ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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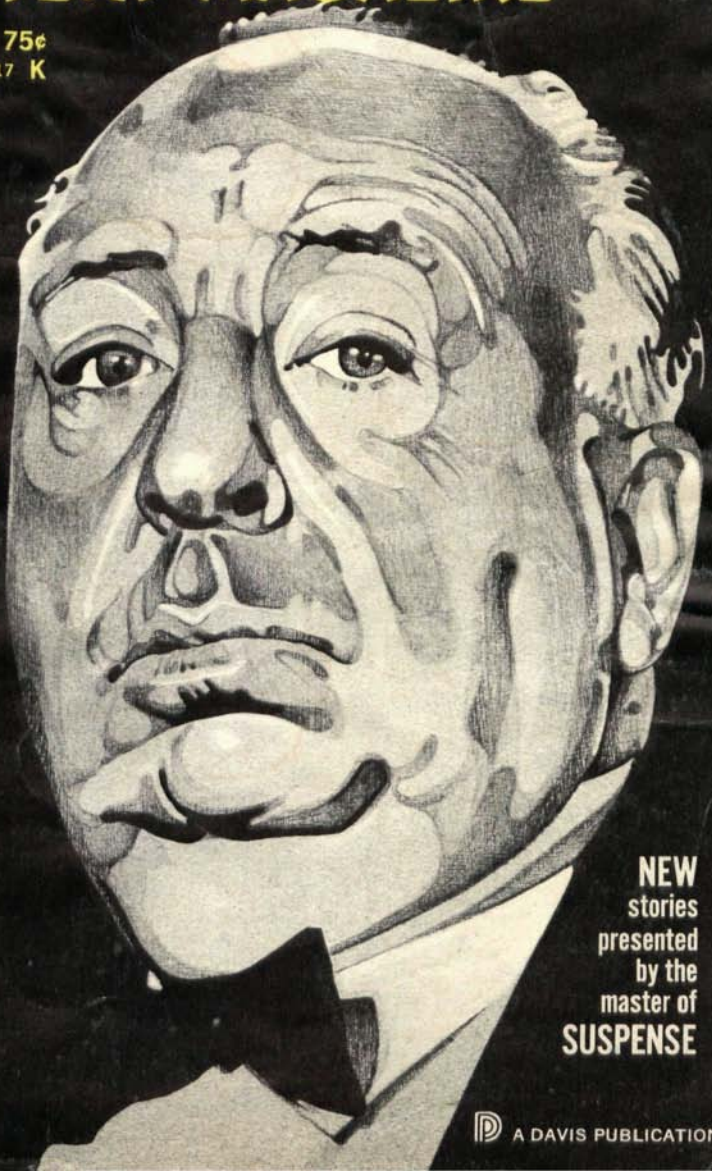

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VOLUME 22, NO. 8 AUGUST 1977

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE AUGUST 16

NOVELETTE

SHORT STORIES

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August 1977

Dear Reader:

It's August once again, month of soothing heat—and restlessness. In this issue you will read about crimes of impatience and frustration and, yes, villainy—perpetrated in cities and towns all over, including Washington, D.C. and Montreal.

