. Bees and squirrels went about their business.

"Well," I said. "Back to work. It's been nice chatting with you." And what exactly did I mean by *that*? It was horrible chatting with her. Was I trying to be charming and disarming so she wouldn't cast an evil spell on me? I crossed the yard feeling her flat eyes boring malevolently into the small of my back. It made me walk funny, as if my legs had turned to stilts.

Our house is a dingy white clapboard affair, squatted at the edge of a little upstate town near a shallow creek and a pleasant wooded area. It is small, in need of paint, and its facilities are primitive, but the rent is cheap and as a sanctuary from the havoc of divorce and the hustle of the city it is perfect.

The screen door shrieked as I entered my sanctuary. The manuscript glared at me from a rickety card-table at one end of the screened porch. Blank yellow paper rolled onto the platen of my old Olivetti issued its challenge. The book, while not precisely the cause of the divorce, had played its part in the final breakup. It had been all right as long as I just diddled around writing an occasional clever little story for clever little magazines. Hal could afford to be proud and say, "This is my wife. She writes."

But as soon as the writing got serious, as soon as I got the grant from the Endowment and really started working on the book, as soon as the cooking fell off and the laundry got behind and dust accumulated on the hi-fi, Hal started obstructing me. In little ways at first—like calling me up from the office when he knew I was working and telling me his grey suit had to be taken to the cleaners immediately. Or inviting hordes of people over for dinner on the day *after* I'd done the weekly shopping so I'd have to dash out and do it all over again and spend the rest of the day cooking. And be hung over and worn out the next day, so there were two days lost from the book. It grew from an accumula-

tion of petty annoyances to a monster bristling with lawyers, recriminations, hurt pride, and no return ticket.

I sighed and settled down in my swivel chair. I swiveled once, viewing my domain. Plants in pots helped hide the lack of paint. At one side of the porch, a lumpy daybed undulated beneath a bright Indian coverlet. I would make some pillows soon, turn the place into a regular den of Oriental luxury, maybe even put a priceless Persian rug on the splintery floor. I might even oil the hinges on the screen door. After I sold the book. I swiveled back to the Olivetti and groped for a thought.

"Ma! Ma! Josh found a dead body!" Peter came screeching across the yard.

"That's nice," I mumbled.

"Ma! Ma! No kidding!" Peter pounded up the stairs and through the screen door, letting it slam behind him. The whole porch shook and the Olivetti inched closer to the edge of the table. "There's an old dead guy in the woods! Josh is guarding him."

I shoved back from the typewriter and stared, disbelieving, at my younger son. Dead guys did not turn up in peaceful woods outside of lurid fiction. Or could this be some of Mrs. Abel's witchery in action?

"Oh, Ma! It's real weird. This old guy is in a cave and he has a long beard and he smells funny."

Peter was hopping up and down with fearful excitement. Stay calm, I told myself, and calmly said to him, "Maybe I'd better take a look."

I followed Peter across the yard and into the quiet aisles between the trees. How strange to be walking through August woods, trailing my capering child, played on by rays of tinkling sunlight, toward the possibility of a corpse. This couldn't be happening.

And it was not. When we reached the cave, a steepled indentation beneath two slabs of angled rock, the corpse was sitting up and talking to Josh.

"Sure we got bears. Ain't you heard 'em? They come in the night. Come for bacon, beans, and boys. Beans and bacon they like to eat. What d'you think they wants with boys?"

"Don't believe you," Josh challenged. "I ain't seen no bears."

"*Any* bears," I corrected automatically. "And don't say 'ain't.' "

Josh shrugged and kicked at a rock.

"Who are you?" I asked the revenant.

The bearded, funny-smelling, no longer dead old guy scrambled to

his feet, knocking his head against the overhanging roof of his cave.

"Morning, ma'am. Afternoon. How dee do. Luther's who I am. You's livin' in my house."

"Your house?"

He was not old beneath his effluvium of cheap wine; I would guess around forty. His beard was patchy black and grey, his arms long, sinewy, and tanned. He wore a ribbed undershirt splotched with wine and sweat stains, grey pin-striped trousers that had come down in the world, and a pair of out-at-the-pinkie-toe sneakers.

"Yes, ma'am. I was livin' in that house. Miz Abel said I could. Then she said I had to leave, cuz you's was comin'."

"How long did you live there?"

The question seemed to puzzle him. He gazed off into the rustling top of the trees and scratched absently at the back of his head.

"Where do you live now?"

He shrugged and glanced over his shoulder at the tiny cave. In it there lay a grimy quilt, the batting poking through the ancient calico, an empty muscatel bottle, and a shabby zippered satchel.

"Can you paint a house, Luther?"

"I can paint," he said, nodding energetically. "I did paint for Miz Abel. She give me two dollars. Said I wa'n't worth no more'n that. I can wash windows. Set traps too."

"For bears?"

"Ain't no bears 'round here." His bloodshot eyes swiveled around at me, pityingly, as if I were loony. "Rabbits mostly. I gets twenny-five cents apiece." His tongue flicked out to lick dry lips, and he turned to gaze longingly at the empty bottle.

The boys had lingered until it was certain that Luther was neither corpse nor ghost, and then they'd scampered away toward the creek. I could hear them whooping and splashing. Luther hung before me, loose-limbed and expectant. What now? I thought of the small building at the back of the yard, no more than a shed really, designated by the rental agent as "the washhouse." I had done no more than poke my head into it and retained a hazy collection of a stone tub with a single faucet, a rusty gas ring, and a single light bulb hanging from a frayed black cord. Not much, but better surely than a cave in the woods. Was I about to hire a resident handyman? It would be nice to have the house painted. Painting was not included in the lease. It would be nice

to get on with the book. I couldn't do both.

"Luther, would you like to paint my house?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Would you like to live in the washhouse?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'll pay you." I hesitated over naming an amount. Best wait and see what kind of a painter Luther turned out to be, although anything would be an improvement.

As if he could read my mind, Luther stated proudly, "I paint real good."

"Fine," I said. "You can move into the washhouse this afternoon. It needs to be cleaned up and so do you. Then we'll go into town and buy some paint."

I walked away, leaving Luther to round up his belongings and say goodbye to his cave. It had always been a tenet of my city life that winos were harmless. Repugnant maybe, and a sad waste of good human material, but basically no threat at all. Luther had a quality of childlike simplicity. No. Not childlike. Children were far from simple.

I set a broom, a bucket, some soap, and a towel outside the washhouse, and for the third time that day confronted my typewriter. It must have been several hours later that I became aware of a tentative scratching at the screen door. The sun threw a long shadow across my yellow paper. Luther stood on the porch steps transformed. He wore white painter's overalls, clean but flecked with many-colored drips of paint. His face, bereft of beard, shone red above and white below, his chin oozing blood from tiny razor nicks. Good Lord! I hadn't asked him to shave!

"Time to get paint," he said.

"Right you are," I agreed. The book was alive again, running through the typewriter like a wild thing. I could be generous with my time. The boys trailed across the yard, obviously about to utter their eternal plaintive cry, "I'm hungry, Ma!"

"Hurry up!" I called to them. "We're going into town."

"Can we eat at McDonald's?"

"Why not!"

In the hardware store, the proprietor eyed me curiously as I shuffled through paint chips. The boys prowled, fascinated by nails in barrels and nuts and bolts in little wooden drawers with curved brass handles.

It was an old-fashioned hardware store that carried the very latest in power tools and electrical appliances alongside stacks of Mason jars and rows of kerosene lamps. Luther clutched a bright red paint chip and stared at his sneakers as if already beyond hope that anything so beautiful could be his to work with.

"White," I said. "And some brushes and whatever else we need. A ladder, I guess."

"I can rent you an extension ladder, ma'am. No sense in buying one of those." The proprietor beamed at me with kindly fat-cheeked goodwill. "Luther doin' the job for you?"

"Yes." I looked around for the boys. They were hypnotized by a display of flashlights. What is it about boys and flashlights? I decided I would let them each choose one.

"Luther's a good enough painter." The proprietor's rich jolly voice called me back to the business at hand. "But he's slow." The man tapped the side of his head significantly. Luther continued to stare at his sneakers; the hand holding the red paint chip began to shake.

"And he has some funny ideas about color. Well, just look at him. I bet he's thinkin' it would be real nice to paint your whole house fire-engine red. Crazy!" The man spoke as if Luther were deaf or so deficient in understanding that he could say any cruel thing without penetrating to a nerve. "But if you want to get the job done, just make sure he stays off the bottle. Right, Luther?"

Luther's mouth twisted into a witless wet grin. He said, "Bub-bub-bub." His eyes filmed over into a semblance of idiocy.

"We'll paint the house white," I said, "but there's no reason why we can't have a red door. Let me have a can of this." I took the red paint chip from Luther's shaking hand and waved it at the hardware man's complacent smirk.

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

Later, with the painting gear stowed in the trunk and the ladder secured to the roof of the car, Luther's face returned to normal. Normal? The boys, in the back seat, shone their flashlights into each other's eyes and threatened mutual mayhem.

Luther said, "Time to eat?"

"McDonald's, here we come."

We carried our hamburgers and french fries home. I was not about to subject Luther to any more of the mindless bullying I had witnessed

in the hardware store. It was for my own protection as much as for his. He had evolved his means of dealing with it; turning himself into a slack-jawed, drooling caricature of a mental defective. But I couldn't bear to watch that awful transformation again.

We ate in the twilit backyard, Luther and the boys munching in companionable silence while I pondered how I had managed to appoint myself protector of the downtrodden. It was totally out of character; I was far from overprotective with the boys and not notable for coddling my husband. My ex-husband. What was there about this alcoholic reject that evoked my righteous indignation? Was that all it was, or was I, God forbid, infected with missionary zeal? Did I have some inane notion that I could reform him, educate him, bless his life with meaning? Maybe he had all the meaning he could handle.

The boys crammed the last of the french fries into their mouths and swooped off shrieking across the darkening lawn, drawn by the wildly flailing beams of their flashlights. Luther gathered up the greasy papers, methodically wadding them into the smallest possible bundle.

"Time to paint now?"

"No. It's too dark. You can start in the morning."

"Don't pay no mind to that Miz Abel. Luther never did no wrong thing."

"Mrs. Abel has never mentioned you, Luther. Now I want to get some more work done. Good night."

As I entered the screen porch, I heard Luther's disjointed mumble fading across the yard to the washhouse.

"Paint in the morning. Get up early. Miz Abel is ugly. This one is pretty. Paint the door *red*. Nice. Miz Abel better not tell."

Tell what? I wondered, and then forgot as my fingers flew over the keys.

In the morning, I awoke to the sound of scraping. It was barely light and a fuzzy mist floated about two feet off the ground. It made the ladder seem to rise from incalculable depths up the side of the house and, for all I could tell, extend all the way to heaven. The scraping came from somewhere above. My little Ben windup alarm clock said 5:45 and my bed felt clammy from the tendrils of mist that had crept onto the porch and fingered my lumpy bedding. I scrambled into my robe and went outside.

Luther was on the ladder, a great white bird of pure light, elbows flapping as he scraped away old paint blisters from the flanks of the house.

"Time to paint now!" He beamed down at me.

"Time to paint, Luther." I went inside to plug in the coffeepot. Time for the book too, before the boys woke up. I left Cheerios and bananas on the kitchen table for them.

The scraping from above melted into a rhythmic slap-slap, which in turn blended into the tap-tap of words arranging themselves on paper. I vaguely heard the boys clanking spoons on bowls and then clump past me to offer their services to Luther. Good, I thought. Let him teach them how to paint a house. Just a few more lines and then on to the next chapter. Then I leaped at an imperative rapping on the screen door and whirled to see who was barging into my morning. It was Mrs. Abel.

"May I come in? I have to talk to you." Her wart pulsed with secrets to unfold. I opened the door and she creaked through.

"Can we talk in the kitchen? I don't want *him* to hear." She rolled her eyes upward and I wondered if she meant Luther or God.

We went into the kitchen. The boys had left behind a crunching of spilled sugar and some flaccid "O's" in milky puddles. Mrs. Abel tiptoed around a shriveled banana peel.

"I thought I ought to warn you," she mouthed, making up in exaggerated lip movements what she lacked in volume. Her teeth were long and yellow.

"About what?" I mouthed back at her.

"Luther. I see he's painting for you."

"Right. He seems to know what he's doing."

"Oh, he's a good enough painter. A bit . . ."

". . . slow? I know. But I'm in no hurry."

"That isn't what I came to tell you. Frankly, I hoped I wouldn't have to tell you this. Luther was supposed to go stay with his brother. I told him to go. He's never disobeyed me before."

"First time for everything."

"What?" Her flat eyes suspected irreverence, but she carried on. "As far as I knew, he went. His brother lives on the other side of town. Luther always has a home there, whenever he chooses to appear."

She stopped for breath and to marshal her thoughts.

"Coffee?" I asked.

"What? Oh. Yes, please. Two sugars, no milk. Luther killed a boy."

Coffee slopped into the saucer and from there over my thumb and onto the gritty linoleum.

"I didn't mean to startle you." She smiled. "But truth is truth and must be told, now that you've got yourself mixed up with him."

"I'm not mixed up. He's only painting the house."

"*And* living in the washhouse. I saw him hanging his quilt out to air. But of course you couldn't know anything about what happened here thirty years ago. You couldn't know the *danger* you're in—or your boys." She sipped coffee primly and smacked her thin lips. Either my coffee was to her liking, or her story was making her mouth water.

One thing was certain. Her evil was infectious. I wanted to rush out of the house and snatch Josh and Peter away from the contaminated person of the house painter. But a small voice said, "Wait a minute. Find out what *really* happened."

"What happened?" I asked. "Thirty years ago."

"What happened was that a boy who lived in this house, about eight years old—isn't your younger boy about that age?—was drowned in the creek. He used to go fishing and trapping with Luther, and then one night he didn't come home for supper. Luther was about ten years old then, living at home with his mother and father just down the road. They've passed on since. He was a child of their old age; a mistake if you ask me, and he never was very bright. Well, the parents of the missing child were very upset and a search was organized.

"They found Luther first, in a little cave in the woods. Oh, he was a mess, crying and blubbering and making less sense than usual. He never did have any backbone. I remember him carrying on the same way over an arithmetic problem. Anyway, all they could get out of him was that he didn't do it and he didn't know who did it. Well, *that* made them search even harder, and eventually they found the boy—Bobby Albright was his name—face down in the creek. They say you can drown in a teacup, but it's always been my opinion that you would need a little help. I've always believed that Luther held Bobby's face in the water."

"What did the police say?"

"Accident," she snapped. "Accident! There was a lump on poor Bobby's head, so they guessed he fell on a rock and drowned while uncon-

scious. But I knew better. Why do you suppose Luther took it so hard? Guilt, pure and simple."

"But why would Luther do such a thing?"

"You and I need reasons, my dear. But Luther is different. He was a willful, disobedient child. One of those who stubbornly refused to learn anything, and no amount of paddling could make him a good student. Well, I just wanted to let you know what kind of person you have painting your house. If I were you, I'd keep my doors and windows locked at night."

"Wait a minute," I said. "If he's so dangerous, why did you give him permission to camp out in this house while it was vacant?"

"Oh, he's no danger to me. I know how to handle him. The owners asked me to keep an eye on the house, and what better way to prevent vandalism than to let it be known that crazy Luther might be lurking about the premises?"

"Has he ever done . . . anything else?"

"No. But who knows what he might do when he's full of wine. Well, I suppose you're busy." She glanced pointedly around my untidy kitchen. "And Lord knows I have plenty of work to do."

I stood at the screen door and watched her wade laboriously across the yard. What's worse than a witch? I thought. I hoped I wouldn't have too many more visitations from Mrs. Abel now that she'd sown her vile seeds of ancient gossip. With half an ear I listened to the slapping at the side of the house, and the low murmur of Peter's voice telling one of his favorite stories.

"So Dorothy had to get the broomstick but she got caught by the flying monkeys . . ."

"You gotta hold the brush like this," came Luther's voice. "And go this way, back and forth."

"And they all came to save her and they ran all over the castle and then Dorothy spilled a bucket of water on the witch and she melted and that was the end of her."

And Josh, ever the realist and puncturer of his little brother's balloons, said, "The Wizard was a fake and it was all only a dream. But Mrs. Abel is a real witch and she'll getcha!"

If you only knew, I thought, and went to take a shower, hoping to dispel the heavy sense of oppression that my visitor had left behind.

Later that evening, I paid Luther for his day's work. The front and

one side of the house were finished except for the trim, and the boys had spent a glorious day covering themselves with paint. As I handed him a ten-dollar bill, his eyes shifted to the little house beyond the honeysuckle hedge.

"Miz Abel came here this morning," he stated.

"Yes, she did."

"She told you things about Luther."

I wouldn't lie to him, but I wondered how much I could safely tell him. I suspected that he was only crazy "north by northwest," but I wasn't ready to bank on it. "She told me about something that happened a long time ago. An accident."

He nodded gravely and sloped off across the yard to the washhouse. I wanted to call after him, let him know I was on his side, but if he didn't know that already nothing I said would make any difference.

That night I was very conscious of not locking my doors and windows. For a long moment, my hand hovered over the hook and eyebolt on the screen door, but then I reminded myself that this was not paranoid New York City. This was the safe, clean, all-American, true-blue small town of everyone's nostalgic dreams. Anyway, the flimsy hook wouldn't stop anyone determined to get in. I went to bed.

For a long time I lay listening to the sleepy murmurs of the boys in their nook under the eaves. After they quieted down, I listened to the hooting of owls and the rustling of trees in the mild night air. Once I got up and stared through the screen into the blackness of the backyard. I thought I'd seen a flash of light from the direction of the washhouse, but decided it must have been a firefly. At last I slept, but dreamed strange, struggling, blood-tinged dreams that kept me on the edge of consciousness, fading as soon as I opened my eyes. Toward dawn, I finally fell into exhausted and dreamless oblivion. . .

I was awakened by the slap-slap-slap on the side of the house. It was mid-morning of a hot humid day, and I'd lost precious hours from the book. I dressed quickly and went outside to see what progress the painters were making.

I rounded the side of the house and stopped in shock. Luther, on the ladder, twisted around and waved to me, grinning and pleased with himself. The front of his white overalls was streaked and splashed with red. My knees went weak and my empty stomach lurched. The boys were nowhere in sight.

"Where . . . ?" My nightmares were coming true. Mrs. Abel was right. My mind leaped to horrid discoveries in the woods or behind the washhouse. I stared up at Luther, wondering what to do next.

"Painted the door already," he announced proudly.

Josh pounded around from the front of the house and took my hand in his sticky one.

"Come and see, Ma. It looks terrific."

Peter followed, gripping a reddened paintbrush. Both boys were generously splattered with red paint.

"Can we paint the stairs red too?"

"No, not the stairs. That would be too much red." It was already too much red for one morning, but I let them lead me around to the front of the house.

The door had, indeed, been painted. Bright red and still tacky, it gleamed on the front of the house like the half-remembered bloodstains of my dreams.

"It looks very nice," I said. And tottered back into the house to plug in the coffeepot. While the coffee perked and I scrambled eggs, I chastised my hyperactive imagination. Was I going to let that vicious old woman distort my mind with her ugly suspicions? No, I was not. It occurred to me that her tale might be just that, a fabrication designed to frighten me into leaving. I didn't know what she had against me, but I wasn't going to be frightened out of my sanctuary. I called everybody in to breakfast. Luther ate with good appetite.

The rest of the morning I spent organizing my notes and my own feelings. I didn't know what to make of Mrs. Abel's story, but if anybody ever needed a friend, it was Luther. If he'd really killed that boy, why hadn't the police found out about it? Mrs. Abel had seemed so certain that he'd done it. Surely she would have told the police. They must have been satisfied that he was innocent, or at least not responsible. Why had she continued to believe him guilty for thirty years? And why try to frighten me off when all I was doing was giving him an honest day's work and a semblance of dignity? I was still puzzling over Mrs. Abel's purpose when I heard voices outside. I ran out and around the house to see who was there.

Josh and Peter were huddled together at the corner of the house, being uncharacteristically quiet. When I appeared, they bolted for the porch, but I sensed their noses pressed to the screen from the inside.

"Good morning," I said to the tall dry man in the quasi-military uniform with the small American flag sewn onto the sleeve. Luther stood dumb and downcast before him. There was no mistaking the family resemblance. Mrs. Abel had neglected to tell me that Luther's brother was a policeman.

"Morning, ma'am," he said, politely and deliberately removing his Smokey Bear hat. "I came to find Luther. I hope he hasn't been bothering you."

I said what was obvious. "Luther's been painting my house."

"Yes. Well, there's more to it than that. I called Mrs. Abel earlier this morning. She always knows what he's been up to."

My blood began to boil. "Luther hasn't been 'up to' anything. Mrs. Abel is a vicious old busybody."

I glanced at Luther. He was wearing his village idiot face, and his lips began to move in the slobbering "bub-bub-bub" I'd heard in the hardware store.

"That may be," said his brother. "But she didn't answer her phone. I called three times. So I came on over to see for myself."

"Luther's doing a job for me, and doing it well. Are you satisfied?"

"Not exactly." He turned to peer intently up the road toward the center of town. "The ambulance should be getting here soon. I called from over to her place."

"Ambulance? What for? Is she sick?"

"Not exactly. She's dead." His eyes, when they swung back to me, were a chilly grey. "May I use your phone?"

"Sure. But wait a minute. What did she die of? Heart?"

He paused with his hand on the screen door. I heard the boys scuffling away upstairs.

"You might say that. Somebody stopped it for her. With a pair of hedge-clippers."

Now that he'd opened up, I wanted him to stop. But he droned on in his official monotone.

"Somebody threw a bucket of water on her. Maybe trying to clean up the mess. Just made it worse. She put up a fight though. Somebody likely got a broomstick busted over his head. I got to make that phone call now." He went inside.

Luther stood beside the ladder, the red-stained front of his overall glowing obscenely in the noonday sun.

"She's a witch," he muttered. He took his painter's cap off and tenderly massaged the top of his head.

"Luther, don't." Everybody was telling me things I didn't want to hear.

"I thrown water on her but she don't melt. She hit Luther with that broom. Luther hit her with that . . . that . . ."

I sat down on the porch steps. Luther came closer, earnestly explaining.

"She hit Bobby with that shovel. Bobby taken two tomatoes."

"What tomatoes? Who's Bobby?"

"Bobby fallen down. She tell Luther help carry. Put Bobby in the water. She say Luther never tell nobody or else go to jail forever. Luther didn't do no wrong thing. Bobby was Luther's friend. She a witch. She kill Bobby."

It came together then and I wanted to cry. But my tears wouldn't help Luther. The only thing I could do was respect his confidence and hope for the best. But what would be best for Luther? To continue playing his role of village idiot, a role he was comfortable with? Or to spend the rest of his life in some institution for the criminally insane? Not if I could help it by keeping his confession to myself. Mrs. Abel had got what was coming to her.

Heavy footsteps shook the porch and the screen door screamed on its rusty hinges. I got up to face Luther's brother with what I hoped was a look of puzzled ignorance.

"Ma'am," he said with exaggerated respect. "I just talked with the station. It seems they think they have a suspect."

I looked at Luther. He had retreated behind his moronic facade.

"It seems they picked up this stranger for speeding through town. It seems they put two and two together and came up with five." Doubt clouded his steely grey eyes as he glanced at his brother. "It seems they're holding him on suspicion."

"Do you believe he did it?"

"I don't know what to believe, ma'am, I truly don't. All I know for sure is that one old woman is dead, and I can't say I regret her passing. But it's my duty to find out who killed her."

"And this stranger, this speeder, what about him?" My voice came strangely from my throat, taut and stifled. If I didn't speak, if I didn't betray Luther's confidence, would another man live wasted years in

the wake of Mrs. Abel's malevolence? I couldn't speak. Only Luther could do that. I whirled on him, clutching his red-smeared sleeve. "Luther! Tell him! Tell your brother what you told me."

"Bub-bub-bub." Wet lips and vacant eyes. He was gone. This was no role-playing. Luther had crossed the line to the only safety he knew.

A gentle hand took my arm and held it firmly.

"Ma'am," said the expressionless voice. "I know. Luther told me. I've been waiting thirty years for him to tell me. Now it's too late."

I looked at the dry creased face under the silvery brush cut. The grey eyes had lost their chill, and I saw there a sadness deeper than any I had ever known. I felt tears in my own eyes then, for Luther struggling dimly in his silent prison and for this man with the sad grey eyes who must finally crucify his brother.

"Ma'am?" The man's questioning voice reached through my sobs. "Would it be all right with you if Luther finishes painting the house before I take him in? It would make him feel better, and I'll stay and keep an eye on him."

"Yes, oh, yes." I broke away and stumbled into the house. I had packing to do. All the clothes into all the duffel bags. All the toys, books, toothbrushes. The lid onto the typewriter. We would go back to the city. Back to a world I knew well and could cope with, where violence and evil were anonymous and did not reach into my life with red hands smearing me with indelible accountability.

Josh and Peter stood one above the other on the narrow stairway, watching, large-eyed and frightened, as I swept through the house indiscriminately tossing objects into boxes and bags, whatever was handy. "Get your things together, boys," I shouted at them. "We're leaving!"

"Aw, Ma," said Josh. "Can't we help Luther finish painting?"

I stopped in my tracks, one hand clutching a damp pair of swimming trunks. My children in their red-stained jeans, with streaks of red on their hands and arms and even in their hair, were telling me something. It was, after all, only paint. Luther had been their friend. He still was. There was nothing to run away from.

"I can't pack these. They're all wet. Sure, go and help Luther. We won't be leaving yet a while. . ."

On the outside of the house, the rhythmic slap of Luther's paintbrush is the most melancholy sound I have ever heard.

How well can you read the person you live with? . . .

THE ATTACK

by
ARTHUR MALING

"Some die, and others lie," the young man said.

The doctor continued to look at him. "Why is that?"

"I like pie, I never cry." The young man's expression was earnest.

"You never cry?" the doctor asked.

Suddenly the young man smiled. "I see the sky. Goodbye, goodbye."

"Let's talk about what happened last week," the doctor suggested.

The young man's smile faded. "I spent a week and climbed a peak."

The doctor sighed. It was no use. Not today. He pushed a buzzer on his desk. "Thank you, Jeremy," he said to the young man. "That's all for now. We'll get together again in a few days."

The young man nodded. "For days and days he lays and prays."

An attendant came into the office.

"Jeremy is ready to go back to the ward," the doctor said.

The young man nodded again and stood up. He followed the attendant into the corridor.

"End of interview with Jeremy Haskell," the doctor said, and turned off the recording machine. He wrote half a page in the notebook labeled "Haskell, Jeremy," then consulted his index of addresses and telephone numbers. He picked up the telephone and dialed.

"Mrs. Haskell?" he said. "This is Dr. Goddard. I'd like to make an appointment with you, to discuss Jeremy."

"Is he worse?" There was panic in her voice.

"No, he's about the same. We haven't begun treatment yet. We're still observing him. But I'd like you to fill us in a bit more on his past history."

The panic subsided. "Of course. I'll do anything I can to help. Anything."

"Good. How about tomorrow at two o'clock?"

"I have engagements tomorrow . . . I'm free on Saturday though."

"I don't work on Saturdays."

"Friday, then?"

"Can't you make it sooner, Mrs. Haskell?"

"Well, I suppose I *could* rearrange things for tomorrow."

"Good. I'll expect you at two. Thank you." He hung up, and put the Haskell notebook into his filing cabinet.

But he had it on his desk again the next afternoon when Mrs. Haskell arrived.

She was less distraught than she had been during their first interview, but still frightened.

"I'm so glad you could see me," she said, as if she were the one who had requested the appointment.

Dr. Goddard nodded, and offered her a cigarette.

She shook her head. "I've never acquired the habit."

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

She wrinkled her nose but said, "Not at all."

He lit a cigarette and settled back in his chair. She had just told him, in less than a second, much of what he needed to know. But he said nothing.

She tightened her grip on the handle of her pocketbook. "About Jeremy's history—where would you like me to begin? I've already told you what happened."

"Why don't you go over it again, Mrs. Haskell? You probably have more perspective now."

She inclined her head but replied, "Not in the least. He tried to *kill* me, Dr. Goddard. My son tried to *kill* me. With a *bread* knife."

Dr. Goddard opened the notebook and glanced at the first page. "It was after dinner, you said."

"Yes. About seven-thirty. I was in the kitchen. I'd just cleared the table. Ellie—that's my cleaning woman, but she stays through dinner—doesn't come on Mondays; I only have her on Tuesdays and Fridays. So I'd just cleared the table and was putting the dishes in the dishwasher. Jeremy had said he was going out, to the drugstore. 'Be sure to wear your sweater,' I said. That was something I didn't tell you that perhaps I should have: Jeremy is very susceptible to colds; he always has been. Anyway, I had a plate in my hand, and suddenly I heard a footstep. I turned around, and there was Jeremy coming up behind me. He was as close to me as I am to you right now, and he had the bread knife in his hand. His hand was raised like this, and he was sneaking up behind me. He had this terrible look in his eyes, and—" she clutched the handle of her pocketbook even tighter "—it was ghastly, Dr. Goddard. I don't know how else to describe it. It was ghastly. He was going to kill me. My son was going to *kill* me."

"And what did you do, Mrs. Haskell?"

"I dropped the plate and I screamed. Or at least I tried to scream. I was so frightened I don't think I actually did, but I did manage to say, 'Jeremy, no!' Then I sort of edged along the counter toward the dining room, and he came after me. He still had this terrible look in his eyes, and he said, 'I'm going to kill you.' He actually said that, Dr. Goddard—I'm not making any of this up. 'I'm going to kill you,' he said. That's the truth."

"I believe you."

"Well, I managed to get to the dining room and to the other side of

the table. He came after me and tried to get around the table, but it's a large table and it was between us, and every time he moved I moved. Finally he stopped and just stood there, waving the knife and saying over and over again that he was going to kill me. I pleaded with him."

"How long did this go on, Mrs. Haskell?"

"It probably wasn't more than a few minutes. It seemed like years. Then he made a sort of choked-up noise and slammed the knife into the table as hard as he could and ran out of the house."

"Is that when you called the police?"

"No. I was so upset, so utterly beside myself, that I sat down and began to cry. I'm not a person who cries easily, I don't think—I'm really quite controlled—but I couldn't help it, I sat down and began to cry. Jeremy is all I have, Dr. Goddard."

"When *did* you call the police then?"

"Not until later. When Jeremy didn't come home. When it got to be ten o'clock and he still hadn't come back. He wasn't wearing his sweater—he wasn't even wearing his jacket—and, as I said, he's very susceptible to colds."

"I see."

"Then the police found him sitting huddled in the driveway in front of the McMillans' garage. Ten blocks away. Just sitting there. And we brought him here . . . . Will he be all right?"

"I don't know. Surely, Mrs. Haskell, you must have had some indication before last Monday that he was emotionally disturbed. You must have noticed something."

Mrs. Haskell sighed and relaxed a bit. She gazed thoughtfully at the carpet. "Well, after the questions you asked me last week, I've been going over everything in my mind. But I can't add much to what I've already told you. The things that you seem to attach so much importance to—they just didn't seem *abnormal* to me. He did begin to lose interest in things. I can't tell you when it started—I didn't notice it at first, and I didn't think it was serious when I did notice it. And all the time he spent staring at himself in the mirror the last couple of months—I told you how I used to tease him about it—but my goodness, he's at the age where boys are conscious of their appearance and I really didn't see anything wrong with it. Of course, the way he began to talk in poetry at times *did* seem a bit unusual. But I've always been

somewhat artistic myself, and poetry—"

"It isn't poetry, Mrs. Haskell. Those rhyming words he uses are called clang associations. They're symptomatic of some schizophrenics."

Mrs. Haskell's shoulders sagged, but she quickly drew herself up. "Jeremy isn't. . . ?"

"Schizophrenic? I'm afraid so, Mrs. Haskell."

Her shoulders sagged again. Her eyes filled with tears. There was a long silence.

"Oh, God," she said at last.

"It isn't as bad as all that," Dr. Goddard said. He stubbed out his cigarette. "Many schizophrenics recover to the point where they can lead very good lives."

Mrs. Haskell remained slumped in her chair. "My Jeremy," she said hoarsely. Then she made a visible effort to pull herself together, resuming her former posture, bolt upright. "Can you help him?"

"I hope so. We're certainly going to try. In cases like Jeremy's, where the onset is sudden, the prognosis is often quite good."

She cleared her throat. "Will he be able to go to college next year the way we planned? He had his heart set on Amherst. My father went to Amherst."

"That depends. If not next year, perhaps the year after. I just don't know. We're certainly going to have to keep him here a while. He's a pretty sick young man at the moment."

"May I see him?"

"I'd prefer that you didn't."

"I suppose you think this is all *my* fault."

"I didn't say that, Mrs. Haskell."

"We poor mothers get blamed for everything these days. But all right, if I can't see him now, when can I see him?"

"Not for quite some time. It would be better for him that way."

"Then you *do* think it's all my fault."

"What I think is, it doesn't matter whose fault it is. Jeremy is sick. You want him to get well, I want him to get well. That's what matters—his getting well." He paused. "But since you raise the point, we do have to keep in mind that there's no father in the picture. Your husband's been dead since—" he looked at his notes "—Jeremy was three. Is that right?"

Mrs. Haskell nodded and said, "Yes. I suppose that if poor Henry

had lived, everything would be different."

"Were you and your husband happy?"

Mrs. Haskell gave him a startled look. "Of course we were happy. What makes you think we weren't?"

"I didn't say you weren't. I merely asked whether you were."

"Well, we were. Very happy. I suppose now you're going to ask me about my sex life. That's all you doctors are interested in. Sex."

Dr. Goddard smiled. "What I'm interested in at the moment, Mrs. Haskell, is schizophrenia. Your son's."

"Yes. Yes, of course. I'm sorry . . . But I'm not one of those seductive mothers I'm always reading about."

"No."

"I never have been. I know the dangers. I think it's disgraceful what some mothers do to their sons."

"I'm convinced you aren't a seductive mother."

"Then why is Jeremy sick?"

"I wish I knew, Mrs. Haskell. No one knows what causes schizophrenia. It's probably not one thing, but many. The home environment does contribute though, I believe. That's one of the reasons Jeremy will have to stay here, and why I'm saying you shouldn't see him."

"What was wrong with Jeremy's home environment? I gave him the best I could. I didn't get too, what shall I say, close to him. He's all I have. Why am I a bad influence? That's what you're telling me, isn't it? That I'm a bad influence."

Dr. Goddard took a deep breath and continued, cautiously. "We have found that one of the things that leads to conditions like Jeremy's is conflicting signals."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Parents who say yes and no at the same time, so that if the child obeys one set of instructions he's automatically disobeying another."

"Oh, you have no idea how relieved that makes me feel! Because I'm not wishywashy at all. I'm a very positive person. Ask anybody . . ." She leaned forward. "Doctor, can I see my son?"

"Not for the time being."

She laughed. "You're making me very angry, Dr. Goddard."

"Then why are you laughing? Look, Mrs. Haskell, if you want to take Jeremy out of this institution, I'll arrange it. I can have him released this afternoon, and the responsibility will be yours. Maybe next

time he really will kill you. Or someone else. But if you want him to stay here, then he's *my* responsibility and we'll do things *my* way. Do I make myself clear?"

"Heavens! I didn't mean to make you cross. Of course I want Jeremy to stay. I want whatever's best for him."

"Fine." Dr. Goddard stood up. "Thank you for coming here, Mrs. Haskell. I'll keep you informed."

She stood up too. "Yes, I really must run. I too have engagements, you know."

He escorted her to the door, then returned to his desk. "End of interview with Mrs. Dorothy Haskell," he said, and turned off the recording machine.

That night he listened to the Haskell tapes, reread his notes, and wrote a detailed summary.

The following morning Jeremy Haskell received his first injection. One hundred milligrams of Thorazine. Later in the day, he received his second. And Dr. Goddard arranged to see him five times a week.

After ten days, the injections were discontinued and Jeremy was given pills, one before each meal. At the end of September, the dosage was reduced to two pills a day; and, in mid-November, to one. Then the medication was stopped altogether.

It was almost Christmas by then. Jeremy had not completely recovered, but he had improved dramatically. His coordination was good, his thoughts were logical, he had made friends with other patients and with members of the staff. He said he felt fine. He even said that he was happy.

Snow was falling the afternoon he admitted to being happy. And there was a vase filled with holly on the table beside the window in Dr. Goddard's office.

"Happy?" Dr. Goddard said. "I'm glad to hear that."

"Not all the time," Jeremy amended. "Just some of the time. But some of the time—well, I don't know—everything seems so *all right,* if you know what I mean."

Dr. Goddard nodded, and let himself smile. He had found that he had to exercise great self-restraint with Jeremy, for the young man stirred something in him. He had to keep reminding himself that Jeremy was not more important than the other patients, just more promising.

"Does that mean you want to stay here indefinitely?"

Jeremy considered. "I suppose not. I don't like the idea of being sick. But you know what I wouldn't mind? I wouldn't mind being a psychiatrist. Like you."

Dr. Goddard's smile broadened. "The field is wide open."

Furrows appeared between Jeremy's eyes. And deepened. "There's one thing that bothers me, though," he said.

"What's that?"

"I keep thinking that maybe I shouldn't have kids."

"Why not?"

"Well, because I keep thinking that if I had kids maybe they'd turn out to be sick too."

The doctor chose his words with care. "I wouldn't worry about that if I were you," he said slowly. "There are too many other things that have to come first, like getting out of here and back to school, so you can make up some of the work you've missed. I've been talking to your mother. I've recommended some prep schools, and she's looking into them. You won't have to live at home. I'm not talking about the immediate future, of course. We haven't finished our work here. But when we do—what do you think?"

"I'd like to have two kids, at least. Never just one, like me. What kind of prep schools?"

"Good ones. But remember, I'm not talking about the immediate future. Naturally, you'd be able to go home for vacations. Christmas, Easter . . . Which brings up something else. Christmas is almost here. Your mother has been asking me if she can't come and see you and I'm beginning to think that maybe it's time. How do you feel about it?"

Jeremy began to twist one of the buttons of his shirt.

"Not for very long," the doctor said. "Maybe just a few minutes."

Jeremy continued to work at the button. "It's really snowing hard," he said.

"Of course, if you'd rather not . . ."

Jeremy crossed his arms and met the doctor's gaze. "No;" he said. "I suppose it's right."

Dr. Goddard struggled with his own indecision. "I don't think it's a matter of right and wrong. I think it's a matter of facing reality. She is your mother. And you do see things more clearly now."

"Sure."

"Then I'll set it up for tomorrow."

Jeremy tried to smile. "Is she still mad at me, do you think?" he asked.

"She was never mad at you," Dr. Goddard replied. "She was frightened, and worried. And she's still worried. We can hardly blame her, can we?"

Jeremy turned away. "Nice holly."

Dr. Goddard's eyes remained fixed on him. He was suddenly very much aware of his own limitations. "Don't worry," he said reassuringly. "I'll tell her she can't stay more than fifteen minutes."

Jeremy nodded. "Nice and fresh-looking. All those red berries. I suppose it'll be nice to see her again." He paused. "Yes, I suppose it really will." His expression cleared, and he became cheerful again.

The next afternoon, as Jeremy walked toward the visitors' lounge, he reassured himself with his own words. "It'll be nice," he said, half aloud.

Mrs. Haskell was sitting on a sectional sofa near the Christmas tree, her back very straight. One hand was resting on the stack of foil-wrapped packages beside her.

"Jeremy!" she exclaimed happily.

He approached her. "Hi," he said, uncertain whether to call her Mom or Mother. Sometimes he had used one term, sometimes the other.

She extended her hands. He took them. She squeezed his fingers and said, beaming, "Stand there and let me look at you. My goodness, you look wonderful. You've gotten fat. The food here must agree with you."

"The food isn't bad," he said.

"You must have gained ten pounds. And who cut your hair? It's much shorter than it used to be. Do you prefer it that way? I think I do."

"There's a barber who comes around."

She continued to inspect him. "You really do look very well. Considering. Come over here and sit down. Tell me how you're feeling."

"I'm feeling O.K." He seated himself on the other side of the packages. He began to fidget with one of the buttons of his shirt, then noticed what he was doing and stopped. "How've you been, Mother?"

"Mother? My goodness, how we've changed. Not 'Mom' any more?"

"Mom."

"That's all right, I don't mind. I've been fine, Jeremy. I've missed you, of course. The house doesn't seem the same without you. People have been asking about you."

He laced his fingers together.

"I simply tell them you're away. It's none of their business, I feel." She glanced at his hands. "My goodness, you don't have to be nervous. I'm the one who should be nervous."

He blinked rapidly, then unlaced his fingers.

"That's better," she went on. "How do you like Dr. Goddard? He has a very good reputation, you know. He's a very . . . determined man, don't you think?"

"We get along fine, Mom. I think he's terrific."

"You can call me 'Mother,' if you'd rather. I don't mind. He's very forceful. I think that's good, don't you?"

"I like him."

"A bit rude, perhaps, but I suppose that's necessary. I can't get over how well you're looking, Jeremy. I was expecting—well, I don't know what. They'll have to put you on a diet soon. Or I will, when you come home. I got the table fixed."

"The table?"

"The dining-room table. As well as it could be fixed. It really doesn't matter though, as long as you're better."

Jeremy began to blink rapidly. "It snowed yesterday," he said. "I went for a walk in the snow."

"They let you go for walks?"

"Sure."

"By yourself?"

"If I want to. Now that I'm in an open ward."

"They must think you're doing very well, then. I put up the Christmas tree yesterday. Do you remember the Christmas tree?"

"Sure I remember the Christmas tree!"

"Do you remember . . . everything?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. I'm so glad to see you looking so well. You have no idea how concerned I've been."

Jeremy could not think of anything to say. Finally he said, "Dr. Goddard has holly in his office."

"That's nice. You have to be careful with holly though. The leaves are so sharp."

"He said you've been looking into schools."

"Yes, I have. But I had no idea they were so expensive."

"I don't want to go back to the school I was at. I'll be put back a year and everybody'll know about me."

"Well, we'll see. Prep schools are very expensive, and this has cost an awful lot already. But don't worry your head about that. All you have to worry about is getting well."

Jeremy swallowed.

"Don't look so crestfallen, dear. Here, look what I brought you. Open your packages."

There were three of them. Jeremy had difficulty in getting the foil wrappings off, because his hands had begun to tremble.

The first box contained a cashmere sweater.

"It's pretty," he said.

"And now that you're going for walks, it'll come in handy," his mother said. "You know how susceptible you are to colds."

The second box contained a fruitcake. "A fruitcake," he said.

"I know how much you like it." She laughed. "I didn't know, of course, that you'd gained so much weight."

"I've only gained five pounds."

"Yes, and you look wonderful. Much better than I expected."

His face lit up when he opened the third box. Inside it was a tabletop book of famous mountains and mountaineering expeditions. It was a book he had wanted for a long time, but his mother had said it was too expensive.

"It's great!" he exclaimed, and reached across the open boxes to put his arms around her.

Mrs. Haskell stiffened and drew away from him.

Jeremy's face went blank. He dropped his arms.

She relaxed, then looked at him and laughed nervously. "My goodness, Jeremy! You don't have to be afraid to show your feelings with me. I'm your mother. That's been one of your troubles—you've always kept your feelings bottled up."

He blinked.

"That's why you're in this awful place. You were never able to let yourself go."

His face remained blank, but he blinked again.

Mrs. Haskell uttered another nervous laugh, and stood up. "Well, I really think I have to be going. Dr. Goddard said I was only to stay for fifteen minutes. He's a dreadful man, in my opinion, but I suppose he's good at what he does."

Jeremy sat there for a few moments after she left, then he gathered up his presents and carried them back to the ward, where he arranged them meticulously beside his bed.

He stretched out on the bed and stared at the ceiling. There was a crack in the plaster directly above him. He gazed at the crack for over an hour. It seemed to take many different shapes.

The afternoon ended, but he didn't notice.

Finally he got thirsty. His thirst grew. There was a drinking fountain in the corridor.

He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

"The snow must blow, and I will go," he said aloud, and smiled. "But where I go, you'll never know."

He got to his feet and walked into the corridor.

Two patients were playing checkers in the dayroom to his left. He turned the other way, toward the drinking fountain. The nurse was at her desk, writing in her logbook. He stopped suddenly, and stood very still.

Her back was toward him, and she was alone.

He knew what she was writing. She was writing about him. She could read his thoughts, and she was writing them down. She had no right to do that. It was illegal.

He began to move very quietly.

She did not hear him until he was directly behind her. She tried to get out of her chair, but he was too quick. He slipped his arm around her throat and applied pressure. She managed to scream, once.

The two patients jumped up from the checkerboard and ran to the desk. One of them yelled. The other struggled with Jeremy.

But Jeremy hung on.

It took two attendants to pry his arm loose from the nurse's throat, and two more to get him into the straight-jacket.

And he was never able to explain afterwards exactly what had happened.

He simply did not know.

A watchdog's bark may not be worse than its bite . . .

WHAT KIND OF PERSON ARE YOU?

by

Bill Pronzini and Barry N. Malzberg

I arrived at Quality Supermarkets' Fairfield branch promptly at nine o'clock Monday morning and went immediately into the office to check the weekend receipts. A roving district manager with twelve stores and nearly one hundred employees to monitor cannot afford to waste time; I work on a very tight schedule.

At 9:40 I stood and walked quickly into the store proper, to where Franklin was working at Register Three, his regular post. I waited until

he finished serving a customer and then motioned him to close down and join me. When he had done that, I took him back into the office and told him to sit down.

He sat poised on the edge of the chair, hands picking nervously at each other; he was about twenty-four, red-haired and gangly, and he reminded me somewhat of my son Ronald. I did not say anything for a time, watching him. He fidgeted under my scrutiny, eyes touching mine, flicking away, flicking back. But he always seemed to be nervous in my presence; I had a reputation as a somewhat stern and uncompromising supervisor.

"I'll get directly to the point," I said. "I have just been over the weekend receipts and register slips, and you're seventy dollars short, Franklin—fifty on Saturday and twenty on Sunday."

His eyes grew wide and his face paled visibly. "Seventy dollars?" he said.

"Exactly seventy dollars. That is a considerable amount, Franklin, as I'm sure you realize."

"Are you *certain*, Mr. Adams? I mean, couldn't you have made a mistake . . ."

"I do not make mistakes," I said stiffly. "The mistake here, if that is what it is, rests squarely on your shoulders."

"I . . . I don't know what to say. I've never been short before, I'm always careful—"

"Indeed?"

"I haven't been off a penny in the two months I've been working here," Franklin said. "You know that, sir."

"I do know it, yes," I said, "but the fact remains that you are seventy dollars short for this past weekend—exactly seventy dollars, not a cent more or less. The question now is what kind of person are you, Franklin?"

"Sir?"

"What kind of person are you?" I repeated. "An honest and fallible one, whose only crime is making careless errors in mathematics? Or a foolish and culpable one who succumbed to the obvious temptation?"

His mouth opened, as though in shock, and he blinked rapidly several times. "Mr. Adams, you don't think I *stole* that money?"

"Did you?"

"No. No!"

I held up a hand. "I am not accusing you of anything, Franklin. I am merely trying to ascertain the truth of the situation here."

"I'm not a thief," he said desperately. "You've got to believe that, Mr. Adams. I don't know how I could have made a seventy-dollar mistake, but that's all it was—a mistake. I swear it."

"I would like to believe that."

"You've *got* to believe it," he said, "it's the truth."

I picked up my pencil and tapped the eraser on the sheaf of papers spread out in front of me. "Embezzlement of funds is a serious offense, you know. I could have you arrested, or at the very least summarily fired."

"Please, Mr. Adams—I didn't steal that money!"

"Have you ever been in trouble before? Any kind of trouble?"

"No, sir, never. Never."

I sighed. "Very well, then. I am not a harsh man, and I have a son about your age; I see no reason not to give you the benefit of the doubt, particularly in view of your prior work record. If you're willing to replace the seventy dollars, and assuming something like this does not happen again, I suppose I am willing to drop the matter entirely."

Relief made him slump on the chair. "I'll replace the money, sure," he said eagerly, "I know I'm responsible for it. I don't have seventy dollars with me, but I can have it by tomorrow; I'll borrow it from my father—"

"That won't be necessary, Franklin. I will accept ten dollars now and ten dollars per week for the next six weeks, assuming again that there are no further shortages and you continue to do your job properly."

"I will, Mr. Adams, I'll be extra-careful. It'll never happen again, I promise you that."

"For your sake," I said, "see that you keep that promise."

He nodded and produced his wallet and handed me a ten-dollar bill. I took it and laid it carefully on the desk. "You can go back to work now," I said.

"Yes sir. Thank you, Mr. Adams."

When he was gone I sat for a moment looking at the register receipts, the branch ledger-books. Then I finished my work, closed everything into the safe, put Franklin's ten-dollar bill into my own wallet, and left the store to continue my rounds. . .

I arrived at the Essex branch at precisely noon and spent nearly an hour checking the weekend receipts. At 12:50 I went out into the store proper and brought Trowbridge—another young man in his early twenties, tall and thin like Ronald—back to the office and told him to sit down.

"I have just been going over the weekend receipts," I said, "and you're seventy dollars short—fifty on Saturday and twenty on Sunday."

He stared at me incredulously.

"The question now is," I said, "what kind of person are you?"