"What in May escaped detection," wrote Robert Browning, "August notes, and names each blunder." So follow these crimes and note the blunders—of the victims, of the criminals, and of the undetecting bystanders who are not as discerning as you. And enjoy what remains of this precious time of year.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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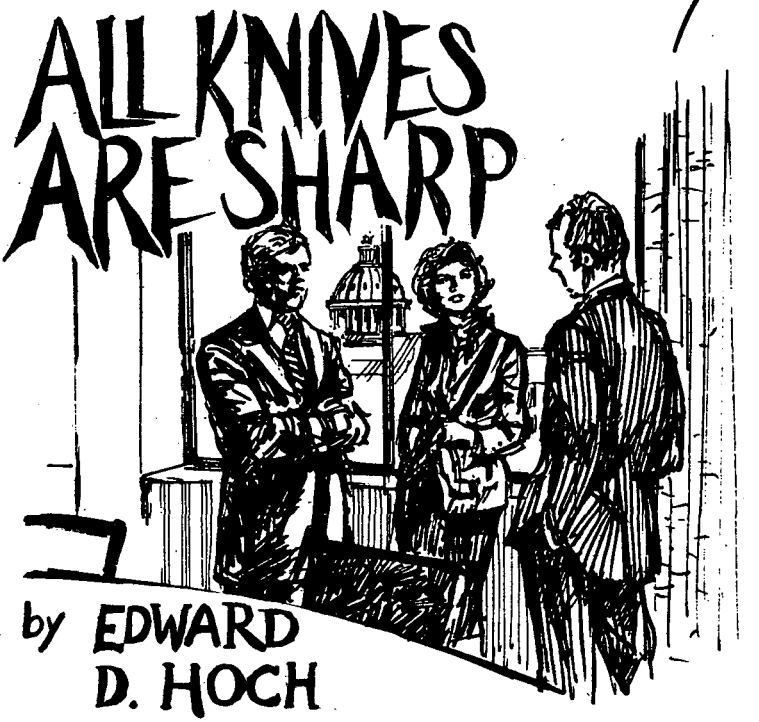
They called themselves consumer lobbyists, which was as good a tag as any . . .

ALL KNIVES ARE SHARP



by EDWARD D. HOCH

I'd just come back from a luncheon meeting with Nader's people at the Mayflower Hotel when my partner Ray Larson summoned me into his office. "How'd it go?" he asked, leaning back in his chair.

"Good. They're after a chemical company in Ohio that's been dumping PCB into a lake there. They want some help from us."

"Can we give it to them?"

"I think so. I'll dig through the files this afternoon."

"Have you got some spare time for something else first?"

He asked it so casually I knew it wasn't casual at all. "Sure. What is it?"

"Glenda Moore's waiting in the conference room. Remember her? Charles Wheat's secretary at Care-Wheat Corporation? I think she's got something to tell us."

"What are we waiting for? Let's go see her."

I followed him into the conference room, a paneled den with a long table that made it more impressive than either of our small offices. A blonde-haired woman in her late thirties was standing by the window looking out at the Washington skyline. She turned as we entered and said, "There are no tall buildings in this city!"

"Their height is limited by law," Ray explained. "I suppose it's not much like Houston."

"Not much," she agreed, turning toward me. Her face was a bit too round to be really pretty, but she made up for it with a smile that could have warmed a mummy.

"Glenda, this is my partner, Dan Summit."

"Nice to meet you," I said.

"Larson and Summit. I get to meet the whole firm!"

"Do you have some information for us, Miss Moore?" I asked. "About Care-Wheat?"

She nodded. "You have to understand I've been loyal to Mr. Wheat for a good many years, through a great many troubles. I stood by his side when he had that run-in with you. I've never been anything but a loyal secretary."

"I understand."

"But now—now something's changed. There's something I feel I have to tell."

"About the company's products?"

"About the testing program for new pharmaceuticals."

"What about it?"

"They've been testing a new drug called AV-5. It's for elderly patients in the early stages of senility. I have documentation that the drug is being tested in a San Diego nursing home on patients without their consent."

"If they're senile, how could they consent?"

"If they're senile, consent should be obtained from next of kin. In

some cases AV-5 was administered even after relatives refused their approval. Patients have died, possibly from harmful side effects."

"Can you supply names and dates?"

"Yes."

"That's a very serious charge, Miss Moore," Ray reminded her. I could tell he was wishing Audrey was there to make a stenographic record of all this.

"I know," she replied.

"When can we have the names and dates?"

"Tomorrow." She was suddenly nervous, and her hand darted into her big green purse for a wrinkled pack of cigarettes. "I can give you the log of the AV-5 test program tomorrow."

"Where is the information now?" I asked.

"I couldn't risk bringing it with me on the plane," she answered vaguely. "I mailed it ahead to a friend in Washington. I'll get it tonight."

"You'll sleep better if you're rid of it," I argued. "Let me meet you tonight and pick it up. Would that be all right?"

"I think so," she agreed.

"Where are you staying?"

She hesitated only an instant. "Meet me at eleven o'clock in the lobby of the Griffin Hotel, near Dupont Circle."

I nodded. "I know the place."