At eight the following Friday night, I arrived at the Dunes Motel on the outskirts of the city, knocked on the door of Unit Eight, and was admitted.

"Right on time," Cobb said.

"I am always punctual." I opened my wallet and laid two hundred and fifty dollars on the bed.

He picked it up and counted it twice. "O.K., Adams," he said. "That takes care of the first installment. Six more weeks and Ronnie and I will be square." He chuckled. "Unless he decides to borrow another thousand to pay off some more of his gambling debts."

"Ronald will never borrow another dime from you," I said, "I'll see to that. And he is not gambling any more."

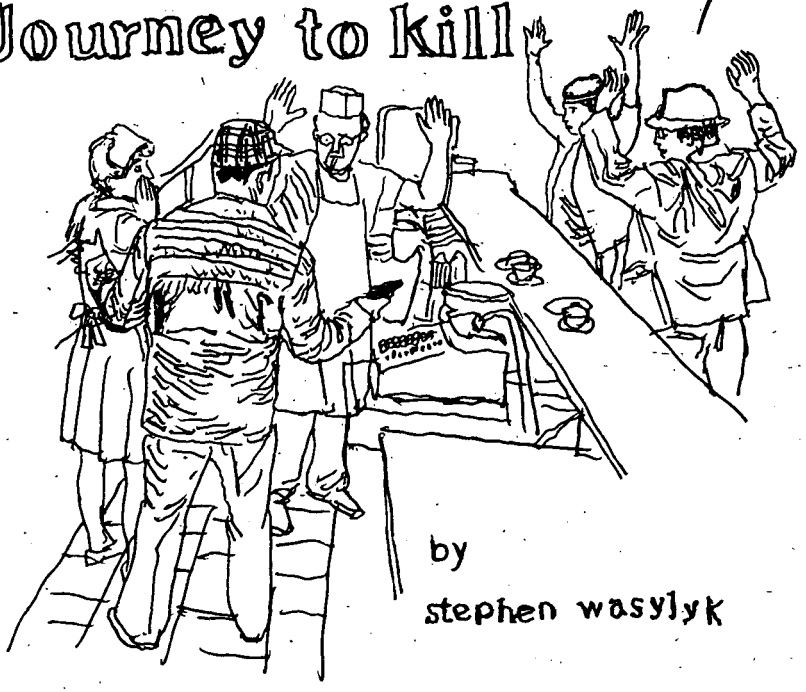
Cobb smiled wisely. "Sure—whatever you say, Adams. Just make sure you're here with the second installment next Friday. I'd hate to have to send one of my boys out to pay Ronnie a little visit."

A sudden rush of anger made me clench my fists. "What kind of person are you to prey on decent people this way?" I said. "What kind of *monster* are you?"

Cobb's laughter rang in my ears all the way out to the car and all the way home to my son.

The truth isn't always beautiful, but it's better than deception and ignorance . . .

Journey to Kill



by stephen wasylyk

The tall pines that lined the road gradually gave way to clearings, 35-mile-an-hour signs, and a variety of dingy buildings pressed close to the cement highway; cinder-block garages, a yellow-brick motel, a new-car dealership with paint sagging in long strips as if the building itself was discouraged by the lack of business.

The town spoke of better days long past, of an uncertain present and an indefinite future.

I slowed far below the speed limit, idling past the plate-glass windows of the stores that were intermixed with wide-porched homes. An ancient hotel with a broad veranda stood shabbily but proudly at one corner in the center of town and then, before I could anticipate it, the business buildings were gone and I was in the outskirts, driving by early-century, wood-frame clapboard houses set back behind wide front lawns.

Indian Forks, I thought. The name should have told me what to expect. These mountain towns were all alike. But then it doesn't make much difference what you find at the end of a journey when all you intend to do when you arrive is to kill a man.

At the next intersection, I pulled the car into the parking lot in front of a big stainless-steel diner and stepped out into the cool morning mountain air, tiredness slipping away at the thought of hot food.

A tall, towheaded kid about seventeen, his long hair held by an Indian-style headband, his gangly body crammed into a jacket and trousers he had outgrown, lifted himself from the steps of the diner and looked me over. His eyes probed the inside of the station wagon, taking in the duffel bag and rod case, and shifted to my cotton slacks, loose jacket, and old hat.

"You up for the fishing, mister?"

I smiled. "Something like that. How do the trout look?"

"Good, if you know the right places—and I know them all. You can ask anybody. My name is Richie Wright."

I could use a guide, but not for fishing. I held out a hand. "I'm George Grinofsky, Richie. You hinting I could do better with your help?" The kid's palm was no stranger to hard work.

"I don't charge much. Whatever you think is fair."

I had always liked a man willing to work for his money. "How does five dollars a day sound?" I pulled a bill from my money clip. "In advance."

He couldn't help grabbing for the money, then looking embarrassed. "I'm ready if you are."

"I've been driving since midnight, Richie. It's breakfast time."

"I'll wait out here."

"Nothing doing. I don't like to eat alone. Breakfast with me is part of the deal."

"I've had breakfast."

I sensed he was lying. "Then you'll have a cup of coffee."

The inside of the diner was warm, the windows steamed. There was a blonde waitress and a heavy man behind the counter, his white hat saying he doubled as the cook. We were the only customers.

"Hi, Richie," said the man, grinning. "Hook a live one?"

"His name is Grinofsky," said Richie.

"I'm Fred," said the cook. "Her name is Jean. What can we get you?"

I slid onto a stool at the counter next to the cash register and motioned Richie to join me. "Scrambled eggs, home fries, toast and coffee for me. Give Richie anything he wants."

Richie hesitated before saying, "I'll have the same."

I hadn't been wrong about his having had no breakfast. He ate as if he had to finish before someone took the meal away from him. I leaned back and lighted a cigarette, watching him clean his plate. Just how I could use him wasn't clear at the moment, but he knew the town and the people in it and that was important to me.

A man dressed in a heavy jacket came in. I glanced at him casually, cataloging him as another fisherman, a tough-looking customer with a hard face and a stocky build. He went to one of the booths. Jean followed to take his order.

"You like this town, Richie?" I asked.

Richie stopped chewing. "Can't wait to get out of it. I'm tired of never having an extra dime."

"Your father doesn't do very well?"

"I don't have a father. He ran out on us a few years ago. There's just my mother, my sister, and myself. Mom works but you can't make much money in this town." He sipped his coffee slowly. "Once I thought I'd like to go to college but I don't guess that's possible. All I'd like to do now is go to some city and get a job as soon as I get out of school this year." He spoke as if he had decided that dreams were for someone else. He was too young for that.

Jean had taken a cup of coffee to the man in the booth. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her returning, the man close behind her as if he were going to complain about the service, then I saw the strain on her face and the fear in her eyes.

The man pushed her behind the counter. He was holding a small

automatic and he waved it at all of us. "All right," he said thickly. "Everybody keep quiet." He motioned to Fred. "I'll take whatever you have in the register."

"Damn," said Fred softly. "You really picked the right time, didn't you? It's too early to get to the bank with yesterday's receipts."

I wanted the man out of there before he decided to use that gun. "Give him the money," I told Fred.

The man turned to me. "You talk too much. I was going to wait until you left but you were in no hurry. Now you pay for it. Empty your pockets."

I handed him my money clip. "That's it," I lied, "I don't carry a wallet."

"You too," he said to Richie.

Richie placed the five I had given him on the counter.

"Let the kid keep his money," I said. "He needs it more than you do."

The man leaned forward and viciously raked me across the forehead with the front sight of the gun. The sudden tearing pain drove my hands to my face and jammed my breath in my throat.

"Keep out of this," he said and reached for the money.

Seeing his precious five about to go, Richie lunged. The gunman swung the revolver hard, smashing him off the stool into an awkward heap.

I went for him then, even though I knew it was useless. He caught me on the head with a backhanded swing of the automatic, and the pain in my forehead was replaced by one a lot deeper and wilder, an explosion somewhere behind my eyes that drove me to the floor alongside Richie.

When I came to, the thug was gone and Jean was fussing over Richie. "He's hurt bad."

My fingers probed my head, found a swelling, and made me wince. "Better get the police and an ambulance."

"Jean already called the sheriff," said Fred. "There's no ambulance around here. We sent for the doctor, but his wife will have to track him down."

I cursed. "What happens to the kid in the meantime?"

"We make him comfortable on the cot in back," said Jean.

I heaved myself to my feet, my head feeling as if it were hinged loosely. "I'll give you a hand."

We put Richie on the cot in the kitchen. Leaning over made my head swim and took the strength from my legs. I grabbed a wall for support.

"Use a cold cloth on his forehead," I said. "It may bring him around."

"Jean will take care of him," said Fred. "You can use a cup of black coffee and a couple of aspirin."

We left Jean with Richie, but I worried about him. He should have been out of it by now. The man had hit him too hard.

I was drinking coffee when the grey police cruiser pulled into the parking lot. Two men got out and left the doors open as they headed for the diner. One was heavy, almost fat, with a soft face and sagging jowls and wearing a tan uniform and a badge, a big revolver strapped around his waist. The other was small and thin and dark, his skin drawn smooth and tight over his facial bones in spite of his obvious age; he had a hawk nose and heavy-lidded eyes that never stopped moving. He was carrying a smooth-looking, well-oiled .30-06 with a telescopic sight under one arm as if it were part of him.

"Here come Harold and Ollie," said Fred. "More work for Ollie, that creep."

The two men came through the door without hurrying.

The fat one pointed at me. "Who is he?"

"Just a customer, Harold," said Fred. "The man hit him and Richie Wright. Richie's on the cot in the kitchen."

"He didn't improve your looks any," Harold said to me.

"How's the boy?" Ollie's voice was like a heavy object being drawn over broken shale. A patina of perspiration covered his skin in the warmth of the diner.

"Jean's with him," said Fred. "We called for the doctor."

Ollie disappeared into the kitchen.

"What did the guy look like?" Harold asked me.

I downed the aspirins Fred handed me and wearily recited the man's description.

"I've seen him before," said Fred. "He's been in here a couple of times in the evening, making a big play for Gloria."

Harold smiled wryly. "Did he get anywhere?"

"I doubt it," said Fred. "You know Gloria."

Jean came out of the kitchen in time to hear him. "Good Lord, we forgot about her!" she said. She turned to Harold. "You'd better go over and tell her about Richie."

"I've got other things to do," said Harold. He pointed at Fred. "Better if you tell her."

"Who's Gloria?" I asked.

"Richie's mother," said Jean. "She works here nights." She started to remove her apron angrily. "Men, you'd think one of you would realize that telling her is more important than anything else. I'll go."

"Why not call?" I asked.

"She doesn't have a phone."

I slid off the stool. "Let me go. Fresh air will do me good. Where will I find her?"

"Cross the main road to the first street, then turn right. It's the last house. You'll think there aren't any more but keep going. You'll see it."

The cool air outside felt good against my still-throbbing forehead so I decided to walk off the headache rather than take my wagon.

The street was broad and tree-lined, the houses large. Here, away from the light morning traffic on the main road, I was alone.

I breathed deeply, hoping the headache would go soon. I hadn't come here to be robbed and hit on the head, but that didn't change anything. I had driven five hundred miles to kill a man and I still had to find a time. And a place. But in the meantime there was Richie to be taken care of.

The house was the way Jean described it, well down the road after the sidewalk had ended and out of sight of its neighbors, surrounded by trees—an old wooden house with a narrow veranda across the front and down the side, ornate gingerbread carving hanging from the eaves.

I climbed the weathered steps and rang the bell.

It took her a long time to open the door.

To have a son as old as Richie, she must have married very young. She was ash blonde, her hair tortured into waves, her lips red and moist, and her eyes dark and shadowed, yet she looked no older than thirty. She wore a light-blue housecoat buttoned up to her throat.

"Mrs. Wright?"

She nodded, her eyes searching my face.

"Your boy Richie has been hurt."

There was a sad resignation in the brown eyes as if this was another blow to be expected. "How?"

"A man held up the diner. He hit Richie."

She sagged against the door jamb.

I wondered why the second piece of information affected her more than the first.

"What was he doing at the diner? I told him a dozen times to stay away from there."

"He was having breakfast with me," I said. "You'd better come along. The doctor's on the way."

"I'll have to dress first."

"I'll wait."

Something flared in her eyes and she half glanced behind the door as if someone was standing there. "No, you go on."

I placed a hand on the door and pushed gently, feeling the resistance. A man, I thought. A little early-morning pattycake. I felt sorry for Richie. "Are you sure you don't want me to wait?"

She shook her head.

I smiled wryly as I went down the steps. If she had a man with her, that was her business.

Back at the diner, a white-haired, rotund, kindly faced type was examining Richie when I walked into the kitchen.

"Doc Stroud," explained Jean. "Where's Gloria?"

"She'll be along as soon as she's dressed," I said.

The doctor straightened. "The boy has to go to the hospital. He has a severe concussion or a fractured skull. I need X rays to be sure. Where's the mother?"

"She's on her way," I said.

"Damn it, I need her. He's a minor and I'll need permission if I have to do anything. You'd better give me a hand—no time to wait for an ambulance. We'll put him in my car. Jean, I need you along to keep him from bouncing around."

"Take my station wagon," I said. "It's roomier."

"Good," said Stroud. "Then you can use my car to bring the mother."

Jean stripped off her apron. "Gloria will tell you where the hospital

is, Mr. Grinofsky."

The doctor looked at me sharply. "You the other fellow who was hit?"

I lifted a hand to my head and winced. "Still tender but nothing serious."

"I should have guessed who you were from that welt on your forehead," said Stroud. "Let me check you out." His examination was quick but expert.

"You'll live," he said with a fleeting grin. "Let's get Richie to the car."

I helped carry Richie out and slid him into the back of the wagon. Jean climbed in beside him. Behind the wheel, the doctor leaned out and looked at me. "Make sure you get that mother there. I need her."

"No problem," I said. "See the boy gets whatever he needs and don't worry about the bill. I took him into the diner and I feel responsible."

Stroud nodded and gunned the wagon down the road.

I went back inside and Fred poured me another cup of coffee.

"That sheriff and Ollie are a weird pair," I said. "Ollie strikes me as a real cold character."

"You know it," said Fred. "I wouldn't want him after me. You see that rifle of his? He likes to use it. Something like this happens, Harold deputizes him, but I guess Ollie doesn't believe in courts or trials or juries. Most of the time he goes after someone, they end up dead."

"The sheriff stands for that?"

"Harold?" Fred put his opinion of the sheriff into that one word as he filled the sugar jars from a ten-pound bag. "He sits on his rear and lets Ollie loose like a hunting dog. Ollie always claims he has to shoot in self-defense and Harold says nothing." He waved me into silence. "Here they come again."

The sheriff's car pulled into the lot and Harold and Ollie came into the diner.

"Any luck?" I asked the sheriff.

"Not a sign. When Jean called, I had the state police set up roadblocks at the foot of the mountain. He never reached either one of them. Must have turned off somewhere. We came back for some men to help us cover the side roads."

Beyond them I saw Gloria Wright crossing the road. I moved out to intercept her.

"The doctor took Richie to the hospital in my car," I said. "He wants us to follow in his car."

Her face, flushed from the rapid walk, turned pale. "I can't," she said desperately.

"What's wrong?"

"I just can't. Richie's sister is alone."

"We'll take her along."

"No!" she said swiftly. "She's asleep."

I felt a touch of irritation. "Mrs. Wright, Richie is badly hurt. You should be there. We'll simply wake his sister and go. Come on." I took her arm.

She pulled loose and hurried away from me, toward home.

I watched her go. Harold came up alongside me. "From the looks of it, I should maybe run you in for making an indecent proposal."

"Grow up," I snapped. "I offered to drive her to the hospital to be with Richie but she wouldn't go. Some nonsense about his sister still being asleep. I told her to wake the kid and bring her along but she wouldn't do it."

Harold rubbed his jaw. "Not much of an excuse. Richie's sister is old enough to take care of herself. Must be at least twelve years old. Something's wrong here."

"Maybe I shouldn't say this," I said, "but when I was at her house earlier I was sure she had someone there with her. I figured it was a man and none of my business."

"I'll be damned," said Harold softly. "It could be one of the boys from town, but if it is Gloria's changed overnight. And if he is a local, no reason for her not to leave him and go along to the hospital. Something pretty strong is holding her back."

I thought of the house, isolated from the others and surrounded by trees. "If I wanted to hide out somewhere for a few hours, it seems to me her house would fill the bill," I said.

Harold smiled. "You're not so dumb." He raised his voice. "Ollie!"

Ollie came over.

"There's a chance the guy doubled back and is holed up in Gloria's house," said Harold. "What do you think?"

Ollie's eyes were opaque. "Mighty chancy. I don't guess he'd do

something like that."

"Yeah, well," said Harold. "I've been wondering how a stranger could know about the roadblocks and that the best time to hit Fred would be early in the morning before he has a chance to get to the bank. Someone from around here would have to tell him, maybe arrange for him to hole up in her house for a few hours afterward."

"That doesn't make sense," I said. "If she could do something like that, she wouldn't be afraid, and that's exactly the way she impresses me."

"Maybe," said Harold, "but there are a lot of things she could be afraid of. Like us finding out, for instance. Or she could have turned a little panicky because things didn't go the way they planned, like Richie being hurt and you showing up on her doorstep. I think we better go over there and check it out."

"How do you intend to do that?" I asked. "March up on the porch and ask her if she has the holdup man inside?"

"Stay out of it," said Ollie. "How we do it is none of your business. Man probably isn't there now anyway."

"You don't know that," I said. "If he is, you can't start a shoot-out with the woman and her daughter inside."

"He's right, Ollie," said Harold. "We can't start shooting with those women in there—we've got to work something out."

"If he's in there and you walk up onto that porch wearing that uniform and badge, he's going to be ready for you," I said.

"You sound like you have an idea," said Harold.

"I've been there," I said. "Whoever is inside has seen me before and he'll figure I just came back to talk about Richie. He'll do what he did the last time, hide behind the door and let her open it a few inches to see what I want. He's not going to be expecting anything but talk. If I hit that door, I'll take him by surprise, maybe knock him off his feet. If it's just some local guy, all I'll do is scare hell out of him."

"And if it isn't just some local guy?" asked Harold. "I can't let a civilian go in there and maybe get himself killed. It's a policeman's job to take risks like that."

I pulled out my I.D. folder and held it so he could see the badge.

"You should have told me," complained Harold. "For a while there I thought you might be in on the holdup, being a stranger and all. You got a gun?"

I opened my jacket and let him see the short-barreled .38 in the belt holster. "I don't intend to stand there and get shot, if it comes to that."

Harold stroked his chin. "Well, I got to give you a lot of credit for being willing to go up there and try it. I appreciate that. But I can't let you go alone. Ollie is going to have to back you up, just in case. He may know Ollie is a deputy, but we have to take that chance."

I said, "I don't need—"

Harold cut me off. "That's the way it's going to be," he said. "If you want to back out, that's all right. You don't have to do it at all. Ollie and I will figure it out."

I thought of the frightened look in Gloria Wright's eyes. "I'll do it," I said. "But Ollie isn't dragging that rifle with him. That would be a dead giveaway. He'll have to do with a hand gun."

Ollie smiled. "That's fine with me, city cop. I have one of those too, and I'm just as good with it as I am with a rifle. You just hit the door and get out of the way before you get hurt."

Ollie and I drove over in Doc Stroud's car, Harold following and parking out of sight down the road while we continued on to the house. Moving slowly to give Harold a chance to catch up on foot, we left the car and mounted the unpainted steps, Ollie humming tunelessly. For the second time that morning, I knocked on the weathered door and Gloria Wright opened it. Ollie stayed back a step or two.

Whatever was bothering her was still with her, her fingers on the door working nervously, her eyes refusing to meet mine.

"We just had a phone call," I told her. "Something about Richie not doing well. They need you at the hospital."

"I told you—I can't leave right now!" Her brown eyes widened when she saw Ollie.

"They won't take no for an answer. Something about an operation."

The eyes were pleading. "Please. Tell them to take care of it. Tell them they have my permission to do whatever is necessary."

I shrugged. "All right. I don't think they can go ahead without your signature, but—" I took a step forward, pulled my gun, and launched myself at the door.

The door hit something solid, knocked it aside, and I plunged into the living room, losing my balance and sprawling, rolling quickly and

sitting up, the .38 pushed out in front of me.

The man who had hit me in the diner was on his knees, reaching for the automatic on the floor. He froze, his eyes narrow with caution, one hand extended as Ollie came charging into the room.

The man seemed to relax a little. "Take him, Ollie," he said.

Ollie smiled coldly and shot him.

Behind me, Harold's voice roared, "Drop that damned gun, Ollie!"

I rolled out of the way. It was between the two of them.

Harold stood in the doorway that led to the back of the house, his big revolver pointed at Ollie.

Ollie spread his hands and smiled his cold smile. "He was reaching for the gun."

"No!" Harold spat the word out. "Grinofsky had him cold and he knew it—you didn't have to shoot! This time you go into a cell for murder!"

Ollie's lips curled. "You fat—" His gun jerked toward Harold.

Harold's big revolver roared and Ollie staggered backward, bent in the middle, and collapsed on the porch.

I glanced at the holdup man, the awkward position and slackness of his body telling me he was dead.

Gloria Wright was crouched against the wall, her hands to her face, her eyes wide. I took her hands and lifted her gently to her feet. She began to tremble, crying softly.

"Take it easy," I said. "Where's your daughter?"

She choked the word out. "Upstairs."

Harold went up and brought down a thin, wide-eyed girl about twelve, dressed in jeans and a striped pullover, and we led them both out and put them in the doctor's car.

"What happened?" I asked Gloria.

She took a deep breath and ran a sleeve over her eyes. "He didn't say a word, just forced his way in and said he was going to stay for a few hours and if I knew what was good for me I'd just stay quiet. Then you came to the door about Richie. That was when I realized why he was hiding there. After you left, he yelled and cursed and said it was some kind of trick because the kid in the diner was too old to be my son. I told him I had to go, that it would look funny if I didn't, and he said all right but to come right back or he'd take care of my daughter in a way I'd never forget. I just couldn't go to the hospital and leave

her with him. He still thought it was some kind of trick when you came back. He had the gun pointed at the door while you were talking, ready to shoot, but then you crashed in and—"

I gave her my handkerchief.

Harold had come back and was listening.

"Well?" I asked. "Do you still think she told him about the roadblocks and the money?"

He shook his head. "No," he said. "It was Ollie. When I heard the man tell him to take you, I knew Ollie was on his side. Ollie must have told him to hide out in Gloria's house, thinking we'd never look there and all he'd have to handle was the mother and daughter because Richie was always out hustling odd jobs during the day."

"Why should Ollie be part of it?" I asked.

Harold's eyes studied me. "It wasn't the money. Ollie didn't need money. It was something else. A few months ago Ollie killed a kid we were after. A big kid—looked a lot like you. He held up the gas station on the other side of town and took off in a beat-up old Volkswagen that broke down on him. We chased him into the woods. It just so happened that I went in one direction and Ollie another and Ollie caught up to him first. He claimed the kid tried to shoot him, so he had to kill him. The kid had a gun, all right, but it was a plastic toy. Ollie's story sounded a little fishy to me but I couldn't prove anything."

"So you think Ollie set this up just so he'd have someone to kill?"

"No question in my mind," he said slowly. "No other reason for it at all. I think that Ollie planned on discovering this holdup man during the day sometime and there would be another body by the time I got there—and nothing for me to say because the man did have a gun."

"It's hard to believe he'd sucker a man into robbing the diner just so he could kill him," I said.

Harold shook his head. "A man kills once and decides he likes it, so he looks for a way to kill again."

"My God," I said, "you knew he was like that and you did nothing?"

"I just wasn't sure. There were two others before the kid and after that I realized I had been sheriff for more than twenty years and fired my gun once but here was Ollie killing three people in less than two years. I told myself I'd give him one more chance and see what happened." He indicated the house. "That's what happened. Just chance I was there to see it for myself and it was a good thing. He'd have tried

to take you too."

"Maybe you should have let him try," I said. "I owed him."

His voice became thoughtful. "The kid Ollie killed is buried in the town cemetery. The marker says his name is Green. That's all we ever knew about him, but I don't guess that's quite right, is it?"

"No," I said. "That was just the name he used. His real name was Grinofsky. We had a big difference of opinion about a year ago and he took off, but he used to send me postcards. Then the postcards stopped. I asked a friend of mine, a retired cop, to track him down. He did. When he came back and told me, he said it was nothing more than a case of legalized murder. Maybe the kid did hold up the station, but the plastic gun figured. He was a little mixed-up but not enough to ever want to kill anybody. If you had picked him up, he'd have drawn five to ten for armed robbery and he would have deserved it, but he didn't deserve to die. I came here to even things up."

Harold's eyes widened a little. "You came here to kill Ollie?"

I nodded. "And I'd have done it no matter what it cost me, not only because he killed my brother, but because it looked to me like you had no intention of stopping him even though there's nothing worse than a cop who likes to kill."

"But you're a cop yourself."

"Sometimes you forget that," I said. "Ollie did."

"Which makes you no better than Ollie."

"A little better," I said. "With me it would have been once."

"How can you be sure? Maybe Ollie thought the same way the first time he killed a man, but once you pull the trigger on another and see how easy it can be, and then talk yourself into believing you did it for law and order, it can be hard to stop.

"You should have come to me," said Harold. "I may be a little slow, but no one ever said I don't do my job and do it the best way I know how. It was my job to handle him, no one else's. He was my responsibility and I took care of it and that's the end of it. If you want to stay around and claim your brother's body or whatever, I'll help you all I can. Right now you better take Gloria here to the hospital."

I watched him walk toward the house, an almost-fat man who made mistakes but was willing to rectify them. I couldn't ask more than that of anyone.

Including myself.

Who can fight drowsiness—especially someone else's? . . .

THE SLEEPER

by **TONITA S. GARDNER**

Fourteen hours. She sleeps fourteen hours a day—goes to bed at 9 P.M., gets up at 11 A.M. I say to her, "Why do you sleep so much? It's not normal for a woman of thirty-seven to need fourteen hours of sleep a day." She just yawns in my face and looks at the clock and says she can't help it if she's tired all the time.

"Go to a doctor," I tell her. "Maybe there's something wrong with you. Maybe you need a shot of vitamins or a tonic."

She lights a cigarette. "I'm getting old," she says. "I'm not pretty any more. Not like when you married me."

"If you'd go to the dentist he could fix your teeth."

"I don't care about my teeth."

"But how're you going to be pretty if you're losing your teeth?"

"I'm not going to be pretty even if I keep my teeth." Smoke wiggles through the gaps in her mouth. It's hard to tell if the remaining teeth are discolored from nicotine or dark with decay. She yawns again.

I grab her by the shoulders. "What do you want to do for Chrissake—sleep your life away?"

"What life?"

"Look, Helen, we could have plenty of good times together—"

"Phil, you don't need me. You've got your job and your bowling and the football games on TV."

"And you've got your sleep!"

"Sleep is good for people. Don't babies sleep a lot?"

"You're not a baby."

"Sometimes I wish I were. Then you wouldn't complain about how much I sleep."

"You mean if you sleep a lot, that'll make you feel younger?"

"No," she tells me, "it'll make me feel nothing. And that's the way I want to feel—exactly like nothing."

Now it's fifteen hours at a time. She sleeps like she's unconscious. I can't wake her if I try.

But I try.

"Helen—wake up, Helen." I reach over, touch her. Her body is soft, going to fat. I make it my business not to mind. *She* minds, but won't do a thing about it. I run my hands over her, but she doesn't know I'm alive. I keep repeating her name, hoping she'll wake up, respond. She sleeps.

I get up, take a burning hot shower.

And for the rest of the night, I can't sleep at all.

Fifteen and a half hours. Again I try to talk to her.

"We started too young, Helen. Maybe that's the trouble. We didn't give ourselves a chance to grow up."

"That's not it, Phil."

"How many guys at forty have a grandchild?"

"That's not it."

"Maybe if we'd had more kids—not stopped after Peggy was born."

"What did we need more kids for?"

"To give you something to do, to keep your mind occupied."

"As it is, does she ever come to see us any more?"

"She just had a baby, Helen! It's some trip from Brooklyn to the Bronx. And without a car—"

"Does she ever call?"

"Sure she calls. You're always asleep. You have no friends, no interests, nothing. And you've been like this since Peggy got married last year. You afraid she'll cut you out of her life the way you did with *your* mother? Not that the old lady gave you much choice in the matter."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Maybe you feel guilty about what happened to her."

"I said I don't want to talk about it."

"We have to talk. How else can we find out what's bugging you, Helen? Unless you'd rather talk to a shrink."

"Never!"

"It was only a suggestion."

"Please, Phil." Her eyes look empty; her skin is pale.

"Helen, I want to help you. You've got to let me try, at least."

"Phil—"

"What?"

"I'm too tired to talk."

Sixteen hours. I have needs too, and satisfy them any way I can. Last night I went out to a bar, picked up a girl—kind of pretty in a brassy, perfumy way. But alive. Not like Helen. We went back to her place. She cost me 25 bucks, half a day's pay. It was worth it—but I can't afford it.

Sixteen hours, twelve and a half minutes. I wait till she's awake.

"Get dressed, Helen. I'm taking you to the West Side Medical Center."

"Absolutely not."

"My boss says it's an excellent place. They'll give you a complete evaluation, tell you exactly what's wrong."

"I don't want to go."

"And *I* say you're going. You're my wife, Helen. When are you going to remember that?"

"Phil, I wish you'd leave me alone."

I clench my fists. "Get dressed now. Or I'll have to dress you myself."

She peers at me to see if I mean it.

"Get dressed, Helen!"

My tone of voice finally convinces her. She throws on some clothes. I drive her to the clinic, find a parking spot.

Lighting a cigarette, she waits in the car while I go inside.

"I'd like to have the doctors look at my wife," I tell the young nurse at the front desk.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No, but this is a serious problem. I was hoping they could take her right away."

"I'm sorry, sir, but you must have an appointment."

"It's my day off," I explain. "I'm willing to put her name down and wait our turn."

"If we put her name down, it'll still take three months."

"Three months!"

"Unless there's a prior cancellation."

"Look, Miss, you've *got* to get her in today. My wife needs help badly."

The nurse has a sympathetic face; she sees my desperation. "Wait here," she says. "I'll do what I can." She picks up the phone, starts talking in an undertone.

"All right," she says when she hangs up. "You can bring your wife in. The doctor will see her on his lunch hour."

"God bless you both," I murmur and hurry out the door. But when I reach the street, the car is there but Helen is gone.

I jump into the car, start the motor. Frantically I begin looking for her—up one street, down another. She's nowhere in sight.

I drive back home, dash into the apartment to phone the police.

Helen, fully clothed, is lying on the living-room couch, asleep.

Imagining how some taxi driver had to wake her when they got to our building, I call the clinic to cancel Helen's appointment.

And then I remember—I didn't even tell them her name. . .

Seventeen hours. Like a baby, she curls up now with a thumb in her mouth. It's scary just to look at her. And the more she sleeps, the less I do. Two, three hours a night is all. I've turned into a walking zombie: palpitations, shortness of breath. I can hardly lift a bowling ball, and when I do it rolls right into the gutter. If things don't improve soon, I'll have to quit the team. All because of Helen. It's no good for a man to live under so much tension.

I try to figure her out as best I can. I realize she's always been quiet, always kept to herself a lot. Maybe that's why I fell for her in the first place. So feminine, so dependent, I used to think; it made me feel like a big shot.

How did I know it would turn into this!

I go to the library, look up books about sleeping problems. But they're mostly about insomnia—very little about Helen's kind of a mess. But I don't need a book to tell me she's all bollixed up, and that she's probably been like that since long before I met her. Sure, I robbed the cradle. She was only fifteen years old. But does that make me responsible? I was a kid myself then; kids don't know about such creepy things. And what about her parents? They weren't exactly sad to get rid of her. More money for the old man to spend on his drinking, less work for mama. And wasn't mama always half-asleep herself? I never saw that woman dressed. Always the old corduroy bathrobe, faded to the color of damp hay—smelling like it too. A big yawner, Helen's mama. When she wasn't yawning in your face, she was blowing smoke at you from those cigarettes she stuck between whatever rotten teeth she still had in her mouth. What a sight, that woman! Until she fell asleep with a dangling cigarette and burned herself up alive.

So far, Helen's been careful about smoking in bed, but otherwise she's exactly like her mother.

Seventeen and a quarter hours. Only because I yell in her ear, actually drag her out of bed and pour black coffee into her twice a day, does she stay awake for more than a couple of hours at a stretch. The rest of the time it's sleep, sleep, sleep. What would happen if I didn't wake her? Would she sleep the whole 24 hours? My God, how long can I take it!

I've got to confide in someone, maybe also get some kind of medicine for Helen. I go to a doctor I used to know from the days we

were kids in the same gang. He's moved to a fancy new neighborhood—long time no see.

"Man," he greets me, "you look like hell."

"I know I look like hell." Self-pity whines through my voice. "You would too if you were going through what I'm going through." As he examines me, I spill out the details. He shakes his head.

"Sounds like she needs a psychiatrist."

"No dice," I tell him.

"If she doesn't want to be helped, then there's very little you can do for her."

"But I feel guilty about it. Like I should be doing *some*thing."

"Phil, you're a nervous wreck. Keep this up and you'll be lucky to wind up in the hospital instead of six feet under."

"If you're trying to scare me, Doc, you're doing a very good job."

"Well, you've got to think of yourself for a change."

"What about Helen?"

"Don't coddle her—and who knows?—eventually she may snap out of it. But if you want me to look her over, have my secretary make an appointment."

"She won't come," I tell him. "Lately she won't even leave the house to buy a pack of cigarettes."

"I'll say it again—if you can't help your wife, at least help yourself." He frowns at me through his horn-rimmed glasses. "As an old friend, I'm giving you the best advice I know. You need a vacation, Phil. I can tell just by looking at you that you need a vacation. Take one!" He writes out a prescription. "Meanwhile, this ought to do some good. It's vitamins."

"For Helen?" I ask.

"No," he says. "For you."

Close to eighteen hours. "Wake up, Helen. Wake up. I got something to tell you. It's about me—your husband. Yes, you've still got a husband, Helen. Or don't you give a damn?

"Well, somebody's got to give a damn! And that's why I'm breaking the news to you in person. Phil needs a vacation, Helen. My boss says I need a vacation. The guys I used to bowl with say I need a vacation. Even my old friend Dr. Britt says I need a vacation. A week in Florida. Fun and sun.

"Want to come along, Helen? Of course you don't. You'd rather sleep. So I'll just have to go by myself. Not that it'll solve anything between us. In fact, it might even make it harder for me to live with you when I get back. But you know what? I'm going anyway. Shirts, socks, ties, my good blue suit. Look, Helen, I'm also packing my bathing trunks. Wake up, Helen. The least you could do is say goodbye to me. That's the least you could do. You're gonna wake up and say goodbye whether you like it or not!"

I start to pinch her flabby arms, to slap her on the cheeks. She whimpers in her sleep. Yanking at her hair, I toss the covers aside and pull her to a sitting position. She's fully awake now, rubbing her bleary-looking eyes, screaming at me to leave her alone.

I scream back at her, "You're not going to drag me down with you, Helen. I'm not going to let you kill me like you're killing yourself!" She quiets down, looks right through me, and doesn't say a word.

On the one hand, I'm ashamed of myself for bullying her, but on the other I'm still furious with her for ignoring me as usual. "Well," I persist, "aren't you even going to say goodbye?"

She fumbles in the nighttable drawer for a cigarette, but there are no more. "Do you have a cigarette?" she asks.

I reach into my pocket and hold up a full pack. "Not unless you say goodbye."

"Goodbye," she says.

I throw her the entire pack. As I head for the door, she lights one and slips back under the covers. And she's yawning and puffing, puffing and yawning. I slam out the door.

But as I'm driving to the airport, I'm thinking that with her crazy need to be exactly like her mother, she could easily fall asleep with a dangling cigarette. And I realize that if anything happens to Helen, I'd feel responsible for giving them to her and walking out on her while she's smoking in bed.

And suddenly I'm torn between wanting to hurry back to make sure she's O.K. and wanting to go to Florida.

But I don't hurry back.

And it's not until I'm on the plane and we're 30,000 feet over North Carolina that I realize one other thing: I haven't smoked a cigarette since Dr. Britt warned me that I wasn't in the best of health.

So why did I buy that pack this morning?

You've heard of the Lady or the Tiger? Here we have the lady and a tiger . . . .

VICTIM OF CIRCUMSTANCES

by **Patrick O' Keeffe**

It was Ballard's first experience with a homicide, and while he occasionally reminds himself that not everyone would have condoned the undisclosed part he played in the case, he still feels that, right or wrong, he was only being human.

He was chief mate of the *Cuzco* when it all happened, a compassionate man of thirty with friendly brown eyes, of slender build, his tanned rugged face pleasing with a modest moustache and brief sideburns. The

Cuzco, a medium-tonnage freighter in the West Coast service to Central and South America, called northbound one voyage at the El Salvadoran port of Acajutla and loaded a caged tiger from a traveling show on the foredeck. Accompanying the tiger and its supply of raw meat was Thelma Sondern. Also embarking for San Diego was Dexter Kennert, in his late twenties; he came aboard wearing an outfit of pith helmet, khaki shirt and shorts, and bearing a hunting rifle. They were the only passengers on that leg of the voyage.

Early one morning when the ship was off the coast of Lower California, she almost shook to pieces before the engineer on watch reached the throttle and shut down the steam. The propeller had dropped off. There was no immediate danger, however; the light westerly wind and current would set the ship toward shore, but as soon as she reached soundings, she could be anchored. A seagoing tug was on its way down from San Diego.

Late that afternoon, Ballard put aside a true-crime magazine that the second mate had tossed into his cabin and went up to the fo'c'sle head to remove the stoppers from the massive anchor cables and test the windlass brakes. The *Cuzco* was drifting toward a lonely stretch of the coast with few signs of habitation. The wind had freshened, stirring up a choppy sea and giving the ship brief, jerky rolls.

When Ballard started back down the fo'c'sle ladder, he saw that Thelma Sondern had come out onto the deck and was standing beside the tiger's cage. She was talking soothingly to the tiger, but the great striped beast was responding with low, angry growls.

"Now now, Caesar," the young woman chided, "you've not been at all nice today." She had a pleasing oval face with smooth olive skin and wore large hoop-like gold earrings; she was neat in a khaki blouse and short denim skirt, her dark, shoulder-length hair tousled by the breeze. Ballard imagined how exotic she might look wearing spangles in the show ring.

She looked round as he came up beside her. "Caesar's in quite a nasty mood," she remarked.

"Maybe he's seasick," Ballard suggested amusedly.

She smiled. "Seriously, that may be his trouble. One night the ship taking us to Panama rocked something awful, and Caesar was in a wicked mood all night. Even dad couldn't get him quieted down. I'd hate to have had to put my head in his mouth that night."

"You mean you do that!" Ballard said, startled.

She smiled. "Dad's big spiel to bring in the crowd. 'See the beautiful young woman place her head between the jaws of the man-eating tiger fresh from the jungles of Bengal. Step right this way, ladies and gentlemen—'"

Ballard gazed at the huge cat lying with whiskered jowls sunk between its forepaws, its big yellow eyes fixed on him sullenly, and he felt glad for the steel bars of the old cage and the long pin bolting the door. "You've got more guts than I have."

She laughed. "Not guts, only confidence in Caesar's affection for me and faith in dad's mastery over him, which seems almost hypnotic. He can make Caesar perform as docilely as a dog in stunts with me, though he's far from being anything like a household pet. He really did come from India as a young tiger. Dad trained him."

"I heard you tell the captain that your father's a rather sick man," Ballard remarked sympathetically.

Her face clouded. "Stomach ulcers and heart trouble. He should never have come on this Central American tour with the rest of the show. I persuaded him to quit in San Salvador and fly to San Francisco for an operation. It was arranged for me and Caesar to go back by this ship. Dad decided to sell his interest in the show and retire. He's past seventy. He's spent all his life with traveling shows. Mother died several years ago. I finally talked dad into retiring and letting me look after him."

"What happens to Caesar? Will you keep him in the backyard on a leash?" Ballard asked, smiling.

She smiled back, shaking her head. "The neighbors might complain. No, dad's presenting him to a zoo, for my sake, so I'll be able to visit him. Berlinger's Circus would like to buy him, but I've become so attached to Caesar I couldn't bear to give him up altogether. To see him in his present mood, you wouldn't think so but he can be quite gentle with me—rolls over on his back to be petted and have his belly rubbed."

Ballard was enjoying his first long chat with Thelma Sondern, and didn't welcome the interruption by the other passenger. Kennert came strolling from the port passageway, rigged out in khaki, the pith helmet held on with a chin strap against the wind. His face had been burned almost black by what Ballard suspected was deliberate exposure to the

tropical sun; it was in sharp contrast with his pale-blue eyes and sandy hair. A small movie camera hung from his shoulder.

"Get any good shots?" Thelma Sondern asked pleasantly.

Kennert grimaced in disgust. "I expected there'd be some excitement after the propeller snapped off. Except for a few guys gaping over the back end of the ship, there's not been a single thing worth taking. And the captain says there's not the faintest danger of being blown ashore."

"Too bad," Ballard remarked drily. He found it hard to conceal his distaste for the man.

Kennert gave him a sour look. Thelma Sondern glanced anxiously toward the coastline.

"There really is no danger, is there?" she asked Ballard.

"None whatever," Ballard assured her. "We'll drop anchor after we've drifted a little farther in, then take life easy till the tug gets here."

She sighed thankfully. "It may sound silly, but if anything happened to Caesar, it would be one less reason for me to go on living."

"You'd soon get over it," Kennert said with disdain. The ship gave a sudden sharp roll that almost threw him off balance. The tiger growled. "Caesar sounds quite vicious today," Kennert went on. "Reminds me of a jaguar I shot near the Costa Rican border. Gave me quite a scare. I heard the growl and whirled about. The beast was about to spring. I got my rifle up just in time."

"You're sure it wasn't a stray goat?" Ballard said.

"The skin's in my trunk any time you wish to see it," Kennert replied stiffly. He gave Thelma Sondern a thin smile. "Droll fellows, these sailors." Gesturing toward the fo'c'sle, he asked Ballard, "Any objection to my taking a look around up the front end of the boat?"

"Be my guest. There's nothing but storerooms, but maybe you'll see a brig full of mutineers."

Kennert wandered forward, scowling. Thelma Sondern eyed Ballard curiously.

"You seem to have taken a dislike to Mr. Kennert."

"He's a phony. He claims to have spent three months in hunting and exploring unmapped regions of Central America. What he most likely did was go from one banana farm and coffee *finca* to another, freeloading. He's wearing what he calls his jungle rig. I've run across his

kind before. They write books about their thrilling adventures and go on lecture tours at fat fees, complete with films. Safe rivers swarm with alligators. Harmless snakes become deadly bushmasters. Poisoned arrows quiver in tree trunks as they pass. A man like Kennert would push his mother overboard to start some excitement he could write up. He's a hunter, all right—a glory hunter."

"He seems to have gotten under your skin."

"He annoyed me yesterday. He told me he'd like to take shots of me running up to the captain on the bridge as though I had something urgent to report. On his next lecture tour, he'd have had it that the ship was in danger of sinking, or the like. I wouldn't mind betting he'll have you staging something phony with him and his rifle and Caesar."

She frowned. "I think he knows I wouldn't permit anything like that."

Later that evening, when Ballard was writing up the rough log in the chartroom toward the end of his bridge watch, he heard the tiger growling at intervals down on the darkened foredeck. It was a black, moonless night, with only a stray light visible here and there along the shore. The captain came up the stairway from the officers' quarters to read the flashing red light on the Fathometer.

"We'll soon be in holding ground," he remarked. "I'm ordering steam on the windlass."

After the young third mate took over the bridge watch at eight o'clock, Ballard strolled along the boat deck to the little passenger lounge to wait until it was time to anchor. Thelma Sondern sat alone at one of the tables, chatting with the fat, middle-aged chief steward who tended the bar. Ballard slipped into a chair beside her, lighting a cigarette, and joined in the conversation.

Presently, the third mate rushed in breathlessly from the deck. "Miss Sondern, the captain wants you on the bridge right away! The tiger got loose!"

She started up in dismay. The third mate explained hurriedly to Ballard. "The tiger's growls didn't seem to be coming from the cage. I got the flashlight and looked. He was on the hatch. I ran into the chartroom to the captain. He told me to go down and close both passageway doors, then find Miss Sondern. Someone had beaten me to the passageway doors. Now I'm going around to tell all hands to stay away

from the foredeck. I told Mr. Kennert as I passed his stateroom."

Ballard caught up with Thelma Sondern along the deck on the way to the bridge. Kennert had already arrived there and was standing with the captain at the bridge rail and staring down at the foredeck. The cargo cluster lamps mounted on the mast at the crosstrees had been switched on, flooding the area with light. The tiger had leaped onto the hatch immediately under the bridge and stood switching its tail angrily, swaying to the light rolling. The cage door hung open, the long locking pin dangling loose on its chain.

"I must have forgotten to put it back in place after feeding Caesar," Thelma Sondern moaned.

"Miss Sondern," the captain demanded, "how long will it take to get your tiger back into the cage?"

She turned to him fretfully. "I'm not sure he'll obey me, especially in his present mood. It's my father he recognizes as his master. He might go back by himself in a while."

The captain's face tightened. Captain Swain was a portly man with an unkempt black moustache and a brusque manner. "At any other time, I could have waited—all night, for that matter, there being no crew quarters up forward, nor a lookout on the fo'c'sle head. But I've got to drop anchor soon, and the only way to reach it is along the foredeck. If you can't get your tiger back into the cage, I'll have to order him shot."

Thelma Sondern gasped. Ballard cynically reflected that there was little doubt who would be called upon to do the shooting. Kennert had obviously rushed to the bridge uninvited on hearing that the tiger was loose. Perhaps he had already offered to get his rifle.

"Cap'n," Ballard suggested, "we could put a boat over and pull up alongside the fo'c'sle head. Throw up a rope to the rails and climb it."

"Too risky. The tiger might jump onto the fo'c'sle head." The captain turned back to Thelma Sondern. "There's no alternative left to me if you can't cage your tiger. You'll be compensated for the loss. The tiger'll be sacrificed to save ship and cargo and will come under General Average Rules for all parties to share in the loss."

"Please give me time," Thelma Sondern pleaded desperately. "I'll try to master Caesar."

She hastened down the bridge ladder. Ballard looked at the captain. "She might need someone to give her a hand with the passageway

door," he said.

"All right. But stay away from the tiger. He might not attack her but he could go for you."

Ballard overtook Thelma Sondern down in the port passageway as she was entering her stateroom. She took a whip and a .38-caliber revolver from a trunk and hurriedly loaded the gun. "Four are blanks. And always put in two live cartridges as a precaution. I've gone through these preparations lots of times, but I've never used them on Caesar," she fretted. "I'm praying I'll succeed. I might go berserk if Caesar is killed," she added ominously.

Ballard went ahead of her and crossed to the other passageway, so that by going out on that side, she would have the tiger between her and the cage. Ballard opened the heavy wooden door, and as she stepped over the high sill, he said, "Good luck!"

He remained by the door, holding it open, not knowing what to expect, but ready to slam it shut behind her if she came running back to safety. From above him came the excited voices of crew members watching at the boat-deck rails.

Thelma Sondern approached the hatch cautiously. The tiger, following her with its big yellow eyes, growled. She cracked the whip. "Back to your cage, Caesar."

The tiger ignored her. She fired a blank. The tiger snarled. She cracked the whip again, with no effect on the tiger. She moved closer and brought the lash down on the tarpaulin cover of the hatch almost at the tiger's front paws. The tiger snarled again, baring its great teeth. She fired another blank. The tiger lowered its huge head and seemed about to slink toward the cage. Thelma Sondern cracked the whip once more, following it with two more blanks in quick succession. The tiger raised its head again in a defiant snarl.

Thelma Sondern waved up to the bridge in hopeless failure and then returned to Ballard. "Caesar knows me," she said in despair, "but it's my father's manner and voice that cows him into obedience. Dad would have flicked Caesar's nose with the whip. I didn't dare."

Ballard slammed the door shut, making sure that it was latched, and followed her to her stateroom. She laid the gun and the whip on the bed and sank into a chair. "I couldn't go back to the bridge," she moaned. "I couldn't bear to watch."

Ballard nodded sympathetically and pulled the door to, relieved to

note that the impending destruction of her Caesar wasn't driving her anywhere near berserk. He started back to the bridge, but before he reached it, he heard a shot. Kennert had evidently lost no time in running below for his rifle. Four more shots had sounded by the time Ballard mounted the bridge ladder. Kennert was standing with his bolt-action rifle beside the captain, staring down at the foredeck.

"Another stray goat," Kennert gibed. "You can thank me for saving ship and cargo."

Ballard presently went along to the fo'c'sle head with the carpenter and let go first one anchor and then the other in response to shouts from the bridge. The twin, not-under-command red lights were hauled down and the single white anchor light raised. The cluster lamps were switched off. On his way back amidships, Ballard shone his flashlight on the dead and bloodied tiger, lying on the hatch. Even at short range, Kennert had been unable to kill it with fewer than five shots. Ballard felt a deep sorrow for Thelma Sondern.

He paused at her stateroom door and knocked. She was now lying on the settee, but she sat up as he opened the door.

"I stopped to say how very sorry I am," he said.