When she'd gone, Ray Larson sat back and stared at me. "What do you think, Dan?"

"I think maybe we've got Care-Wheat Corporation at last."

To understand my feelings toward Care-Wheat you have to go back a few years, to the time when Ray Larson and I came home from Vietnam at the end of that mixed-up war, full of ideas and ideals about a better tomorrow. It was a year of flux in Washington. Nixon was on his way out, the environmentalists were strong, and Ralph Nader was the city's leading consumer advocate. Ray and I founded Larson and Summit with a couple of small foundation grants and a lot of dreams. We called ourselves consumer lobbyists, which was as good a tag as any.

The first big company we went after was Care-Wheat, a conglomerate formed by the merger of Care Chemical Corporation and Wheat Pharmaceuticals. Based in a Houston skyscraper, the firm had

branched out in recent years into medical publishing, plastics, and a half-dozen other ventures. Their plastics division was making a seal for the doors of microwave ovens—a seal which broke down quickly and allowed the leakage of dangerous amounts of radiation. We forced them to withdraw it from the market, and to replace the seal on ovens already sold. The resulting publicity made the reputation of Larson and Summit, and also made us a lifelong enemy of Care-Wheat Corporation.

Over the past few years our reputation grew. Ray lectured and authored a couple of consumer-oriented handbooks that added to our income. Neither of us was growing rich, though, in what was basically a nonprofit operation. Books, lecture fees, and occasional grants didn't go far toward supporting a Washington office with a full-time secretary and some part-time people. Ray was in worse financial shape than me, with a wife and a couple of kids not far from college age. All I had was a failed marriage and an ex-wife too proud to take alimony.

So here we were, back up against Care-Wheat once more.

"Why do you think she's broken with her boss?" Ray wondered. He liked to speculate on things like that.

"Who knows? Maybe he decided to go back to his wife. How the hell should I know? The important thing is that she's come to us."

When I left my modest Georgetown apartment that night at ten-thirty, I figured my meeting with Glenda Moore would be the start of something big. It was, but not in the way I imagined.

She wasn't in the Griffin lobby so I asked the clerk for her room number. He told me she wasn't registered there. I waited a few minutes, letting this news sink in, and finally went outside. There was a crowd gathered halfway up the next block, where police cars and an ambulance stained the night with their revolving red lights.

I felt a chill up my spine, as if I knew what I would find before I got there.

It was Glenda Moore and she'd been stabbed to death on the street. The cop told me it looked like a mugging that had gone wrong.

Street crime in Washington was especially bad that spring, and the police wrote off the killing of Glenda Moore as one more regrettable tragedy. "We came close," Ray said the next morning. "It's damned bad luck."

I sat on the edge of his desk and lit a cigarette. "I don't believe much in luck—or coincidences—like that."

"You think Care-Wheat was involved? Have they reached the point where they're killing off witnesses?"

"According to her story, people died in that nursing home. Another killing to cover it up isn't too far-fetched."

"All right," Ray agreed with a sigh. "I know better than to disagree with one of your hunches. But where do we go from here?"

"Glenda Moore told us she'd mailed the information to a friend. She was going to pick it up last night and meet me in the Griffin lobby. But she wasn't registered there. She might have been using another name, but since she was killed on the street it's far more likely she was on her way to the hotel from the place she was really staying."

"And where would that be?"

"Her reaction to our skyline implied that this was her first trip to Washington. And yet she came up with the Griffin—an obscure hotel—when I asked for a meeting place. And she wouldn't have wanted to travel too far on Washington streets that late at night. I think she was staying very close to where she was killed—somewhere actually within sight of the Griffin Hotel. Across the street or down the block. I'm going to check it out."

Ray Larson stared up at me. "Be careful, Dan."

No one had seen the attack on Glenda Moore. She'd been stabbed once in the chest, straight to the heart, and her open handbag was found discarded down the block. At first glance it had all the earmarks of a typical mugging, with the criminal panicking when she screamed or tried to resist. But her wallet with fifty-five dollars in cash was still inside the purse.

Maybe her killer had been after something else, something more important than money.

I had to find out where she'd been staying, and with whom. I had to find out if she had the Care-Wheat records in her purse when she was stabbed. Because they weren't there when the police reached the body.