"Thank you, Mr. Ballard." She sighed disconsolately. "I'll never forgive myself for forgetting to bolt the cage door. It's never happened before. I've been trying to think what could have made me so careless this evening."

"Kennert got his glory without having to scheme for it," Ballard said. "He's already boasting he saved ship and cargo. I'd rather have seen you do it with your gun."

"I couldn't have done that to Caesar," she said heavily. "I left it to Mr. Kennert, and I'm not begrudging whatever satisfaction he's getting from it." She paused. "What will be done with Caesar?"

"I've been thinking about that. Caesar's life was sacrificed to safeguard human life, and I feel he's entitled to a decent burial, not heaved overboard like a dead mule. I'll suggest to Captain Swain that Caesar be wrapped in canvas and given a traditional sea burial. I'm pretty sure he'll go along with the idea."

She sighed gratefully. "I could bear watching that. It would be a last memory of Caesar I could cherish."

Ballard went up to his cabin and dropped pensively into the swivel chair before his desk. He stared unseeingly past his wife's framed

photograph at a ship-chandler's advertising calendar thumbtacked to the bulkhead, pondering over Thelma Sondern's remarks about forgetting to bolt the cage door. It had never happened before. She was trying to think what could have made her so careless this evening. Perhaps she hadn't forgotten. If not, then someone must have removed the pin. The thought moved Ballard to dark suspicion. Only one man would have reason to let the tiger loose. Maybe Kennert hadn't gotten his moment of glory without scheming for it after all. He could have been the man who beat the third mate to closing the passageway doors, thereby confining the tiger to the foredeck, where it would have to be shot to provide safe access to the anchors.

Ballard jerked upright in the chair to what sounded like a distant gunshot. He sat listening, in doubt. Then came running footsteps on the stairs up from the passenger quarters and into the captain's cabin next door, ending with the chief steward's voice gasping, "Miss Sondern just shot Mr. Kennert in her stateroom!"

Ballard dashed out just as the chief steward and the captain rushed from the captain's cabin. Ballard led the way down to Thelma Sondern's stateroom. The door was open, swinging free. Thelma Sondern sagged limply in a chair. Kennert lay flat on his back, his khaki shirtfront stained red. The whip was still lying on the bed, but the revolver now was clutched in Thelma Sondern's hand, which hung at her side.

Captain Swain immediately knelt to examine Kennert. Ballard hooked back the door. He looked at Thelma Sondern blankly. "What happened?"

She looked back at him with distraught eyes. "He knocked and came in—started to say he was sorry about Caesar." Her voice trembled. "I was holding the revolver—about to unload it. The ship suddenly lurched. I—I stumbled against him. The gun discharged."

The captain stood up. "He's dead," he said gravely. He looked at Thelma Sondern. "I thought your gun only fired blanks."

"No, live cartridges too," she moaned. "There were two left in it."

"Miss Sondern, I'll log the shooting as an accident, in accordance with your statement. However, there'll be an official inquiry as soon as we arrive in port." His manner turned sympathetic. "It may delay you on board a while. Not too long, I hope, but have that in mind if you make any travel arrangements."

The captain then instructed the chief steward to have Miss Sondern and her belongings transferred to another stateroom. Sending to the bridge for the standby sailor to aid them, Captain Swain and Ballard carried Kennert's body down to an empty cold-storage locker, to be kept for the inquiry and an autopsy. When they returned together to their cabins later, Captain Swain called Ballard into his cabin.

"I suppose the shooting really was accidental," he said, pursing his lips dubiously. "But I'm wondering if she may have shot him over tiger . . ."

Ballard shook his head decisively. "You're the one she'd have been most likely to shoot, seeing that it was you who ordered the tiger killed. For the log when you write it up, I spoke to her in her stateroom right after the killing. She showed no anger, only deep loss. She actually said she didn't begrudge Kennert any satisfaction he got from the shooting."

"Something might have come up to make her want to shoot him."

"It would have had to be something other than the shooting of the tiger . . ."

Alone in his cabin, however, Ballard was uneasy with doubt. There *was* something that could have come up to turn Thelma Sondern vengefully against Kennert in the brief interval that elapsed between the time he left her and the time Kennert came to her stateroom. She may have convinced herself beyond all doubt that she hadn't left the cage door unfastened, and then arrived at the same dark suspicion that he had. That might have been enough to send her berserk, as she had feared. If that was so, then he himself was not entirely blameless. The thought left Ballard with a feeling of guilt.

During the slow haul up to San Diego, Thelma Sondern virtually went into seclusion. She seldom left her stateroom other than for meals in the saloon, and during them she spoke but little and did not linger when she had finished. Captain Swain and the officers avoided any mention of Kennert when she was present.

Ballard was watching for an opportunity to engage her in conversation alone, and saw one when he came across her sitting out on deck in a steamer chair one afternoon. He stopped and sat on the footrest.

"Any word about your father?" he asked kindly.

She shook her head drearily. "I just stopped off at the radio room. I

was hoping for news of him by now. I'm awfully worried. I'll be relieved when I can go to his side."

"We'll arrive early tomorrow morning. The inquiry shouldn't take long. Then you'll be free to catch the first plane to San Francisco." Ballard paused. "Captain Swain might have caused the inquiry to take longer. He was inclined to think at first that you might have shot Kennert because he killed Caesar. I set him right on that. He thought you might have suddenly turned against Kennert for some strong reason or other."

Ballard looked at her, hoping for some assurance to the contrary. She turned her head away, toward the tug at the end of the long towline, and was silent.

"I can think of only one thing that could possibly have arisen," he said quietly.

Her head swung back to him in sharp query, her hoop-like earrings swaying.

"You remembered you didn't neglect to put the pin in, and that had only one meaning for you," he suggested.

She held her breath for a tense moment. "You suspect the truth?"

He nodded.

An expression of bitter despair spread over her face. She gazed bleakly across the grey sea. "You've been most kind and sympathetic to me about Caesar, about my father, about trying to spare Caesar and getting him a sea burial. I hated to deceive you, but now—"

She paused, as if not knowing how to begin. "But now that you suspect the truth, it's hopeless for me to try to conceal it further. You are right. I did become positive that I'd fastened the cage door. I recalled that after I'd fed Caesar, the ship gave a little roll, and I grasped a cage-door bar to keep my balance. If the pin hadn't been in place, the door would have swung open under my weight. From what you'd said to me about Kennert, I had little doubt who'd removed it."

Her eyes flashed. "I was enraged enough to have shot him right then and there, but by the time he came to my stateroom, I'd simmered down. When he started saying how sorry he was about Caesar, I waited for him to finish so I could denounce him as a lying hyprocrite, but before I could speak, he said he intended to claim Caesar's skin as his trophy and have it made into a rug."

Her eyes blazed again. "The mere thought of Caesar's skin becoming

a mat for that monster's feet drove me into a blind fury. I didn't stop to ask myself whether he'd have the right to make that claim. I snatched up the revolver from the bed and shot him."

She sat in silence for several moments.

"I was horrified by what I'd done. I stood staring down at Kennert. The chief steward came to the doorway, then dashed off. I knew he'd gone to get the captain. That gave me time to collect myself. I could think only of what would become of my father now. I was frantic for the moment. The hope of passing it off as an accident came to me and I seized upon it."

She gazed at Ballard in mute appeal for understanding.

"I've brooded over it since, asking myself whether I'm justified in concealing the truth. For myself, I wouldn't care, but when I think of my father—" Anguish showed in her eyes. "I feel I'm a victim of circumstances. If Kennert hadn't been on board, if he hadn't come to my stateroom at that critical moment with his monstrous claim, if the revolver hadn't been at hand—"

"And if I hadn't told you that Kennert might stage some stunt with Caesar—" Ballard broke in angrily.

"No, please," she begged. "The blame is entirely mine. I lost control of myself."

"A saint wouldn't have been able to control himself under that provocation," Ballard fumed. "I'd have felt like shooting him myself. Kennert brought on his own death. I'd hate to have to see you suffer because of that cheap glory hunter."

"There's no way of avoiding it now," she said bleakly.

Ballard was suddenly swept with pity and a sense of guilt. "Nothing's changed because of me," he said gently. "I got you into this and I'm not going to say or do anything that will keep you from getting out of it."

She eyed him anxiously. "But if it ever became known that you—"

"Who's going to tell about it?" he asked, and when she didn't answer, he said, "Just stop brooding and everything will be fine."

Inwardly, however, Ballard was far from being optimistic. He had read enough crime stories in newspapers and crime magazines to know that if Thelma Sondern had stumbled against Kennert with the gun, there would be visible traces of powder burns on his shirt. She had fired at a distance, and hence there weren't likely to be any. The FBI

agents who came aboard to conduct the inquiry would scarcely fail to notice the absence of them.

Pacing the bridge during his usual watch, Ballard worried over the problem. By the time the third mate relieved him for supper at five o'clock, he had made up his mind what he must do. He decided not to confide in Thelma Sondern; she had enough on her mind.

First making sure that she was already in the saloon at supper, he hurried along to her stateroom. Revolver and cartridges lay just inside the trunk. With the gun hidden under his shirt, he hastened below to the cold-storage locker and, closing the heavily insulated door, he fired a blank into the exact spot on the dead man's shirt. He then returned to the stateroom, replaced the revolver inside the trunk, and went inside for supper.

There are many things besides the obvious that can be colored to suit our needs . . .

TINTING BASE

by **BRUCE M. FISHER**

I should have known, of course.

I should have known when Claire consistently chose that exciting pale-green dress to visit Mrs. Truffles; when I'd never met the woman, nor knew her address, nor could find her name in the telephone directory; when Claire didn't get home until the small hours—in this instance 12:17 A.M.—after promising faithfully that she'd be home at nine in the evening.

You may remember the case from the papers; but it's not particularly likely with murder so common these days and the doings of a small town, population 14,000, being of little general interest. Our local paper, the *Ashburg Chronicle*, worked it to a froth without ever knowing the truth of the matter.

I am, I will admit, of a pudgy build, and balding, with eyes close-set and eyebrows meeting darkly. However, the *Chronicle*'s vicious adjectives demand some retaliation. Prejudice and sensationalism should never eclipse the truth. So if this is ever published, I will send its editor a bright new copy of the magazine, incognito, with a cutting phrase in red ink to whittle him down to size.

And others might read it—Ashburg is keen on mystery magazines—and though the similarity in the stories will strike them as only coincidental, it will give them a side of the story the newspaper never did.

When Claire finally did get home that night, she listened to my chidings and smiled, as sweet and innocent as an angel.

"What's the use," I growled. "Sit down and let's decide for the last time what color to paint this house."

It's a big old farmhouse we bought cheaply some years ago for its privacy, low taxes, and reasonable handiness to Ashburg. Neighbors are few and elderly on the gravel road which, winding between forested hills, joins the main road to town just over the creek bridge.

Well, Claire maintained, the original white with green trim was too old-fashioned and wanted something more lenient, like buff with blue trim. I conceded the buff but thought maroon trim would be more striking.

"Eleven gallons should do it," I said. "Nine for the siding and two for the trim. I wonder what house paint costs now."

"Whatever it is, let's pay it," she said. "It will be a long time before we paint again."

She was right there. I don't throw money around loosely. "I was thinking of buying it from David," I said.

"David Wambold?" Her eyebrows shot up. "But he's in hardware."

"He sells paint too. And I've been wanting to see him."

The next day I tried a few shops which sold paints and wallpapers exclusively, but their exorbitant prices and my old friendship with

David Wambold eventually drove me to his hardware store on Columbine Row.

He was wearing a white smock and talking to Miss Warren, his sole clerk, a pleasant broad-hipped brunette. I smiled, thinking how much this man owed me, though he didn't realize it. An old schoolmate, he had been best man at my wedding. A mighty poor figure he cut there, shaking with nervousness when he handed me the ring to slip on Claire's finger. He'd always had a shy and wilted look. But I had made him.

I made him the day he came into Truft's—men's clothing, the best in town—wanting to buy a new suit. Something conservative, he said.

Practice teaches a short man like me to give the haughty and pitying stare. With his dark good looks and angular build, something conservative would make him look like a parson or an undertaker. Nor would gay colors do him justice. His pale-blue pinstripe was evidence of that. "Conservative, yes," I said. "A brown will do nicely. In tweed. But brown tweed with daring. A hint of red will do it."

He was hard to convince. I showed him suits. I showed him swatches, flourishing the piece that would lend him the most dash and vitality. He shuddered and edged toward the door. I waved him back. "Anything else," I proclaimed, "is mere haberdashery. If this doesn't make you the envy of Columbine Row, I'll pay for it myself."

He ordered the suit. And here he was, master now of his own store, a successful businessman. Which proves that very few men know how to clothe themselves. They need expert advice.

It was for this reason I was fond of David Wambold.

I strode forward with my hand outstretched. "David!"

He straightened abruptly. "Jim! What brings you here?"

"Paint," I said. "Good Lord, David! It's ages since you've been out to the house. Why don't you visit us any more?"

"Business. It keeps me hopping. How's Claire?"

"Just fine. But you must come out again soon. You're always welcome." I smiled again.

Before I sold David that suit, he was as insipid as watered tea. But after he bought it women could hardly take their eyes off him. Even Claire had noticed the rugged, debonair effect and shoved her friend, Gladys Winkler, at him. Then she shoved a couple of others. But nothing ever came of it.

"What color paint do you have in mind?" David asked.

"Buff. Claire's tired of white."

He led me to a wall stacked with hundreds of gallons of paint and presented me with a monstrous catalogue. "Take your pick."

Pick? With over two thousand colors to choose from? With each sample only half an inch wide by one inch long? With almost five hundred shades of buff alone? Had things changed that much since the light, medium, and dark of my father's day?

"Look," I said. "I only came in for nine gallons of buff paint and two gallons of maroon trim."

"So pick it out and I'll mix it."

"Mix it?"

"Yes." He frowned. "When did you last buy paint, Jim?"

"This is my first time."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Nevertheless, it's the truth."

"Hmmm. Well, each color has a different formula, as you'll notice beneath the samples, and must be blended exactly."

"Oh." I turned huge pages back and forth, reacting in confusion to buffs that ranged from deep cream to near orange, until, feeling his eyes upon me and driven by desperation, I jabbed my finger down. "This, I guess." It looked like buff under the store lights. But they all did.

He marked letters and numerals on a notepad and pried the lid from a one-gallon can of dead-white paint.

I said, "Hey, that can's not full."

"It has to be that way," he said. "To leave room for the pigments."

He placed the can under a calibrated glass tube on the pigment dispenser. He had every color of the rainbow, condensed and rich, in the dozen or more cylinders that ringed the machine.

He grabbed a knob, partially filling the glass tube with yellow pigment, and pressed a tiny lever, shooting the yellow into the white. Consulting the notepad, he swung the cylinders and shot in a couple of other colors. Then, tapping the lid onto the can with a rubber hammer and clamping it between the circular jaws of the agitator, he flicked a switch.

Talk about robotic animation! The can whipped over and over at a tremendous rate, its ends flashing, its label blurred by the ferocious

movement of that little metal monster. I began to feel dizzy and looked at the wall instead, which was easier on the eyes. A calendar hung there, showing a bikini-clad girl lying on a sandy beach under a blue sky. I studied it until David, having mixed two gallons, asked me what I thought of the paint.

I looked. "Canary yellow!" I gasped. "You must have made a mistake!"

"It's the color you chose," he said stiffly.

"Well, I don't want it." I pointed at the calendar's sandy beach and to a like hue in the catalogue. "That's the color I want."

He bit his lip, then mixed nine gallons that matched the shade. "And two gallons of maroon trim?" he asked.

"First," I said, "I want my money back on those two gallons of yellow paint you mixed earlier."

"Your money back? You haven't paid me anything yet. But if you had—no, I'm sorry, Jim, I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because it's blended to order."

"No, it wasn't. Sell it to someone else."

"Nobody else'd want it, even at a reduced price. No, you ordered it; it's your loss."

"Damned if it is!" I thought a minute. "Tell you what. If you can convert those two gallons of yellow horror into maroon trim, that will settle the problem."

"Impossible!"

"Nothing's impossible."

"This is. That yellow paint was mixed on a white base. If you had specified a neutral base, I could do it. But not on a white tinting base. It can't be done."

I laughed. "My God, David, you've got enough different colors in that dispenser to make it any color you want. Don't be stubborn."

"I'm not being stubborn!" His handsome face hardened, then his lips twitched wryly. "All right," he said. "What color should we add first to turn yellow into maroon?"

"*I* don't know. You're the paint-mixer."

"But I can only mix according to a specific formula. My responsibility ends there."

"Does it?"

"Yes, it does." He lowered his voice. "Jim, did you come here to make trouble?"

"Trouble?" I stared at him. "With my oldest friend? For Pete's sake, David!"

"You came just for paint?"

"I came just for paint."

"I wish you'd go elsewhere for your maroon trim. Though I can mix it here. On a neutral base."

"And leave me paying for two gallons of yellow paint I'll never use? Not on your life!"

He shook his head with the weary resignation of a doctor with an impossible patient, and placed a gallon of the canary yellow on the pigment dispenser. "So tell me what color will make it maroon."

That was more like it. I studied the dispenser carefully. Red, I felt, was a step in the right direction. Yes, but which one? The fast red or the oxide? Oxide sounded like a more cutting color. "Give her a shot of that," I said, pointing.

"How big a shot, Jim? These pigments are quite potent."

"Well," I said, "a fair shot. You know more about it than I do. Or you should."

He stepped forward, drew violent red paint up into the glass tube. "Say when."

Fascinated, I watched red creep to the halfway mark. "Now!"

It shot into the can like a bullet, disappeared into the yellow with only a smear of the last drop showing. David tapped the lid on, placed the can in the agitator, and flicked the switch. I strolled down an aisle, examined electric sanders, and returned when the machine stopped.

As the simplest child knows, when you mix red and yellow you get orange. I expected orange, was set for orange, burnt-orange more than likely but not necessarily. What I got was an unhealthy, dirty salmon-pink. "It needs darkening," I said.

"With what? Black or charcoal?"

"Neither. Green is the darkening agent for red. I know that much. Give her a shot of green."

"How big a shot?"

"Use your own judgment."

It was a three-pronged mistake. Green might have done wonders for straight red but it had a horrible effect on dirty pink; it filled the can to

overflowing and gave David an excuse to say, "I guess we'll have to quit. There's no room for more."

"Dump some out, then." There being no empty cans handy, I snatched a plastic pail from a nearby shelf. "Put it on my bill," I said magnanimously.

"I will."

"That green should have been a smidgeon more bluish but—"

"Blue, a smidgeon." He performed the operation.

"I hope you're keeping track of what colors we put in," I said anxiously. "So we can duplicate the second gallon."

"Oh, I'm keeping track all right," he answered, scribbling two columns of figures on the notepad, one with initials alongside, the other carrying decimal points. "Jim, do you honestly expect to kill that white tinting base and make maroon out of this?"

"Yes," I said doggedly. "Maroon or bust!"

Abruptly, he laughed. He laughed jovially, heartily, long and loud; caught his breath and laughed some more. The store rang with his laughter. Miss Warren and two customers smiled at his merriment.

I suddenly realized that I did not like David Wambold, that I had never liked him—not as a schoolmate, young man, best man, or mixer of paint.

Did I show my displeasure? No, I laughed with him, clapped him on the back, and wiped tears of mirth from my eyes to save my self-respect. "Black," I choked. "Try black."

While he tried it, I sauntered toward the screwdrivers. I picked up a long thin slot type to replace the last one Claire had broken but, after twirling it experimentally, I laid it down again.

"It's closing time," David said when I returned.

"Time for one more shot," I urged. "Everything about this paint has gone contrary to my expectation, so let me try a contrary color. Slam in some of that rich orange."

"Right." He shrugged and waved to Miss Warren as she left.

In went rich orange. Off I went, past saws and chisels to hammers. Not liking the steel-shanked sort, I hefted a bell-faced claw hammer with a hickory handle. Superb balance. A high-grade tempered tool. Expensive, but my own cheap hammer had mushroomed badly and . . .

"No use, I'm afraid," David called buoyantly.

"None?" Did he have to tell me in that haughty, hawk-nosed tone, his contempt and insolence so thinly veiled?

"Take a look."

It was a color never before seen on this earth, a kind of pale pearly purple with a diseased greyish cast. It looked as if it might glow in the dark. Repressing a shudder of abhorrence, I managed to smile. "Well," I said, "I guess it will do for an undercoat on the more weathered shingles."

He looked down, a head taller than me. "*Now* shall I mix two gallons of maroon trim on a neutral base?"

"Please do."

He did. I asked him to make out my bill. He arranged the thirteen cans on the floor, wiped his hands, and got busy. "Don't forget the bucket," I said.

"I won't. Did you want that hammer too?"

I'd forgotten I was holding it. "I'm not sure. It's pretty expensive. Finish the paint bill while I decide."

He gave me a sharp look but continued jotting. Holding the hammer like a pistol, I sighted between the claws at that can of obscene paint. Its sides were plastered with spillover. It was what you might call a *crawling* color, hideous, suggesting putrefaction—a disturbing color which, once perceived, gripped you with its hypnotic sheen. My irritation grew to smoldering anger. I wanted to bash that can to pieces so badly that the hammer shook in my hand.

"That comes to $203.35, tax included," David said.

"What!" That awful paint seemed to darken, turn liverish before my eyes. "How much are you charging a gallon?"

"$12.95 for this quality. Thirteen gallons makes $168.35."

"So where do you get $203.35?" Like liver going bad, the paint assumed a revolting greenish cast.

"I have to charge for labor over and above the prescribed formula. And for loss of time."

"Oh, naturally!"

"That's ten dollars. Then there's the extra pigments I put in at your demand. That stuff is very expensive."

"Oh, sure." Weird colors began to form and swirl on the side of the can, milkily, with a peculiar elliptical sideways motion, faster and faster, rapidly changing, like dead fish oil on wavering water.

"I will not take that loss."

"And neither, by God, will I!" I cried, turning on him, goaded beyond endurance by one I'd once thought a friend. The hammer came down with force enough to drive a railroad spike.

The shop was suddenly quiet, still as a mausoleum. I looked around wonderingly.

The paint, I was relieved to see, was a dull purplish-grey color, nothing more. David lay ten feet away between counters of putty knives and paint brushes.

After six, Columbine Row was deserted, everyone gone home to supper. Nothing could be seen from a passing car. I worked swiftly, though. Donning gloves from the gardening section, I wiped the hammer clean and replaced it on the shelf. Then I grabbed a wrecking bar . . .

When I drove from town with the paint in the trunk of my car and the back seat crammed with electric hand tools, David's receipt book was in order, his money—including my $203.35—intact in the locked but half-jimmied till. In my wallet I had a receipt stamped PAID with his official stamp. The front door was locked, as if by David, but this was necessary to postpone discovery of his body. The ruined back door would tell how thieves had entered, and how David had returned through the delivery alley to check on the premises to find amateurish, excitable thieves who, having killed him to silence him, had fled.

I stopped at the creek bridge and got out as if to admire the view. Seeing no one, I heaved electric hand drills, routers, and sanders into the deep water made so murky now by housing developers near town. I weighted the gloves with pebbles and watched them sink. None of them would ever be found, nor the thieves apprehended.

It was good to get home. I spent a very happy evening with Claire.

But next day, at noon, the police arrested me for the murder of David Wambold. It was incredible. How could they possibly have known? And so soon?

Miss Warren, they told me at headquarters, had seen us in the highest good humor on her departure last evening. She also said that David had received a telephone call yesterday morning which seemed to be of a disquieting nature.

They were glad, they said, that I had tried to make robbery appear the motive, because, noting empty spaces on David's shelves, they had gone directly to the creek bridge and retrieved several electric hand tools from the murky water. Which was the only place between town and home where I could have ditched them quickly.

"But why me?" I cried. "What possible motive could I have?"

They told me. In a cold grey room where the overhead light tinged faintly purple, they told me.

They had been expecting it. The entire town of Ashburg had known about Claire and David for months, had waited breathlessly, wondering what would happen when I eventually found out.

And it had happened—in reverse order.

Needless to say, I was stunned. But I was glad I'd killed him. It showed people that I was no man to trifle with.

Then I decided to do some tinting of my own. "Pretty damn neat," I said to the desk sergeant. "And I'll probably get twenty years for it."

"Maybe only ten," he answered. "There were extenuating circumstances."

"I'd gladly serve every minute of it, if I knew who set me up."

"Set you up!" His boots hit the floor. "Don't try to give me that."

"I'm not giving you anything. If you had the brains of a button, you'd know how women looked at David. Why, I'll bet that there are over forty jealous husbands in this town jumping with joy right now."

"Yeah? Name one!"

"Well, how about yourself, Sergeant? You work the night shift sometimes, don't you? I've met your wife. She's a lovely, charming woman, much younger than you, with no children to hinder—"

"Now look here!" His beefy face flamed red. His knuckles were ivory-white, his eyes an unclouded Prussian-blue.

I spread my hands. "David was a handsome man."

The lieutenant joined us. The sergeant took him aside and whispered angrily. The lieutenant laughed heartily.

I studied him over the tips of my fingers with a gaze prolonged and questioning. His laughter died; doubt flickered over his lean brown face; a look of inward recall puzzled his grey eyes.

I shook my head. "No, it's not you either."

"You bet it's not, mister! Norma would never—" He jabbed a bony forefinger in my face. "We know you did it! We've got proof!"

I frowned thoughtfully. "With so many pretty women in this town, it could be any husband. Not necessarily a regular traveler of that main road but definitely one who knew I was shopping at David's yesterday. The question is who."

"Oh, come off it!" the lieutenant snapped. "If somebody else did kill David, why did he steal electric tools and dump them off *that* bridge?"

"Because the murderer wanted to implicate me."

"But why would he want to incriminate you in particular?"

"Well, for one thing, it seems that everybody has been gossiping about Claire and David."

"And for another?"

I bowed my head and held my breath until my face reddened with the strain, then I looked up slowly, wretchedly. "Let's face it, lieutenant. I'm not liked. You don't like me, the sergeant doesn't like me. Nobody likes me. It may be that I am a little—stuffy. But there it is. Can you deny it?"

They were silent. And still seething.

I said, "I didn't know about Claire and David until you told me. But somebody else doubted his own wife's fidelity and saw a chance to square a debt of honor by taking advantage of this town's dislike of me."

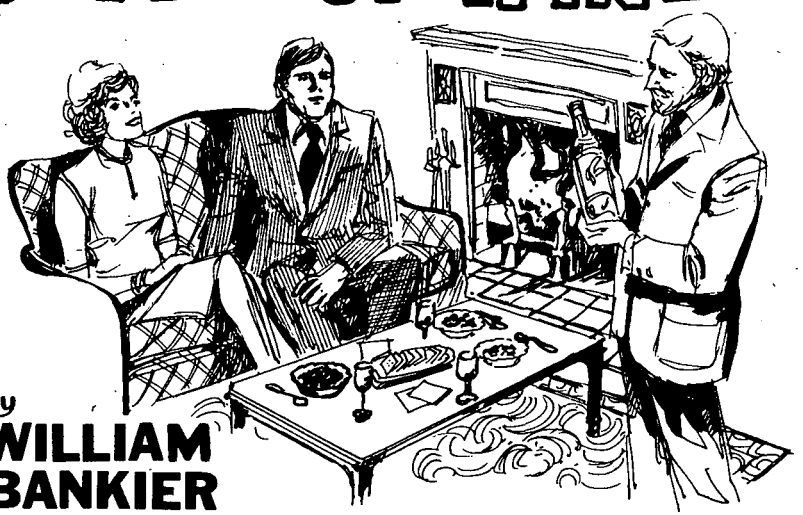
They hadn't thought of that angle. No one had. At the trial, my attorney, D. B. Griswold, rode it to the roof. Hardly anyone looked at me. Under Griswold's sway, they were too busy looking at each other with furtive, searching eyes.

That decided the jury more than anything else. The case against me was dropped for lack of sufficient evidence. Claire was pale and silent on the way home.

These days it only takes a drop of sentiment or doubt to color any issue to a totally different hue.

Dickens also believed in confiding in untried friends . . .

A LOVELY BOTTLE OF WINE



by
WILLIAM BANKIER

A tourist expects to be surprised. An old friend may appear beside you on the main street of a foreign city. Or a row of low buildings facing a park may suddenly remind you of the town in which you were born. But I must admit I never expected to be told, casually in the city of Oxford, of a murder that had taken place years previously in upper New York State—a crime solved but never prosecuted because of the detecting officer's sense of civilized justice.

My wife and I were spending two days in the university city, walking about beneath the grey spires, visiting the Ashmolean Museum, punting on the river amid a flotilla of swans.

At seven o'clock on our first evening, Celia and I walked a few doors down the street from our hotel to have dinner at a restaurant called The Groaning Board. I had taken the trouble to telephone ahead, and a good thing too. The place was obviously popular with the academic community. Our table was going to be a half hour late so we accepted the calm apology of the maitre d' and sat down in the lounge to drink an aperitif.

Celia sipped her vermouth and said, "He sounded like an American, the maitre d'."

"I don't want to know," I said, concentrating on my pint of bitter, reminding myself I was in England.

Some minutes later I was aroused by the sight of a bald-headed man at the front of the lounge. Clearly disappointed, he stood fists on hips. He turned first to this side and then to that. He sighed and I began to feel that tears would follow.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lonergan," the maitre d' said, "but you did tell me you were going up to London this weekend. Otherwise I could have . . ."

"I know. My plans changed, I'm not blaming you."

At that moment a waiter signaled and the maitre d' turned to me. "Mr. Hasty, your table is ready."

"Perhaps if there's room," I said, "and if this gentleman wouldn't mind sharing . . ."

His face screwed itself into a magnificent grin. "Well now, that is very civil of you, I must say."

That was how we came to meet Loman Lonergan and to hear a most unusual story. It may even be true, or perhaps the telling of it was his way of repaying my impulsive hospitality.

Our meal consisted of a very tasty potage parmentier followed by veal piccata with some exquisite braised celery. On the wine list I discovered an old friend, Bertani Soave, which went down very well indeed.

As we began to eat I said, "Mr. Lonergan, your turn of phrase is English but I'd swear your voice is that of an American."

"Quite correct. I've been retired over here for a few years. Origi-

nally I'm from upper New York State."

"Lovely country. We drove through the Finger Lakes district one summer. Stayed at a place on Lake Cayuga."

"Then you weren't far from my old territory. I spent most of my life in Hammondsport."

"Where the Aviation Museum is," Celia said. "Those creaky old airplanes; how did the pilots ever summon up the nerve?"

I said, "They make some good wine there too. We toured one of the wineries."

At this remark our guest's lips came together in a thoughtful pout and his eyes took on such a faraway look that I found myself turning my head to follow his gaze.

"Yes," he said, "there were some fine wine makers there."

I waited for him to go on but the light faded from his face and he turned back to his food.

"Is anything wrong?"

"No. It's just that I haven't thought of that whole business in years."

I assumed that he meant the wine business and said no more.

Later, as we pondered our choice of dessert, Lonergan's good spirits returned and he suggested we go to his place for the final course. The walk would refurbish our appetites, and he had a large bowl of freshly picked raspberries and a pitcher of Devon cream.

The American expatriate's flat was about fifteen minutes away and we arrived with our lungs full of cool evening air. It was not a large apartment, but was comfortably furnished and outfitted with many shelves of books. There were small lamps in convenient places and a number of surfaces upon which a man could rest his feet.

We were delighted when our host opened a window and then struck a match to some paper and wood in the fireplace. "This is one of the nice things about England. Even in August you can let in the night breeze and then balance it with a small blaze."

Celia and I sat on a love seat close to the fire while Lonergan rattled about in an adjoining room. From it he carried three bowls of raspberries swimming in thick cream, a crumbly wedge of Cheshire cheese, and assorted crackers. Then he disappeared again, we heard a resounding pop, and he was back with a tall green bottle.

As he poured wine into three sparkling crystal glasses, he said, "This is Gewurztraminer, very light but with a little more bouquet than

your Soave. It should go well with the fruit and cheese."

He lit a candle then, extinguishing the electric lamp and leaving the room to the magical effect of flame and shadow. We sipped our wine and talked easily of whatever came to mind.

He said at first that he had no particular reason for leaving home. He had simply visited England and decided, as he suspected we might do someday, that he had found a good place to live. "Then a day came in my working life when I knew it was time to make the move."

It was late but I felt no inclination to leave that comfortable room, nor did Loman Lonergan offer us any incentive. Instead, he put another log on the fire. Then he inserted a cassette into a stereo unit beside his easy chair and the sound of Brahms' First Symphony flowed softly from speakers somewhere in the darkness above our heads.

Watching reflections from the candle flame, I felt impelled to say, "That wine bottle is a thing of beauty. Never mind the delicious stuff we're drinking from it. Just look at its shape, the dark green glass, the colors on the label. Look at the shadow it throws. I do think the visual sensation a bottle conveys is part of the pleasure of drinking wine."

Lonergan was looking at me with the hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth. "Simpatico," he said. "Extremely simpatico. If you can say something like that, then why can't I tell you what's on my mind?"

"What is it?"

"Something that happened fifteen years ago. It's the reason why I left Hammondsport. Why I retired early. And I've never told the story to a living soul."

The story went like this.

Lonergan had been an inspector on the Hammondsport Police Force. Life was routine, with the usual quota of deaths on the highway, robberies in the commercial district, and the occasional brawl in a bar.

Then the Sydney Peel episode took place.

"Peel was brought in as manager of the Clayton Winery, one of the oldest companies and one of the best. Much of their success began with the arrival of old Karl Walther who came from the Rhine Valley to show them how to make wine. When he died, his son Max took over. The boy inherited his father's love of grapes and the mystique of fermentation and aging. You just knew that as long as Max Walther was

there, the Clayton plant was going to produce good wines.

"When Syd Peel arrived it must have been difficult for young Max. Peel was a Harvard Business School graduate and all he saw was the balance sheet. He was forever searching out ways to cut expenses and sell wine at a higher profit. I found all this out after Peel died.

"One day in late April I was called to Peel's place outside town. He was a bachelor, living by himself in a cottage set back from the highway on a hillside. He'd been found in his swimming pool. Drowned."

I asked my first question. "Murdered?"

"They called it accidental death because it was known that Peel couldn't swim. He'd been sunning himself beside the pool on a Saturday afternoon and drinking quite a lot of gin. The theory was that he lost his balance, fell in, and drowned."

"But you didn't think so."

"No. I made some inquiries but all I could learn was that Peel was not well liked. In fact, he was considered to be a miserable S.O.B. Not the kind of man who goes accidentally."

Our host laughed and shook his head. "It's strange how this case has stayed with me. I even recall the rhyme the schoolchildren made up about it." He raised a finger and recited with solemnity:

"Poor old Peel
Is in the pool.
He didn't obey
The golden rule—
If you play near water
You really oughter
Learn to swim.
But no, not him.
So Peel, the fool,
Is in the pool . . .
Now drink your beer
And go to school!"

Celia shook her head with admiration and said, "You have a good memory."

"For odd bits, yes. Anyway, I felt something was wrong so I went and asked questions at the winery. This was the Monday morning. Peel drowned on Saturday afternoon. One man I talked to was the president, old man Clayton. He was around a thousand years old, really

past it. But I learned from him that Peel was one of the new breed, full of ideas, and that he had been given considerable authority. One of his schemes was an idea to market wine in tin cans."

I must have reacted. Lonergan grinned.

"That's right, the same as beer. It would require some development money to solve the technical problems but he had the ear of the president and it was about to happen. That was the word from old Clayton. Then I went to see Max Walther.

"Walther was a quiet young man with pale blue eyes. At first I thought he was angry but then I realized the flush on his face was sunburn.

"I asked him what he thought of Peel. He didn't try to pretend he liked him or his ideas. But Peel was the boss and Max was prepared to live with him. If he'd lived. I asked about the wine-in-cans project. Young Walther looked me straight in the eye. If that were to happen, he said, he'd leave the company."

Lonergan lifted the elegant bottle and poured a splash of silver wine into each of our glasses.

"At that moment," he said, "something inside me whispered the word 'motive.' I asked the boy where he lived and he gave me the address of an apartment in town. Then I said to him, 'Saturday was the first sunny day of the season. Sunday it rained. Peel was soaking up the sun by his pool when the accident happened. Where did you acquire your sunburn, Max?' "

Celia's eyes were shining. "How did he answer that?"

"He claimed he'd been sitting in the park, but I suspected he was lying. So I drove back out to Peel's house and took another look around. An officer on duty told me nothing had been touched. I walked by the pool, stared at the chair he had sat in, inspected the metal table and the book resting on it.

"The book was a volume of *Great English Poets.* I tried to imagine Peel with Tennyson on his lap and pop-top cans of Chablis on his mind. Entering the house, I checked his bookshelf. Mr. Peel's taste in reading had been all self-improvement: *Efficiency in Business, The Executive Decision and How To Make It, Improving Your Bridge Game,* a matched set of Dale Carnegie. It was clear to me the book of poetry belonged to somebody else: It belonged to Peel's killer.

I drove downtown and persuaded Max Walther's landlady to allow

me inside his room. The walls were almost hidden by collections of Byron, Keats, Shelley, Burns, a yard of Shakespeare . . .

"There was still time that afternoon for me to return Max's book. I found him in his office. When I put the volume in front of him he gave a small sigh and said, 'I realized too late I'd left it behind. But my name isn't in it. I hoped nobody would follow it up.'

"I asked him how he'd done it; I knew why but I wanted to know how. He told me Peel was indeed drunk as a lord, that he slipped and fell into the water. Walther could have pulled him out but didn't. He allowed the man to sink. 'I wanted him dead,' he told me, 'so I'm guilty of murder.' "

Our host leaned forward and stirred the dying fire. He seemed preoccupied.

"And that's the end of the story," I suggested.

"Not really. Stories don't end, do they? The characters, those still living anyway, move on to the next stage of their lives."

Celia said, "And you moved on to England."

"Yes. I couldn't bring myself to turn Max Walther in. He was clearly involved in Peel's death but he had my sympathy. And consequently, my silence." Lonergan glanced up and gave me a fleeting smile. "Not very good behavior by an officer sworn to uphold the law. So I retired."

I could not resist asking, "And what became of Walther? What about him?"

Lonergan's smile returned. "His life changed as abruptly as mine, and more dramatically. Having allowed Peel to die in order to maintain the status quo at his beloved winery, he then discovered his conscience would not allow him to remain working there. He left Hammondsport shortly after I did."

"Fascinating."

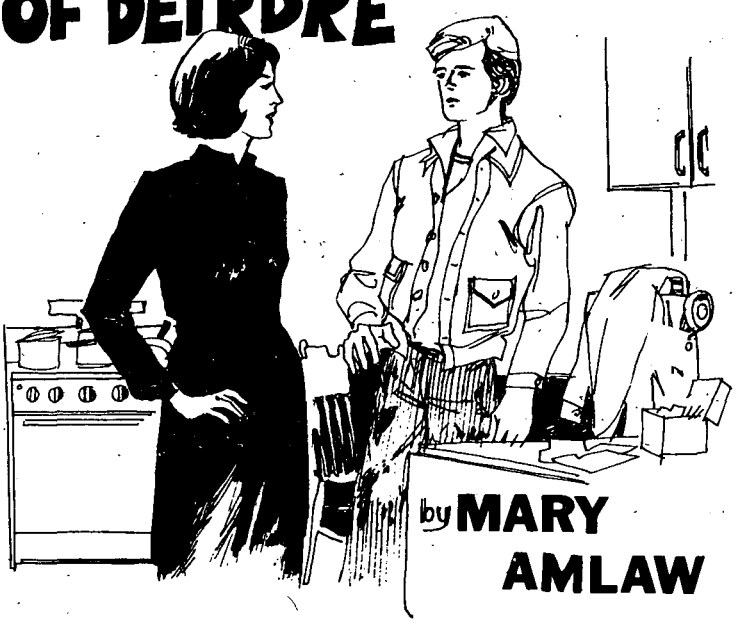
"Yes. In fact, he followed me here to Oxford. I've always suspected he wanted to keep one eye on his silent partner in crime."

"A most unusual story," I said. "I don't suppose he'd like it, but I wouldn't mind meeting the man."

"You have met him," Lonergan said. "Max Walther is the maitre d' at The Groaning Board. He's the man who sat us down tonight and brought us that lovely bottle of wine."

Plutarch wrote of the indulged son; but what of the unindulged son?

THE UNEQUAL SONS OF DEIRDRE



by MARY AMLAW

My mother was standing in the middle of the living room, her hands gripped before her as if she meant to swim over the disorder surrounding her. Her face had the greyed-down look of a hill worn to stone.

"Paul." It sounded as if she had had to thumb through a file of old memories to find my name. "So you've come."

Her hands dropped. Her body, inclining towards the door expectantly, seemed to droop at my entrance. Had she been waiting for my

brother Johnny? I wondered. Beloved, ne'er-do-wrong Johnny?

I had hoped to bar myself in my room before either Johnny or my mother realized I'd come home. That she should be standing there at seven of a winter Saturday morning was unheard of.

The solid black of her clothing diminished her. I could have painted her like that; a blackbird against a grey and threatening background.

Her eyes, like her face, had greyed down. They passed over my paint-spattered dungarees and parka without warmth. "You can't go dressed like that." Her voice conveyed the ultimate degree of maternal martyrdom. "Put on a dark suit." I had come home with a hard thing to tell her, a thing I hoped would force her sympathy, if not her love. I dared not tell her yet.

"I don't have a dark suit."

A delicate shudder distorted her face. "Take Johnny's grey." The shudder passed from her face into her voice as she said his name.

"His blue is darker," I said. She hadn't directed so many words to me since the day I first called her darling Johnny a thief.

"Why do you always have an argument?" she cried. "Can't you just once do as you're told?"

Her anger came at me like a sword. I backed away, puzzled. I knew she liked Johnny to wear deep-blue. It underscored his eyes. Eyes like hers had been, blue as a jay's wing. The unusual heat of her response, her black clothing, the sense of something disordered created a curious excitement in me.

Her eyes blazed with anger. Anger, the emotion nearest love. Her usual response to me was indifference. Was it possible that somewhere inside her, unknown even to herself, she harbored a little love for me?

The doorbell rang. My mother turned toward the sound. She seemed to flow towards the door, she moved so swiftly. She didn't embrace the man who stood there and he didn't touch her, but I felt their spirits meet and embrace.

Did Johnny know of this? I wondered. I wouldn't have believed an outsider could break into the closed corporation formed by Johnny and my mother. Yet here was this man, tall, silvered at the temples, his brown eyes warm and alert, his handshake firm.

"My son Paul," my mother said. "My other son. Paul, this is Richard Doran."

Her inflection as she said "other," the falling of her voice as she said

"son," effectively removed me light years from Johnny's orbit. Doran's quick eyes took me in. I felt as if he knew from that one glance my whole sorry history, the years of drudging at school to earn my mother's praise, the surprise of winning a scholarship to the Museum School, the joy with which Johnny and my mother maneuvered me into exile in Boston.

"I'm waiting for you to change your clothes," my mother said.

I excused myself, feeling awkward under her dissatisfaction, and shut myself in my room. It was too small for the sagging bed, the rolls of canvas, the half-finished paintings stacked against the wall. My skis, the ancient iron trunk at the foot of the bed, my books crammed every which way into homemade shelves were all thick with dust. The quilt was still wrinkled where I had pulled it hastily over the bed in September. The windows hadn't been opened. The room mirrored my life—cluttered, dark, isolated.

Why had I bothered concealing the .38 Walther deep in the closet? I could have thrown it on the bed, fully loaded, left my door wide open, and my mother still wouldn't have noticed it.

I put it carefully in the top dresser drawer. First I must tell her what I had come home to say. Afterward, there might be need of the gun.

I went to get Johnny's suit. His room was a different story. It had belonged to my parents when my father was alive and was the biggest and best upstairs room. My mother had left the double bed, the long draperies, and the blue Oriental rug when she exchanged rooms with Johnny. There was no trace of dust or stale air here. I thought of my mother's hands smoothing the sheets and blankets, caressing his dresser appointments as she dusted them.

The closet would have done credit to the tailors of Savile Row. Fine cashmere and woolens from Scotland, silks from Italy. Nothing was too good for darling Johnny while I scraped by with trousers reeking of turpentine and one ill-fitting greenish tweed suit left over from high school.

How did Johnny come by his fancy-Dan wardrobe? That's what I wanted to know. And his clothes were only part of it. Where did he—a tenth-grade dropout—get the money to buy his yellow Saab and a sheaf of stocks? ("You know the Saab was second-hand," my mother retaliated when I could no longer hold my tongue. "And the stock has

been put in my name. It's my security. You know your father left nothing.")

How could she cover up for Johnny so blindly? We had both seen Johnny leave the house in the grey of early morning when he was fourteen and fifteen and sixteen, wearing patched jeans and sweaters his wrists dangled out of, and come home whistling in new clothes—and, yes, sometimes with clothes for me as well. And she said nothing. Once, only once, early on, when he had waltzed in sporting maroon slacks and an expensive down-filled jacket, she had murmured, "Something bad will happen to you."

"What are you talking about, woman?" He had reached down to where she was sitting, her head bent over her mending, and tousled her hair.

Woman. She let Johnny call her that, as if she welcomed the chance to shrink into dependency, as if Johnny had some rightful authority over her.

Gently she grasped the sleeve of his down-filled jacket, her face tender with love.

"These clothes. You'll get caught."

Johnny let out a great whoop of laughter. "You think I stole them?"

Of course he had stolen them! Even I knew that. She thought so too, though she wouldn't admit it. I saw her face furrow with concern. Hastily she returned to her mending.

"I'm working, woman." Johnny lifted her chin and looked straight into her eyes. "I'm making enough to take care of us all."

She never questioned him again.

I helped myself to Johnny's grey suit and to a shirt with tiny red and black oblongs scattered on the soft material. My mother, who had taken to sewing all Johnny's shirts, had exclaimed over the delicious feel of this one. "It's like a cloud," she had said. Her face glowed when Johnny first tried it on. "Johnny my boy," she had teased, "it's a wonder some smart girl hasn't taken you away from your old mother."

"Why should he trade you in for some strange girl when you treat him like a prince?" I had said before I could stop myself.

"Do I treat you like a prince?" my mother had asked Johnny. "That's shameful of me—hereafter I'll treat you like a king."

Johnny's clothes fit me well. He and I were the same height, and I'd lost some weight at school. I looked quite as handsome in my own way

as Johnny did. I anticipated with pleasure the spark of jealousy that would leap into his eyes when he saw me in his finery.

My mother was standing where I had left her, Richard Doran at her side. The same odd current seemed to surround them. I couldn't understand it.

My mother had put on a black hat that blended with her hair. A short veil masked her eyes. She held Johnny's black overcoat in her black-gloved hands, its velvet collar pressed to her cheek. Doran's brown eyes took my measure a second time and dismissed me. He took the coat from my mother and handed it to me. I put it on. My mother pressed her fingers to her lips and turned her back to me. Doran put his arm around her.

It hurt. Every time she had ever shut me out, it had hurt. Years and years of hurts falling one on another, strengthening and reinforcing each other, like a thickening scar tissue of the soul, burying every flicker of warmth under its accumulated toughness.

My mother straightened. "It's time," she said. Doran led her to the door and closed it after us, as if he owned the place. He stood back to let us into the Ford parked at the curb. My mother sat between us, her head inclined slightly toward Doran. Nobody spoke. Doran drove smoothly through the morning streets. Snow sprinkled down from the leaden sky. A heavy storm was in that sky.

I was too absorbed in myself to notice where we had stopped, until, on opening the door of the white clapboard house before us, I smelled the heavy smell of gladioli and saw the obsequious man in black greet my mother and Doran. A funeral parlor.

I followed them into a sickly-smelling room, too warm and too richly appointed, to where a coffin gleamed darkly. And in that coffin—my heart bounded—my brother Johnny!

My mother knelt, and I went down beside her. Her face, drawn and tearless, turned toward her dead son. Even with him dead, there was a stamp of sameness, of singleness of spirit, on them both. Their level brows and wide mouths mirror-imaged each other; Jung's animus-anima in the flesh. Death couldn't change that. But it *had* closed Johnny's eyes. No more would a quick glance of understanding flash between them. No more would their locked blue gaze shut me out.

I've won, brother, I gloated over the curiously flat body before me. Surreptitiously I touched his hand. It was as cold as nothing I'd ever

touched before. Not cold like ice or cold like marble, but its own unique dead cold, colder than a forgotten love.

"We're going to close the coffin now." The undertaker was speaking to my mother.

"No." Her voice seemed loud in that room. "I'd like five more minutes," she said. "Alone."

"The service begins at nine—" the undertaker began, but Doran interrupted. "Let it begin late."

The undertaker backed off. I followed Doran out to an antechamber off the hallway.

"How did it happen?" I asked him.

He faced me. "Didn't she tell you?" His eyes moved away from mine. "He was shot," he said. "In the back. The police say it was attempted robbery. It happened down by Max's Gas Station just as Max was closing up."

So his thieving had finally caught up with him! For thief Johnny had been, from the winter ~~day~~ when he was twelve and I seven and my mother had first turned on me for his sake.

He had come home from school to find my mother hunched over the kitchen table, addressing orange envelopes. A shopping bag full of them was at her feet and three more leaned against the wall. I was longing for a mouthful of ice cream to ease my sore throat. Neily, two years old, her kidneys already failing though we didn't know it then, sat on the floor, gnawing the wrist of her sweater with hunger. We had lived four days on oatmeal. On this, the fifth day, even that was gone. My mother had gone out, leaving me in charge of Neily, and returned with the bags of orange envelopes.