Our full-time secretary, Audrey Lincoln, was both black and beautiful. And she knew Washington like the back of her hand. I explained the problem to her and said, "You know that neighborhood, Audrey.

Are there any apartments nearby? A place where she could have been staying with this friend? It would probably be in sight of the Griffin."

She thought about it, pulling a pencil from the nest of her modified Afro and jabbing it at the large-scale city map on my office wall. "This whole block is apartments. Maybe two hundred of 'em. How are you going to find the right one?"

I grinned at her. "You're going to help me."

My idea was simple, though only a lot of telephoning and footwork would tell us if it paid off. I figured this had been Glenda Moore's first trip to Washington, so there was a good chance the person she stayed with was a friend or relative from Texas. The police said no one had come forward, but that only meant the person was afraid to be known.

"You'll be looking for someone from Texas, at least someone who lived in the Houston area before coming to Washington," I told Audrey. "Check for people named Moore first. It could be a relative. I'm going to check the taxi records for the last few days, for a fare between the airport and one of those buildings you pointed out."

I found what I wanted without too much trouble, a fare from the airport on the day before Glenda Moore visited our office. When I reached the building Audrey was already there, talking to the superintendent in the hallway. "This is the place," I confirmed. "Any luck?"

"No Moores, but he remembers a woman arriving two days ago with a suitcase."

The super nodded but didn't speak. "Which apartment did she go to?" I asked.

"I don't remember for sure."

"She's the woman who was stabbed to death last night. If you can't remember, the police might be able to help you."

"I don't want no trouble," he insisted nervously.

"Which apartment?"

"I think number 25.".

It was on the second floor. The building was old but clean, with well-lit hallways. I knocked at the door, not knowing what to expect. The man who answered was slim and blond-haired, with a slight accent that could have been a muted Texas drawl. "What is it?"

I looked him in the eye and said, "I'm a friend of Glenda Moore."

His eyes shifted from my face to Audrey's. "Is this some sort of rack-

et? Who are you people?"

I showed him my card. "Dan Summit, of Larson and Summit. Consumer lobbyists. Maybe you've heard of us."

"I don't read the papers."

I edged into the room. "Funny you didn't tell the cops she was staying here with you."

"Go to hell!" He started to shut the door but my foot was in the way.

"We know she came here. We know she left you just a few minutes before eleven to cross the street and meet me in the Griffin lobby."

He relaxed his pressure on the door. "You were the one she went to meet?"

"That's right."

"All right. Come in."

The apartment was sparsely furnished with pieces that seemed totally unrelated to its present occupant, suggesting that his stay was temporary at best. "Were you a friend of Glenda Moore?" I asked.

"I used to work with her at Care-Wheat. My name's George Howff."

His age was hard to judge, but I figured him for a few years younger than Glenda. "She was staying with you, wasn't she?" I let my eyes wander to the double bed set in an alcove on one wall.

"I—yes, she was. We were old friends."

"What brought you to Washington from Houston?"

"I was a purchasing agent at Care-Wheat and they fired me. I came here hoping to land a government job, but so far it hasn't worked out."

"How long ago?"

"What?"

"How long ago did you come here?"

"Three months. Back in the winter."

"And Glenda Moore resented their firing you?"

He hesitated. "Yeah, I guess she did."

I nodded. It helped explain why she'd suddenly turned against her employer. They'd fired the man she loved and driven him out of town. To a woman of Glenda Moore's looks and age, that could have been the tragedy of her life. "Did Glenda mail something to you recently?"

"Last week."

"Records of drug testing?"

"You seem to know it all."

"Did she tell you she was coming to see us?"

"I guess she mentioned it. I told her to be careful. These streets aren't safe at night." He looked away, refusing to meet my eyes.

"She wasn't killed by a mugger," I said. "You know that."

George Howff glanced at me, and then at Audrey again. He seemed to be waiting for her to say something. When she remained silent he said, "I don't know any such thing. I don't know who killed her."

"If you thought it was a straight mugging there'd be no reason not to come forward. You kept quiet about knowing her because you think the corporation got to her. Right?"