"Be good children and let me work," she had said to us. "When I'm finished we'll have a little money to put food on the table."

She was half done with one bagful when Johnny came home. He took in the bare cupboards, the empty refrigerator and breadbox, then jerked his head toward the envelopes.

"Will you get paid for that?"

She lifted her head and for the first time I saw that curious current pass between them, establishing them as a unit, an island, leaving Neily and me like so much flotsam to be washed out to sea.

My mother nodded.

"How much?"

At first it seemed she wouldn't answer. Then it seemed she couldn't. She bent her head until her hair, long and black and silky then, fell like a curtain shielding her eyes. Finally her voice came faint and uneven. "A penny apiece."

"Holy crow," Johnny said.

Suddenly her eyes brimmed with tears. A choking sound caught at her throat. She put her head down on her arms. She had never cried in front of us before, not even the day my father died, and it shook me to my boots.

Johnny's face set like a mask. He turned on his heel and marched out. Presently my mother picked up her pen and went on, tears streaking down her face.

Johnny came home at dusk. He threw twenty dollars on the table. My mother stared. It was a fortune. It meant milk, meat, bread, even a little ice cream for my sore throat. She reached for the bills.

I yearned toward that money too. But I wasn't corrupted then. I brought my hand down between it and my mother's outstretched fingers.

"He stole it, ma!" I cried. "Ma, Johnny *stole* it!"

I've never forgotten the look she gave me. There was no faintest particle of love in it. There was only a distaste that created a distance between us that all the years since haven't been able to bridge.

My mother withdrew her hand. The money lay crumpled just beyond her fingers like a fallen bird. Her eyes searched Johnny's.

He lifted his chin. How he could stare back without flinching I'll never know.

"I never said I stole it."

In that room, along with those words, was the knowledge between the three of us of the senior citizens' housing project across the alley, and the halting old ladies shuffling into the streets, their Social Security checks in the pocketbooks they clutched in their feeble hands. Twenty dollars. Two crumpled ten-dollar bills.

My mother looked from Johnny to Neily gnawing at her sweater. Her eyes passed over me.

"Mind the house," she said. "I'll buy us some food." And she took the money.

The undertaker materialized at my elbow. "If you please," he said. I followed him back to the overdone parlor, now peopled with mourners.

"Don't cry over Johnny." The imploring, hurt sound of my own voice unnerved me. "He wasn't worth it."

"He was the child of my heart," my mother said.

I waited for her to cry herself out, wondering how to turn her grief for Johnny to myself. "I hated having to send for you," she said. "It was generous of you to come." Her voice scraped on *generous* as if even so niggardly a compliment cost her too much. Tears streamed down her face. She stared at the ceiling, unmindful of them.

"I didn't come home for Johnny's funeral," I said. "I didn't even know he was dead."

Her head turned a fraction toward me, the lines in her forehead deepening. Her mouth looked pinched and strained.

"I'm sick," I said.

I'd hoped for a little cry of sympathy. All I got was her sour observation: "You don't look it."

"In the morning, when I wake up," I said as evenly as I could, "my vision is so blurred I can't count the fingers I hold up to my face. I've spent the last three days in the hospital, having blood samples taken and all kinds of injections. This morning I couldn't stand any more. I walked out." My smile felt taut as a death's head grin. "I've inherited more than my father's character. I have his disease as well."

My father had spent his last conscious hours consumed with thirst. He had died in a diabetic coma, his disease undiagnosed and unsuspected.

My mother's eyes were cold and bright. "Your father wouldn't have died if we had known what was wrong with him," she said. "Just follow your doctor's orders. You can live to be a hundred."

"It's not dying I'm afraid of," I said, trying to master the anger that was edging my voice. "It's living! I can't keep regular hours, day after day after day! When I'm painting, I can't be called back to think of meals and medicine! I can't spend the rest of my life weighing and measuring every bite I put in my mouth! But if I don't, I'll go blind. And I must see to paint."

I had fallen on my knees without realizing it and my face was level with hers. "If you'd help me for a while—cook for me, do the weighing and measuring, make me eat on time—"

The words were only an excuse that had come to hand. She heard what I was really begging of her. *If only you will love me!*

"A sad thing, Paul." "Terrible for your mother." "Such a waste." Old Mr. McMorrow who had run a variety store down the block since my childhood thrust out his hand and gripped mine. "I remember Johnny from when he first started working for me," he said. "Talked me into hiring him. Damn fine worker too." His shaggy brows had gone white with age and his voice, always gruff, was hoarse. I used to chalk caricatures of his shelflike eyebrows and puffy nose on the sidewalk in front of his store to amuse my classmates. "Just a boy, not even up to my shoulder," McMorrow said, "and he worked like two men." Tears glinted in his eyes.

I made my face as sorrowful as I could and took my place by my mother's side. She seemed unaware of my presence, and only barely shrank from my touch when I handed her into the funeral limousine. She sat beside me straight and still as a queen, head high, too proud for public tears.

I did the honors for the few neighbors who came back with us to the house, bringing funeral meats as payment for the gossip they took away with them. My mother's grief was everywhere apparent. A pink shirt, half stitched, hung across the sewing machine. Her recipe file of Johnny's favorites lay askew on the kitchen table. Somewhere between her sewing and her cooking the message of his death had come, and her life had stopped.

Richard Doran stayed after the others had gone—stayed and stayed, his eyes never leaving my mother's face. That curious protective current still seemed to enclose them, although he sat in a chair well away from the sofa where she huddled.

"I think my mother should rest," I said to him. I wanted her to myself, to tell her what I was facing.

He looked at me. For a moment I thought he wouldn't go, but at length he nodded. "I think so too," he said to me; and to her, "I'll be back this evening."

"Yes." The word flew from her to him like a little bird, a breath, a desire.

When he left, I brought her a pillow and made her lie down on the sofa. I covered her with an afghan. Now that we were alone, the pride that had sustained her dissolved. Tears filled her eyes. When she felt me watching, she turned her head to hide them from me.

Her exasperation stung me. "Oh, Paul, I can't put up with your dramatics today! Always, always, you have to push your way to center stage, demand all the attention for yourself!" She pushed herself up on one elbow. "No, Paul, I won't be your servant. I won't do it."

"Won't do it?" The anger of years exploded. I was shouting at her, as it seemed to me now we had always shouted. "If it was Johnny you'd do it! A common thief shot down in a cheap holdup! And Neily! When she was sick you were in and out of the hospital with her, rocking her for hours, playing games with her, hushing the house for her! And for nothing—for nothing! She was doomed. But I can live, unless you condemn me!" My voice rang with bitterness, cannonaded against the walls. "*Why* won't you help me? Why?"

She sighed. The stillness vibrated with the fading echoes of my cry. When she spoke her voice held nothing but sadness. "Why can't you leave well enough alone? Don't you see I can't help you?"

"But if you loved me—"

"I don't." Her eyes, grey and hollow, fastened on me. "I can't. I did my best for you. I sent you away."

I felt as if I'd drunk from a poisoned spring. Her words fell between us like drops of clear, cold water.

"I sacrificed Johnny, didn't you see that? The first day he brought money home, I knew he'd stolen it. And when I took it, I knew I was starting him down the road to his ruin. I couldn't help it. I was weak. But I promised myself I'd make it up to him. I told myself desperate lies—that he had somehow talked McMorrow into lending him money against his working for him. And you, my conscience, looking at me with contempt, even though you were a child yourself—"

"It wasn't contempt. It was love. I wanted you to love me."

She didn't seem to hear. "When he got older, I made myself believe he was working, that even without schooling he was bright enough to do well. Even now, the way he was killed—I knew he'd been doing things that didn't bear looking into. I saw some of the people who called for him." Her face, greyer and greyer, her voice searching for words like a child turning over shells on a beach, straying farther and farther from safety, made me grieve for her.

"You have me," I said.

She paused and looked at me. How cold and far away she seemed. *But I don't want you.* She might as well have said it.

"This isn't the place for you," she said. "Go back to school. Do what the doctors tell you. Find a good girl and marry her."

My face must have betrayed my pain. For the only time in my life, she softened towards me; she rested her hand gently on my head.

"It's best," she said. "You're strong, Paul. You were always the strong one. I won't entangle you. It's all I can do." A spasm of pain crossed her face. "Don't come home again."

She took her hand away and closed her eyes, shutting herself away from me. My head responded where her hand had rested so briefly. "And you? How will you live?"

Her eyes opened. "There's Richard," she said. A new note lightened her voice. "He's been a widower a long time. He and Johnny liked each other."

"Are you going to marry him?"

She nodded.

She would have that new happiness, and I would be cast out forever, my vision fading, my body's needs intruding on the only escape I had, my painting.

I watched her until she slept, her face turned away from me, her breast rising and falling softly. I was alive and Johnny was in his grave, but I had been as dead as he was for the last quarter-hour. I went to my room, quietly slipped the gun from the top drawer, and just as quietly returned.

My mother didn't stir as the gun found her temple. Her breath left her in a final sigh, her breast rose no more. I pulled the afghan over her face.

Arise, my love, my dove, my beautiful one, no more. No more to escape me. One minute and I too would enter on eternity.

I called the police and reported my mother's murder, gave my name and address, and put the gun to my own head. I felt pleasure at the thought of Doran returning that evening to find his bird of paradise filched from him.

Sirens wailed nearby. I closed my eyes. Time to die now in the body. Let the police try to reconstruct my motive. Let Doran wonder in vain.

The gun waited, aimed and ready. But my finger wouldn't pull the trigger.

I foresaw myself a prisoner, my meals carefully measured out, my life dragging on endlessly in a series of prison cells. And still my finger wouldn't move.

I could see headlines: ART STUDENT KILLS MOTHER. I heard myself called a monster, insane, cold-blooded. Tears streamed down my face. All the hours I had been rehearsing my death—body, will and understanding seeming to agree—they had kept their fatal secret from me.

Even with the police knocking at the door, even with my mother dead and the threat of capture upon me, my finger refused to pull the trigger. It was beyond reason.

I wanted to live.

I wanted to live!

He was Anselmo, the inhuman terrorist who had yet to meet his match . . .

LIKE A DOG IN THE STREET

by

LAWRENCE BLOCK

The capture of the man called Anselmo amounted to the gathering together of innumerable threads, many of them wispy and frail. For almost two years the terrorist had been the target of massive manhunt operations launched by not one but over a dozen nations. The sole valid photograph of him, its focus blurred and indistinct, had been reproduced and broadcast throughout the world; his features—the jagged and irregular yellow teeth, the too-small upturned nose, the under-

slung jaw, the bushy eyebrows grown together into a single thick dark line—were as familiar to the public as they were to counterintelligence professionals and Interpol agents.

Bit by bit, little by little, the threads began to link up. In a café in a working-class neighborhood in Milan, two men sat sipping espresso laced with anisette. They spoke of an interregional soccer match, and of the possibility of work stoppage by the truck dispatchers. Then their voices dropped, and one spoke quickly and quietly of Anselmo while the other took careful note of every word.

In a suburb of Asuncion, a portly gentleman wearing the uniform of a Brigadier General in the Paraguayan Army shared the front seat of a four-year-old Chevrolet Impala with a slender young man wearing the uniform of a chauffeur. The general talked while the chauffeur listened. While Anselmo was not mentioned by name, he was the subject of the conversation. At its conclusion the chauffeur gave the general an envelope containing currency in the amount of two thousand German marks. Three hours later the "chauffeur" was on a plane for Mexico City. The following afternoon the "general" was dead of what the attending physician diagnosed as a massive myocardial infarction.

In Paris, in the Ninth Arrondissement, three security officers, one of them French, entered an apartment which had been under surveillance for several weeks. It proved to be empty. Surveillance was continued, but no one returned to the apartment during the course of the following month. A thoroughgoing analysis of various papers and detritus found in the apartment was relayed in due course to authorities in London and Tel Aviv.

In West Berlin, a man and woman, both in their mid-twenties, both blond, fair-skinned, and blue-eyed, and looking enough alike to be brother and sister, made the acquaintance of a dark-haired and full-bodied young woman at a cabaret called Justine's. The three shared a bottle of sparkling Burgundy, then repaired to a small apartment on the Bergenstrasse where they shared several marijuana cigarettes, half a bottle of Almspach brandy, and a bed. The blond couple did certain things which the dark-haired young woman found quite painful, but she gave every indication of enjoying the activity. Later, when she appeared to be asleep, the blond man and woman talked at some length. The dark-haired woman was in fact awake throughout the conversation, and was still awake later when the other two lay sprawled beside her,

snoring lustily. She dressed and left quickly, pausing only long enough to slit their throats with a kitchen knife. Her flight to Beirut landed shortly before two in the afternoon, and within an hour she was talking with a middle-aged Armenian gentleman in the back room of a travel agency.

Bits and pieces. Frail threads coming together to form a net . . .

And throughout it all the man called Anselmo remained as active as ever. A Pan-Am flight bound for Belgrade blew up in the air over Austria. A telephone call claiming credit for the deed on behalf of the Popular Front for Croatian Autonomy was logged at the airline's New York office scant minutes before the explosion shredded the jetliner.

A week earlier, rumors had begun drifting around that Anselmo was working with the Croats.

In Jerusalem, less than a quarter of a mile from the Wailing Wall, four gunmen burst into a Sephardic synagogue during morning services. They shot and killed twenty-eight members of the congregation before they themselves were rooted out and shot down by police officers. The dead gunmen proved to be members of a leftist movement aimed at securing the independence of Puerto Rico from the United States. But why should Puerto Rican extremists be mounting a terrorist operation against Israel?

The common denominator was Anselmo.

An embassy in Washington. A police barracks in Strabane, in Northern Ireland. A labor union in Buenos Aires.

Anselmo.

Assassinations. The Spanish Ambassador to Sweden, shot down in the streets of Stockholm. The sister-in-law of the Premier of Iraq. The research-and-development head of a multinational oil company. A British journalist. An Indonesian general. An African head of state.

Anselmo.

Hijacking and kidnapping. Ransom demands. Outrages.

Anselmo. Always Anselmo.

Of course it was not always his hand on the trigger. When the Puerto Rican gunmen shot up the Jerusalem synagogue, Anselmo was playing solitaire in a dimly lit basement room in Pretoria. When a firebomb roasted the Iraqi Premier's sister-in-law, Anselmo was flashing a savage yellow smile in Bolivia. It was not Anselmo's hand that forced a dagger between the ribs of General Subandoro in Jakarta; the

hand belonged to a nubile young lady from Thailand—but it *was* Anselmo who had decreed that Subandoro must die and who had staged and scripted his death.

Bits and pieces. A couple of words scrawled on the back of an envelope. A scrap of conversation overheard. Bits, pieces, scraps. Threads braided together can make strong rope. Strands of rope interwoven comprise a net.

When the net finally dropped around Anselmo, Nahum Grodin held its ends in his knobby hands.

It was early summer. For three days a dry wind had been blowing relentlessly. The town of Al-dhareesh, a small Arab settlement on the West Bank of the Jordan, yielded to the wind as to a conquering army. The women tended their cooking fires. Men sat at small tables in their courtyards sipping cups of sweet black coffee. The yellow dogs that ran through the narrow streets seemed to stay more in the shadows than was their custom, scurrying from doorway to doorway, keeping their distance from passing humans.

"Even the dogs feel it," Nahum Grodin said. His Hebrew bore Russian and Polish overtones. "Look at the way they slink around."

"The wind," Gershon Meir said.

"Anselmo."

"The wind," Meir insisted. A Sabra, he had the unromantic outlook of the nativeborn. He was Grodin's immediate subordinate in the counter-terror division of Shin Bet, and the older man knew there was no difference between the keenness both felt at the prospect of springing a trap on Anselmo. But Grodin felt it in the air while Meir felt nothing but the dry wind off the desert.

"The same wind blows over the whole country," Grodin said. "And yet it's different here. The way those damned yellow dogs stay in the shadows."

"You make too much of the Arabs' mongrel dogs."

"And their children?"

"What children?"

"Aha!" Grodin extended a forefinger. "The dogs keep to the shadows. The children stay in their huts and avoid the streets altogether. Don't tell me, my friend, that the wind is enough to keep children from their play."

"So the townspeople know he's here. They shelter him. That's nothing new."

"A few know he's here. The ones planning the raid across the Jordan, perhaps a handful of others. The rest are like the dogs and the children. They sense something in the air."

Gershon Meir looked at his superior officer. He considered the set of his jaw, the reined excitement that glinted in his pale-blue eyes. "Something in the air," he said.

"Yes. You feel something yourself, Gershon. Admit it."

"I feel too damned much caffeine in my blood. That last cup of coffee was a mistake."

"You feel more than caffeine."

Gershon Meir shrugged but said nothing.

"He's here, Gershon."

"Yes, I think he is. But we have been so close to him so many times—"

"This time we have him."

"When he's behind bars, that's when I'll say we have him."

"Or when he's dead."

Again the younger man looked at Grodin, a sharp look this time. Grodin's right hand, the knuckles swollen with arthritis, rested on the butt of his holstered machine pistol.

"Or when he's dead," Gershon Meir agreed.

Whether it was merely the wind or something special in the air, the man called Anselmo felt it too. He set down his little cup of coffee—it was sweeter than he liked it—and worried his chin with the tips of his fingers. With no apparent concern, he studied the five men in the room with him. They were local Arabs ranging in age from sixteen to twenty-eight. Anselmo had met one of them before in Beirut and knew two of the others by reputation. The remaining two were unequivocally guaranteed by their comrades. Anselmo did not specifically trust them—he had never in his life placed full trust in another human being—but neither did he specifically distrust them. They were village Arabs, politically unsophisticated and mentally uncomplicated, desperate young men who would perform any act and undertake any risk. Anselmo had known and used the same sort of man throughout the world. He could not function without such men.

Something in the air . . .

He went to a window and inched the burlap curtain aside with the edge of his palm. He saw nothing remarkable, yet a special perception more reliable than eyesight told him that the town was swarming with Israelis. He did not have to see them to be certain of their presence.

He turned and considered his five companions. They were to cross the river that night. By dawn they would have established their position. A school bus loaded with between fifty and sixty retarded children would slow down before making a left turn at the corner where Anselmo and his Arabs would be posted. It would be child's play—he bared his teeth in a smile at the phrase—to shoot the tires out of the bus. In a matter of minutes all of the Jewish children and their driver would be dead at the side of the road. In a few more minutes Anselmo and the Arabs would have scattered and made good their escape.

A perfect act of terror, mindless, meaningless, unquestionably dramatic. The Jews would retaliate, of course, and of course their retaliation would find the wrong target, and the situation would deteriorate.

At times, most often late at night just before his mind slipped over the edge into sleep, Anselmo could see the outline of a master plan, the way in which all the component parts of the terror he juggled moved together to make a new world. The image of the plan hovered at the perimeter of his inner vision, trembling at the edge of thought. He could almost see it, as one can almost see God in a haze of opium.

The rest of the time he saw no master plan and had no need to search for one. The existential act of terror, theatrical as thunder, seemed to him to be a perfectly satisfactory end in itself. Let the children bleed at the roadside. Let the plane explode overhead. Let the rifle crack.

Let the world take note.

He turned once more to the window but left the curtain in place, merely testing the texture of the burlap with his fingertips. Out there in the darkness were troops and police officers. Should he wait in the shadows for them to pass? No, the village was small and they could search it house by house with little difficulty. He could pass as an Arab—he was garbed as one now—but if he was the man they were looking for, they would know him when they saw him.

He could send these five out, sacrifice them in suicidal combat while he made good his own escape. It would be a small sacrifice. They were

unimportant, expendable; he was Anselmo. But if the Jews had encircled the town, a diversion would have little effect.

He snapped his head back. Time was his enemy, only drawing the net tighter around him. The longer he delayed, the greater his vulnerability. Better a bad decision than no decision at all.

"Wait here for me," he told his men, his Arabic low and guttural. "I'll see how the wind blows."

He began to open the door, disturbing the rest of a scrawny, long-muzzled dog. The animal whined and took itself off to the side. Anselmo slipped through the open door and let it close behind him.

The moon overhead was just past fullness. There were no clouds to block it—the dry wind had blown them all away days ago. Anselmo reached through his loose clothing, touched the Walther automatic on his hip, the long-bladed hunting knife in a sheath strapped to his thigh, the smaller knife fastened with tape to the inside of his left forearm. Around his waist an oilcloth money-belt rested next to his skin. It held four passports in as many names and a few thousand dollars in the currencies of half a dozen countries. Anselmo could travel readily, crossing borders as another man would cross the street. If only he could first get out of Al-dhareesh.

He moved quickly and sinuously, keeping to the shadows, letting his eyes and ears perform a quick reconnaissance before moving onward. Twice he spotted armed uniformed men and withdrew before he was seen, changing direction, scurrying through a yard and down an alley.

They were everywhere.

Just as he caught sight of still another Israeli patrol on a street-corner, gunfire broke out a few hundred yards to his left. There was a ragged volley of pistol fire answered by several bursts from what he identified as an Uzi machine pistol. Then silence.

His five men, he thought. Caught in the house or on the street in front of it. If he had stayed there he'd have been caught with them. From the sound of it, they hadn't made much trouble. His lip curled and a spot of red danced in his forebrain. He only hoped the five had been shot dead so that they couldn't inform the Jews of his presence.

As if they had to. As if the bastards didn't already know . . .

A three-man patrol turned into the street a dozen houses to Anselmo's left. One of the men kicked at the earth as he walked and the dust billowed around his feet in the moonlight. Anselmo cursed the

men and the moonlight and circled around the side of a house.

But there was no way out. All the streets were blocked. Once Anselmo drew his Walther and took deliberate aim at a pair of uniformed men. They were within easy range and his finger trembled on the trigger. It would be so nice to kill them, but where was the profit in it? Their companions would be on him in an instant.

If you teach a rat to solve mazes, presenting it over a period of months with mazes of increasing difficulty, and finally placing it in a maze which is truly unsolvable, the rat will do a curious thing. He will scurry about in an attempt to solve the maze, becoming increasingly inefficient in his efforts, and ultimately he will sit down in a corner and devour his own feet.

There was no way out of Al-dhareesh. The Israelis were closing in, searching the village house by house, moving ever nearer to Anselmo, cutting down his space. He tucked himself into a corner where a four-foot wall of sun-baked earth butted up against the wall of a house. He sat on his haunches and pressed himself into the shadows.

Footsteps—

A dog scampered along close to the wall, found Anselmo, and whimpered. Was it the same dog he'd disturbed on leaving the house? Not likely, he thought. The town was full of these craven, whining beasts. This one poked its nose into Anselmo's side and whimpered again. The sound was one the terrorist did not care for. He laid a hand on the back of the dog's skull, gentling it. The whimpering continued at a slightly lower pitch. With his free hand, Anselmo drew the hunting knife from the sheath on his thigh. While he went on rubbing the back of the dog's head, he found the spot between its ribs. The animal had almost ceased to whimper when he sent the blade home, finding the heart directly, making the kill in silence. He wiped the blade on the dog's fur and returned it to its sheath.

A calm descended with the death of the dog. Anselmo licked a finger, held it overhead. Had the wind ceased to blow? It seemed to him that it had. He took a deep breath and got to his feet.

He walked not in the shadows but down the precise middle of the narrow street. When the two men stepped into view ahead of him, he did not turn aside or bolt for cover. His hand quivered, itching to reach for the Walther, but the calm which had come upon him enabled him to master the urge.

He threw his hands high overhead. In reasonably good Hebrew he sang out, "I am your prisoner!" And he drew his lips back, exposing his bad teeth in a terrible grin.

Both men trained their guns on him. He had faced guns innumerable times in the past and did not find them intimidating. But one of the men held his Uzi as if he was about to fire it. Moonlight glinted on the gun barrel. Anselmo, still grinning, waited for a burst of fire and an explosion in his chest.

It never came.

The two men sat in folding chairs and watched their prisoner through a one-way mirror. His cell was as small and bare as the room from which they watched him. He sat on a narrow iron bedstead and stroked his chin with the tips of his fingers. Now and then his gaze passed over the mirror.

"You'd swear he can see us," Gershon Meir said.

"He knows we're here."

"I suppose he must. The devil's cool, isn't he? Do you think he'll talk?"

Nahum Grodin shook his head.

"He could tell us a great deal."

"He'll never tell us a thing. Why should he? The man's comfortable. He was comfortable dressed as an Arab and now he's as comfortable dressed as a prisoner."

Anselmo had been disarmed, of course, and relieved of his loose-fitting Arab clothing. Now he wore the standard clothing issued to prisoners—a pair of trousers and a short-sleeved shirt of grey denim, and cloth slippers. The trousers were beltless and the slippers had no laces.

Grodin said, "He could be made to talk. No, *nahr*, I don't mean torture. You watch too many films. Pentothal, if they'd let me use it. Although I suspect his resistance is high. He has such enormous confidence."

"The way he smiled when he surrendered to us."

"Yes."

"For a moment I thought—"

"Yes?"

"That you were going to shoot him."

"I very nearly did."

"Did you suspect a trap?"

"No." Grodin interlaced his fingers, cracked knuckles. "No," he said, "I knew it was no trick. The man is a pragmatist. He knew he was trapped. He surrendered to save his skin."

"And you thought to shoot him anyway?"

"I should have done it, Gershon. I should have shot him. Something made me hesitate. And you know the saying, he who hesitates and so forth. So I hesitated and was lost. Not I, but the opportunity. I should have shot him at once—without hesitating, without thinking, without anything but an ounce of pressure on the trigger and a few punctuation marks for the night."

Gershon studied the man they were discussing. He had removed one of the slippers and was picking at his feet. Gershon wanted to look away but watched, fascinated. "You want him dead," he said.

"Of course."

"We're a progressive nation. We don't put our enemies to death any more. Life imprisonment is supposed to be punishment enough. Don't you agree?"

"No."

"You like the eye-for-an-eye stuff, eh?"

"It's not a terrible idea, you know. I wouldn't be so quick to dismiss it out of hand."

"Revenge."

"Or retribution, more accurately. You can't have revenge, my friend. Not in this case. The man's crimes are too enormous for his own personal death to balance them out. But that's not why I wish I'd killed him."

"Then I don't understand."

Nahum Grodin aimed a forefinger at the glass. "Look," he said. "What do you see?"

"A piggish lout picking his feet."

"You see a prisoner."

"Of course. I don't understand what you're getting at, Nahum."

"You think you see a prisoner. But he's not our prisoner, Gershon."

"Oh?"

"We are his prisoners."

"I don't follow you."

"No?" The older man massaged the knuckle of his right index finger. It was that finger, he thought, which had hesitated upon the trigger of the Uzi. And now it throbbed and ached. Arthritis—or the punishment it deserved for its hesitation?

"Nahum—"

"We are at his mercy," Grodin said crisply. "He's our captive. His comrades will try to bring about his release. As long as he is our prisoner he is a sword pointed at our throats."

"That's farfetched."

"Do you think so?" Nahum Grodin sighed. "I wish we were not so civilized as to have abolished capital punishment. And at this particular moment I wish we were a police state and that this vermin could be officially described as having been shot while attempting to escape. We could take him outside right now, you and I, and he could attempt to escape."

Gershon shuddered. "We couldn't do that."

"No," Grodin agreed. "We could not do that. But I could have gunned him down when I had the chance. Did you ever see a mad dog? When I was a boy in Lublin, Gershon, I saw one running wild. It is one of the earliest childhood memories I've been able to retain. They don't really foam at the mouth, you know. But I seem to remember that dog having a foamy mouth. And a policeman shot him down. I remember that he held his pistol in both hands, held it out in front of him with both arms fully extended. Do you suppose I actually saw the beast shot down or that the memory is in part composed of what I was told? I could swear I actually saw the act. I can see it now in my mind, the policeman with his legs braced and his two arms held out in front of him. And the dog charging. I wonder if that incident might have had anything to do with this profession I seem to have chosen."

"Do you think it did?"

"I'll leave that to the psychiatrists to decide." Grodin smiled, then let the smile fade. "I should have shot this one down like a dog in the street," he said. "When I had the chance."

"How is he dangerous in a cell?"

"Not as long as he will remain in that cell." Grodin sighed. "He is a leader. He has a leader's magnetism. The world is full of lunatics to whom this man is special. They'll demand his release. They'll hijack a plane, kidnap a politician, hold schoolchildren for ransom."

"We have never paid ransom."

"No."

"They've made such demands before. We've never released a terrorist in response to extortion."

"Not yet we haven't."

Both men fell silent. On the other side of the one-way mirror, the man called Anselmo had ceased picking his toes. Now he stripped to his underwear and seated himself on the bare tiled floor of his cell. His fingers interlaced behind his head and he began doing sit-ups. He exercised rhythmically, pausing after each series of five sit-ups, then, springing to his feet after he had completed six sets, he deliberately flashed his teeth at the one-way mirror.

"Look at that," Gershon Meir said.

Nahum Grodin's right forefinger resumed aching.

Grodin was right. Revolutionaries throughout the world had very strong reasons for wishing to see Anselmo released from his cell. In various corners of the globe, desperate men plotted desperate acts to achieve it.

The first attempts were not successful. Less than a week after Anselmo was taken, four men and two women stormed a building in Geneva where high-level international disarmament talks were being conducted. Two of the men were shot, one fatally. One of the women had her arm broken in a struggle with a guard. The rest were captured. In the course of interrogation, Swiss authorities determined that the exercise had had as its object the release of Anselmo. The two women and one of the men were West German anarchists. The other three men, including the one who was shot dead, were Basque separatists.

A matter of days after this incident, guerrillas in Uruguay stopped a limousine carrying the Israeli Ambassador to a reception in the heart of Montevideo. Security police were following the Ambassador's limousine at the time, and the gun battle which ensued claimed the lives of all seven guerrillas, three security policemen, the Ambassador, his chauffeur, and four bystanders. While the purpose of the attempted kidnapping was impossible to determine, persistent rumors linked the action to Anselmo.

Within the week, Eritrean revolutionaries succeeded in skyjacking

an El Al 747 en route from New York to Tel Aviv. The jet with 144 passengers and crew members was diverted to the capital city of an African nation where it overshot the runway, crashed, and was consumed in flames. A handful of passengers survived. The remaining passengers, along with all crew members and the eight or ten Eritreans, were all killed.

Palestinians seized another plane, this one an Air France jetliner. The plane was landed successfully in Libya and demands were presented which called for the release of Anselmo and a dozen or so other terrorists then held by the Israelis. The demands were rejected out of hand. After several deadlines had come and gone, the terrorists began executing hostages, ultimately blowing up the plane with the remaining hostages aboard. According to some reports, the terrorists were taken into custody by Libyan authorities; according to other reports, they were given token reprimands and released.

After the affair in Libya, both sides felt they had managed to establish something. The Israelis felt they had proved conclusively that they would not be blackmailed. The loosely knit group who aimed to free Anselmo felt just as strongly that they had demonstrated their resolve to free him, no matter what risks they were forced to run, no matter how many lives—their own or others—they had to sacrifice.

"If there were *two* Henry Clays," said the bearer of that name after a bitterly disappointing loss of the Presidency, "then one of them would make the other President of the United States of America."

It is unlikely that Anselmo knew the story. He cared nothing for the past, read nothing but current newspapers. But as he exercised in his cell his thoughts often echoed those of Henry Clay.

If there were only two Anselmos, one would surely spring the other from this cursed jail.

But it didn't require a second Anselmo, as it turned out. All it took was a nuclear bomb.

The bomb itself was stolen from a NATO installation forty miles from Antwerp. A theft of this sort is perhaps the most difficult way of obtaining such a weapon. Nuclear technology is such that anyone with a good grounding in college-level science can put together a rudimentary atomic bomb in his own basement workshop, given access to the essential elements. Security precautions being what they are, it is worlds

easier to steal the component parts of a bomb than the assembled bomb itself. But in this case it was necessary not merely to have the bomb but to let the world know that one had the bomb. Hence the theft by way of a daring and dramatic dead-of-night raid. While media publicity was kept to a minimum, people whose job it was to know such things knew overnight that a devastating bomb had been stolen, and that the thieves had in all likelihood been members of the Peridot Gang.

The Peridot Gang was based in Paris, although its membership was international in nature. The gang was organized to practice terrorism in the Anselmo mode. Its politics were of the left, but very little ideology lay beneath the commitment to extremist activism. Security personnel throughout Europe and the Middle East shuddered at the thought of a nuclear device in the hands of the Peridots. Clearly they had not stolen the bomb for the fun of it. Clearly they intended to make use of it, and clearly they were capable of almost any outrage.

Removing the bomb from the Belgian NATO installation had been reasonably difficult. In comparison, disassembling it and smuggling it into the United States, transporting it to New York City, reassembling it, and finally installing it in the interfaith meditation chamber of the United Nations was simplicity itself.

Once the meditation chamber had been secured, a Peridot emissary presented a full complement of demands. Several of these had to do with guaranteeing the eventual safety of gang members at the time of their withdrawal from the chamber, the U.N. Building, and New York itself. Another, directed at the General Assembly of the United Nations, called for changes in international policy toward insurgent movements and revolutionary organizations. Various individual member nations were called upon to liberate specific political prisoners, including several dozen persons belonging to or allied with the Peridot organization. Specifically, the government of Israel was instructed to grant liberty to the man called Anselmo.

Any attempt to seize the bomb would be met by its detonation. Any effort to evacuate the United Nations Building or New York itself would similarly prompt the Peridots to set the bomb off. If all demands were not met within ten days of their publication, the bomb would go off.

Authorities differed in their estimates of the bomb's lethal range. But

the lowest estimate of probable deaths was in excess of one million.

Throughout the world, those governments blackmailed by the Peridots faced up to reality. One after the other they made arrangements to do what they could not avoid doing. Whatever their avowed policy toward extortion, however great their reluctance to liberate terrorists, they could not avoid recognizing a fairly simple fact: they had no choice.

Anselmo could not resist a smile when the two men came into the room. How nice, he thought, that it was these two who came to him. They had captured him in the first place, they had attempted to interrogate him time and time again, and now they were on hand to make arrangements for his release.

"Well," he said. "I guess I won't be with you much longer, eh?"

"Not much longer," the older one said.

"When do you release me?"

"The day after tomorrow. In the morning. You are to be turned over to Palestinians at the Syrian border. A private jet will fly you to one of the North African countries, either Algeria or Libya. I don't have the details yet."

"It hardly matters."

The younger of the Israelis, dark-eyed and olive-skinned, cleared his throat. "You won't want to leave here in prison clothes," he said. "We can give you what you wore when you were captured or you may have western dress. It's your choice."

"You are very accommodating," Anselmo told him.

The man's face colored. "The choice is yours."

"It's of no importance to me."

"Then you'll walk out as you walked in."

"It doesn't matter what I wear." He touched his grey denim clothing. "Just so it's not this." And he favored them with a smile again.

The older man unclasped a small black bag, drew out a hypodermic needle. Anselmo raised his eyebrows. "Pentothal," the man said.

"You could have used it before."

"It was against policy."

"And has your policy changed?"

"Obviously."

"A great deal has changed," the younger man added. "A package bill

passed the Knesset last evening. There was a special session called for the purpose. The death penalty has been restored."

"Ah."

"For certain crimes only. Crimes of political terrorism. Any terrorists captured alive will be brought to trial within three days after capture. If convicted, sentence will be carried out within twenty-four hours after it had been pronounced."

"Was there much opposition to this bill?"

"There was considerable debate. But when it came to a vote the margin was overwhelming for passage."

Anselmo considered this in the abstract. "It seems to me that it is an intelligent bill. I inspired it, eh?"

"You might say that."

"So you will avoid this sort of situation in the future. But of course, there is a loss all the same. You will not look good to the rest of the world, executing prisoners so quickly after capture. There will be talk of kangaroo courts, star chamber hearings, that sort of thing." He flashed his teeth.

"There's another change that did not require legislation," the older man said. "An unofficial change of policy for troops and police officers. We will have slower reflexes when it comes to noticing that a man is attempting to surrender."

Anselmo laughed aloud at the phrasing. "Slower reflexes! You mean you will shoot first and ask questions later?"

"Something along those lines."

"Also an intelligent policy. I shall make my own plans accordingly. But I don't think it will do you very much good, you know."

The man shrugged. The hypodermic needle looked small in his big gnarled hand. "The pentothal," he said. "Will it be necessary to restrain you? Or will you cooperate?"

"Why should I require restraint? We are both professionals, after all. I'll cooperate."

"That simplifies things."

Anselmo extended his arm. The younger man took him by the wrist while the other one readied the needle. "This won't do you any good either," Anselmo said conversationally. "I've had pentothal before. It's not effective on me."

"We'll have to establish that for ourselves."

"As you will."

"At least you'll get a pleasant nap out of it."

"I never have trouble sleeping," Anselmo said. "I sleep like a baby."

He didn't fight the drug but went with the flow as it circulated in his bloodstream. His consciousness went off to the side somewhere.

Then he was awake, aware of his surroundings, aware that the two men were speaking but unable to make sense of their conversation. When full acuity returned he gave no sign of it at first, hoping to overhear something of importance, but their conversation held nothing of interest to him. After a few minutes he stirred himself and opened his eyes.

"Well?" he demanded. "Did I tell you any vital secrets?"

The older one shook his head.

"I told you as much."

"So you did. You'll forgive our not taking your word, I hope."

Anselmo laughed aloud. "You have humor, old one. It's almost a pity we're enemies. Tell me your name."

"What does it matter?"

"It doesn't."

"Nahum Grodin."

Anselmo repeated the name aloud. "When you captured me," he said, "in that filthy Arab town—"

"Al-dhareesh."

"Al-dhareesh. Yes. When I surrendered, you know, I thought for a long moment that you were going to gun me down. That wind that blew endlessly, and the moon glinting off your pistol, and something in the air. Something in the way you were standing. I thought you were going to shoot me."

"I very nearly did."

"Yes, so I thought." Anselmo laughed suddenly. "And now you must wish that you did, eh? Hesitation, that's what kills men, Grodin. Better the wrong choice than no choice at all. You should have shot me."

"Yes."

"Next time you'll know better, Grodin."

"Next time?"

"Oh, there will be a next time for us, old one. And next time you won't hesitate to fire. But then next time I'll know better than to surrender, eh?"

"I almost shot you."

"I sensed it."

"Like a dog."

"A dog?" Anselmo thought of the dogs in the Arab town, the one he'd disturbed when he opened the door, the whining one he'd killed. His hand remembered the feel of the animal's skull and the brief tremor that passed through the beast when the long knife went home. It was difficult now to recall just why he had knifed the dog. He supposed he must have done it to prevent the animal's whimpering and drawing attention, but was that really the reason? The act itself had been so reflexive that one could scarcely determine its motive. If it mattered.

Outside, the sunlight was blinding. Gershon Meir took a pair of sunglasses from his breast pocket and put them on. Nahum Grodin squinted against the light. He never wore sunglasses and didn't mind the glare. And the sun warmed his bones, eased the ache in his joints.

"The day after tomorrow," Gershon Meir said. "I'll be glad to see the last of him."

"Will you?"

"Yes. I hate having to release him, but sometimes I think I hate speaking with him even more."

"I know what you mean."

They walked through the streets in a comfortable silence. After a few blocks the younger man said, "I had the oddest feeling earlier. Just for a moment."

"Oh?"

"When you gave him the pentothal. For an instant I was afraid you were going to kill him."

"With pentothal?"

"I thought you might inject an air bubble into the vein. It would have been easy enough."

"Perhaps, though I don't know that I'd be able to find a vein that easily. I'm hardly a doctor. A subcutaneous injection of pentothal, that's within my capabilities, but I might not be so good at squirting air into a vein. But do you think for a moment I'd be mad enough to kill him?"

"It was a feeling, not a thought."

"I'd delight in killing him," Grodin said. "But I'd hate to wipe out New York in the process."

"They might not detonate the bomb just for Anselmo. They want to get other prisoners out, and their other demands. If you told them Anselmo had died a natural death they might swallow it and pretend to believe it."

"You think we should call their bluff that way?"

"No. They're lunatics. Who knows what they might do?"

"Exactly," Grodin said.

"It was just a feeling, that's all." Meir pulled thoughtfully at his earlobe. "Nahum? It's a curious thing. When you and Anselmo talk I might as well not be in the room."

"I don't take your meaning, Gershon."

"There's a current that runs between the two of you. I feel utterly excluded from the company. The two of you, you seem to understand each other."

"That's interesting. You think I understand Anselmo? I don't begin to understand him. You know, I didn't expect to gain any real information from him while he was under the pentothal. But I did hope to get some insight into what motivates the man. And he gave me nothing. He likes to see blood spill, he likes loud noises. You know what Bakunin said?"

"I don't even know who Bakunin is."

"He was a Russian. 'The urge to destroy is a creative urge,' is what he said. Perhaps the context in which he said it mitigates the thought somewhat, I wouldn't know. But Anselmo is an embodiment of that philosophy. His wish to destroy *is* his life. No, Gershon, I do not understand him."

"But there is a sympathy between the two of you just the same. I'm not putting it well, but there is something."

Grodin and Meir were on hand the day that Anselmo was released. They watched from a distance while the terrorist was escorted from his cell to an armored car for transport to the Syrian lines. They followed the armored car in a vehicle of their own, Meir driving, Grodin at his side. The ceremony at the Syrian border, by means of which custody of Anselmo was transferred from his Israeli guards to a group of Palestinian commandos, was tense; nevertheless, it was concluded without in-

cident. Just before he entered the waiting car, Anselmo turned for a last look across the border. His eyes darted around as if seeking a specific target. Then he thrust out his jaw and drew back his lips, baring his jagged teeth in a final hideous smile. He gave his head a toss and ducked into the car. The door swung shut and moments later the car sped toward Damascus.

"Quite a performance," Gershon Meir said.

"He's an actor. Everything is performance for him. His whole life is theater."

"He was looking for you."

"I think not."

"He was looking for someone. For whom else would he look?"

Grodin gave his head an impatient shake. His assistant recognized the gesture and let it drop.

On the long drive back, Nahum Grodin leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. It seemed to him that he dreamed without quite losing consciousness. After perhaps half an hour he opened his eyes and straightened up in his seat.

"Where is he now?" he wondered aloud. "Damascus? Or is his plane already in the air?"

"I'd guess he's still on the ground."

"No matter." He sighed. "How do you feel, Gershon? Letting such a one out of our hands? Forget revenge. Think of the ability he has to work with disparate groups of lunatics. He takes partisans of one mad cause and puts them to work on behalf of another equally insane movement. He coordinates the actions of extremists who have nothing else in common. And his touch is like nobody else's. This latest devilment at the United Nations, it's almost impossible to believe that someone other than Anselmo planned it. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that he hatched the concept some time ago to be held at the ready in the event that he should ever be captured."

"I wonder if that could be true."

"It's not impossible, is it? And we had to let him go."

"We'll never have to do that again."

"No," Grodin agreed. "One good thing's come of this. The new law isn't perfect, God knows. Instant trials and speedy hangings are not what democracies ought to aspire to. But it's comforting to know that we will not be in this position again. Gershon?"

"Yes?"

"Stop the car, please. Pull off onto the shoulder."

"Is something wrong?"

"No. But there is something I've decided to tell you. Good, and turn off the engine. We'll be here a few moments." Grodin squeezed his eyes shut, put his hand to his forehead. Without opening his eyes he said, "Anselmo said he and I would meet again. But he was wrong. He'll never return to Israel. He'll meet his friends, if one calls such people friends, and he'll go wherever he has it in mind to go. And in two weeks or a month or possibly as much as two months, he will experience a certain amount of nervousness. He may be mentally depressed, he may grow anxious and irritable. It's quite possible that he'll pay no attention to these signs because they may not be very much out of the ordinary. His life is disorganized, chaotic, enervating, so this state may be no departure from the normal course of things for him."

"I don't understand, Nahum."

"Then after a day or so these symptoms will be more pronounced," Grodin went on. "He may run a fever. His appetite will wane. He'll grow very nervous. He may talk a great deal, might even become something of a chatterbox. You recall that he said he sleeps like a baby. Well, he may experience insomnia.

"Then after a couple of days, things will take a turn for the worse." Grodin took a pinseal billfold from his pocket, drew out and unfolded a sheet of paper.

"Here's a description from a medical encyclopedia. 'The agitation of the sufferer now becomes greatly increased and the countenance now exhibits anxiety and terror. There is marked embarrassment of the breathing, but the most striking and terrible feature of this state is the effect produced by attempts to swallow fluids. The patient suffers from thirst and desires eagerly to drink, but on making the effort is seized with a violent suffocative paroxysm which continues for several seconds and is succeeded by a feeling of intense alarm and distress. Indeed the very thought of drinking suffices to bring on a choking paroxysm, as does also the sound of running water.

" 'The patient is extremely sensitive to any kind of external impression—a bright light, a loud noise, a breath of cool air, anything of this sort may bring on a seizure. There also occur general convulsions and occasionally a condition of tetanic spasm. These various

paroxysms increase in frequency and severity with the advance of the disease.' "

"Disease?" Gershon Meir frowned. "I don't understand, Nahum. What disease? What are you driving at?"

Grodin went on reading. " 'The individual experiences alternate intervals of comparative quiet in which there is intense anxiety and more or less constant difficulty in respiration accompanied by a peculiar sonorous exhalation which has suggested the notion that the patient barks like a dog. In many instances—' "

"A dog!"

" 'In many instances there are intermittent fits of maniacal excitement. During this stage of the disease the patient is tormented with a viscid secretion accumulating in his mouth. From dread of swallowing this, he constantly spits about himself. He may also make snapping movements of the jaws as if attempting to bite. These are actually a manifestation of the spasmodic action which affects the muscles in general. There is no great amount of fever, but the patient will be constipated, his flow of urine will be diminished, and he will often feel sexual excitement.

" 'After two or three days of suffering of the most terrible description, the patient succumbs, with death taking place either in a paroxysm of choking or from exhaustion. The duration of the disease from the first declaration of symptoms is generally from three to five days.' "

Grodin refolded the paper, returned it to his wallet. "Rabies," he said quietly. "Hydrophobia. Its incubation period is less than a week in dogs and other lower mammals. In humans it generally takes a month to erupt. It works faster in small children, I understand. And if the bite is in the head or neck the incubation period is speeded up."

"Can't it be cured? I thought—"

"The Pasteur shots, yes. A series of about a dozen painful injections. I believe the vaccine is introduced by a needle into the stomach. And there are other less arduous methods of vaccination if the particular strain of rabies virus can be determined. But they have to be employed immediately. Once the incubation period is complete, once the symptoms manifest themselves, death is inevitable."

"God."

"By the time Anselmo has the slightest idea what's wrong with him—"

"It will be too late."

"Exactly," Grodin said.

"When you gave him the pentothal—"

"Yes. There was more than pentothal in the needle."

"I sensed something."

"So you said."

Gershon Meir shuddered. "When he realizes what you did to him and how you did it—"

"Then what?" Grodin spread his hands. "Could he be more utterly our enemy than he is already? And I don't honestly think he'll guess how he was tricked. He'll most likely suppose he was exposed to rabies from an animal source. I understand you can get it from inhaling the vapors of the dung of rabid bats. Perhaps he has hidden out in a bat-infested cave and will blame the bats for his illness. But it doesn't matter, Gershon. Let him know what I did to him. I almost hope he guesses, for all the good it will do him."

"God."

"I just wanted to tell you," Grodin said, his voice calmer now. "There's poetry to it, don't you think? He's walking around now like a time bomb. He could get the Pasteur shots and save himself, but he doesn't know that, and by the time he does—"

"Oh, God."

"Start the car, eh? We'd better be getting back." And the older man straightened up in his seat and rubbed the throbbing knuckles of his right hand. They still ached, but all the same he was smiling.

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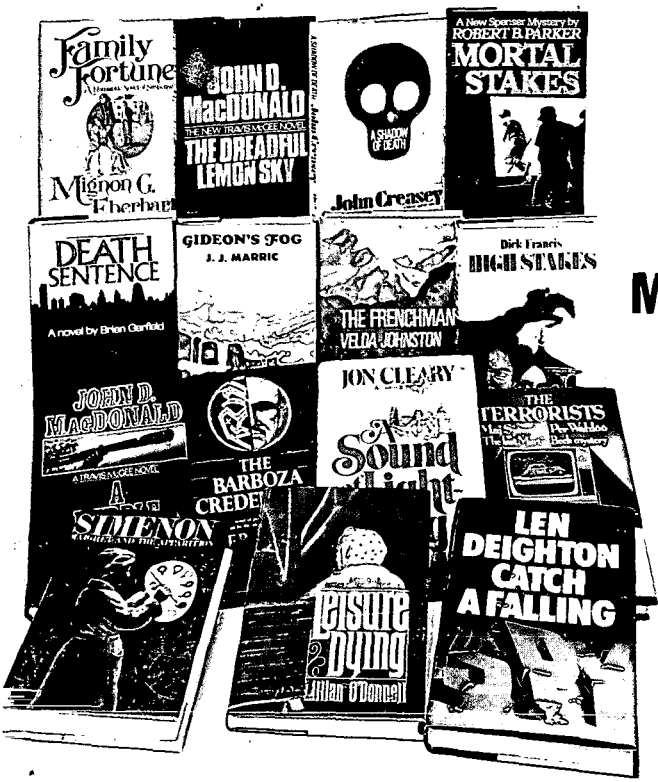

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