"I—"

"Look, Mr. Howff, you're on dangerous ground. This whole business could wind up in front of a Senate committee with you testifying before TV cameras. Would you like that any better?"

"No," he admitted.

"Did she leave anything here when she went out to meet me?"

He opened a closet door. "This suitcase is all."

It was unlocked and I snapped it open. Underthings, cosmetics, a brown leather purse with a handkerchief and her plane ticket inside. No sign of the AV-5 records, which only confirmed that they'd been in her other purse. "You must have opened the letter Glenda sent you. What was inside?"

"I couldn't make much of it. I think it was a log of some tests with AV-5. There was a doctor's name—Memlo—in San Diego."

I made a note of it. "Maybe that's what I need."

I talked it over with Ray Larson and flew out to San Diego the following morning, coming in low over the bay to land at Lindbergh Field. It didn't take long to rent a car and establish that Dr. Carlos Memlo was director of the Happy Harbor Nursing Home, situated on a hill which gave it a view of the marinas and the downtown skyline.

Dr. Memlo himself was a burly man with a black beard and a high forehead. The window behind his desk offered, I was sure, the best view available of San Diego harbor. Dr. Memlo was the sort who would always have the best view for himself.

"I've heard of you, Mr. Summit," he said. "You're one of those consumer rabble-rousers." He was busy sorting a stack of file cards, and he glanced only occasionally in my direction.

"I'm glad my fame has spread to the West Coast," I replied.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Summit? As you can see, I'm a busy man."

"We're looking into the testing program on AV-5. You're familiar with the drug?"

"Certainly. We've done some limited laboratory work on it."

"Has it been tested on anyone here at Happy Harbor?"

He put down the cards and leaned back in his chair, giving me his full attention now. "It has been used on some of our patients in a carefully controlled program. It has not been *tested* on them in the sense you seem to infer."

"You have records to back this up? Permission forms signed by your patients?"

"We do."

"I'd like to see them if I may."

He smiled and shook his head. "You must know that patient records are confidential, Mr. Summit. You'd need a court order to see them."

"Isn't it true that some of the patients who took AV-5 have died?"

"Certainly! In a nursing home as large as this one we average about one death a week. Nothing unusual in that!"

"As I understand it, Dr. Memlo, AV-5 is a drug for the treatment of certain forms of senility."

"That's correct."

"Then the patients to whom it's administered would hardly be capable of making rational judgments about being used as guinea pigs."

He was on his feet then, pointing toward the door. "Get out of my office, Mr. Summit, or I'll have you thrown out! I do not intend to listen to any more of your wild charges. And if you repeat them in the press you'll be sued for libel!"

"I don't think you'd want a court to look into your activities too closely, Dr. Memlo."

I left him and went back outside to my rented car. I hadn't flown all the way across the country for nothing, so I drove downtown to the public library and got out the file of recent local newspapers. The drug AV-5 had only been available for testing during the past fourteen months or so. According to Memlo, the nursing home averaged about one death a week among its patients, so I figured during the period in question I should find maybe sixty names in the obit columns that be-

longed to Happy Harbor. Some who died shortly after admission might be identified by their former home address, but I figured they weren't the ones I wanted anyway.

At the end of two hours I had seventeen names, with several months left to check out. I decided to work on the seventeen for now and see what I came up with.

Calling next of kin and asking about the cause of a parent's or spouse's death isn't any easy task, and I got through the list with difficulty. Two couldn't be reached and four wouldn't talk to me. Six others assured me that their elderly relatives had been given no unusual drugs while at Happy Harbor. But with the other five I hit pay dirt. They all said they'd been asked by Dr. Memlo to allow the administration of AV-5. Three had denied permission, but the other two had agreed. At least one of the three denials believed the drug had been administered anyway, to her mother. She agreed to let me come and see her.

Her name was Rita Rogers and she was in her late forties. She lived in a small house and when I arrived late that afternoon she was alone. "The kids are all gone and my husband's at work," she explained. "Some days it gets lonely. I'm looking around for a job myself now that I don't have to worry about mother any longer."

"She died three months ago?" I asked, consulting my list.

"That's correct. We had to put her in Happy Harbor last year. "There was no room for her here, not with the care she needed."

"How old was she?"

"Eighty-one, and a bit senile. Oh, she'd have her good days, but there were fewer of them toward the end."

"And Dr. Memlo approached you about trying AV-5 on her?"

Rita Rogers nodded. "He said it might help and I was all for it at first, till he gave me a long permission form to sign. It would have absolved Happy Harbor and the drug company of liability. I refused to sign it and told him not to administer the drug to my mother."

"But you believe he did it anyway?"

She nodded. "I'm sure of it. One day, in a more lucid moment, mother remembered marking an X on a paper for Dr. Memlo. I demanded to see the document, and sure enough—it was the permission form. Memlo wouldn't say whether they were actually giving her AV-5, but after a few days of seeming improvement she suddenly died. When

I confronted him with it he said they had her X on the paper, witnessed by two nurses, and there was nothing I could do about it."

I stayed with her for another hour, using my portable recorder to make a tape of her testimony and noting carefully all the dates she could give me. When we finished I was sure I had the beginnings of a case against Dr. Memlo and Care-Wheat Corporation.

I remained in San Diego overnight and talked to three more families the following day. At least two of the three bore out what Rita Rogers had told me, and all were willing to repeat their charges in public if necessary.

That night, feeling good for the first time in days, I boarded a plane to Houston.

There had been one previous meeting between myself and Charles Wheat, back in the early days of Larson and Summit, but that had been in Washington, in a congressional committee hearing room. This was my first visit to the Houston headquarters of Care-Wheat Corporation, and I was impressed. The forty-story building actually tapered going up, giving it the look of one of the oil wells I'd seen on the way in from the airport.

Charles Wheat's office, which I'd penetrated a phalanx of secretaries to reach, was all chrome and glitter, two floors high, with a sweeping view of the buildings across the street. He sat behind a large oak desk without a single object on top of it.

"We meet again, Mr. Summit."

"Right you are, Mr. Wheat." I shook his hand to keep it all proper.

"What new scare headlines are you working on these days? Still on the microwave-oven kick?"

"No, I've moved on to other things. Testing new drugs on human guinea pigs without their conscious consent—how's that for a scare?"

"You came to Houston, to my office, to tell me this?" He was a tall man, beating my six feet by a couple of inches, and just then he seemed filled with a towering indignation.

"I've got the evidence, Mr. Wheat. Names, dates, statements from next of kin. How long do you think Dr. Memlo will stay silent if it's his neck on the line?"

"Get out of here!"

"Memlo already tossed me out. But I'm not leaving this room till

I've had my say. What Care-Wheat has been doing on the AV-5 tests is downright criminal and you know it."

He seemed on the verge of pushing a concealed buzzer beneath the rim of his desk, and then to think better of it. Instead he sat down and said,

"All right. You have my attention, Mr. Summit. What in hell do you want?"

"The murderer of Glenda Moore."

"I—"

"She was your personal secretary. I'm sure you haven't forgotten the name."

"No, of course not. I heard about her tragic death in Washington." His eyes met mine. "A mugging, I understand."

"You understand wrong. She was stabbed to death on her way to meet me. I think her death was ordered by someone connected with Care-Wheat Corporation."

"Oh, come now, Mr. Summit! This is a bit too much, even for you!"

"I want the person who killed her, Wheat."

"I know nothing about it. She was an old and valued friend. We hardly go around killing former employees."

There was little point in talking any longer. "All right, Mr. Wheat. You know what information I've got and you know what information I want. Care-Wheat is in big trouble already. The trouble could get even worse if the corporation is linked to Glenda Moore's killing."

He sighed and pulled open a desk drawer. I half expected his hand to come up holding a gun, but it came up holding a package of hundred-dollar bills instead. "All right, Summit," he said, tossing the money onto the bare desk top. "There's ten thousand dollars. Put it in your pocket."

I didn't touch it. "That's not my price."

"What is? Twenty? Thirty?" His hand moved, producing two more packets of money.

"You can't buy me, Wheat. Don't bother to try."

He leaned across the desk, his lips turned back in a sneer. "I can buy you. Every man in Washington has his price. *Every* man!"

"The only way you'll stop me will be with a knife in an alley."

"I'll make it a dull knife, Summit, so it'll hurt more."

"All knives are sharp," I replied, heading for the door. "Ask Glenda

Moore the next time you see her."

Ray Larson was in my office the following morning. "How'd the trip go, Dan?"

"Good and bad. I'm loaded with stuff from the West Coast. But I stopped by Houston on the way back to confront Wheat with it and drew a blank."

"Charles Wheat? You went to see him?"

"Sure. I thought I could get something from him about the murder of his secretary. But he wasn't talking."

"A man like Charles Wheat doesn't fly in from Texas to stab his secretary on a street in Washington."

"Agreed—but he could pick up a phone and have it done. He has the money for that. He even tried to bribe me."

"You!"

"Thirty grand, right on the desk top. I told him to forget it."

"Too bad you didn't tape that bit."

"He has body scanners in the reception area. No one could get near him with a gun or a tape recorder."

"What about San Diego? Do we have enough to fly with?"

"Just about. I'll have Audrey transcribe the tapes I made. Then we'll decide where to run with them."

He patted my shoulder on the way out. "Take care, Dan. Since Wheat knows we're after him again, there's no telling what he'll come up with."

Ray left the office early that afternoon, and Audrey closed up her desk at five-thirty. I was still going over the mail that had accumulated during my three days away, so I told her good night and decided to stay awhile. I was just settling in for another hour's work when the phone rang.

"Mr. Summit?"

"Speaking."

"This is Dr. Memlo."

"Yes."

"I'm here in Washington. I'd like to speak with you. Tonight."

"Sure, Doc. I'm here in my office. I'm sure you know the address."

"Not there. I could be seen."

"Where, then?"

"The parking garage on H Street, between 9th and 10th. The second level."

"All right," I agreed. "When?"

"Eight o'clock?"

"Fine. I'll be there."

I hung up and sat looking at the phone. The voice had been Memlo's, all right, but I didn't know what it meant. I didn't even know if he was really in Washington. Assassins could be hired from Houston and victims could be lured into traps by calls from San Diego.

I gathered up all my tapes and notes and locked them in the office safe. Then I went out to Audrey's fireproof filing cabinet and opened the drawer with the combination lock. There was a .38 revolver wrapped in an oil-stained cloth, which Ray had acquired somewhere in his travels. We spoke of it as the office gun, but neither of us had ever felt the need to carry it. I used to kid Ray about his private-eye image when he brought it out on quiet days to oil it.

But tonight I wasn't kidding.

I unwrapped the weapon and checked the cylinder to see that it was fully loaded. There was no holster, so I dropped it into the right-hand pocket of my raincoat. With the evening temperature in the mid-fifties, I figured the raincoat wouldn't look all that unusual.

I was at the garage twenty minutes early, and found that it was all but deserted at this hour of the night. Standing in the shadows I felt a bit like Woodward waiting to meet Deep Throat.

Exactly at eight a car came in off the ramp and parked. Dr. Memlo got out and walked toward me. He was alone.

"I'm surprised to see you back East, Doctor," I said. This time I didn't bother to shake hands. My right hand was in the pocket with the gun.

"Oh, I get around. I thought we should talk a bit more about the AV-5 testing program."

"Gladly." I was certain now that Charles Wheat had told him of my visit to Houston.

"I'm willing to admit that we used AV-5 on certain patients without the consent of their relatives. It was a decision I made personally, for the good of those patients."

"It was so good it killed a few of them."

"That's not true! In every case possible we conducted an autopsy.

There's no evidence AV-5 contributed to those deaths! And for every patient who died, ten have showed a marked improvement. Don't you see? AV-5 works! Already the test results justify a full-scale marketing program by Care-Wheat."

"And that's what interests you most, isn't it, Doctor? I'm sure you own a large block of Care-Wheat stock."

"That's beside the point. The only important factor is that AV-5 prolongs life in elderly patients."

"If it doesn't kill them first."

"Medical progress has always involved some risks."

"But this time those taking the risks are innocent victims, unable to decline the role you thrust upon them."

"What do you intend doing?"

"The whole AV-5 story will be made public. I owe that much to your patients, and to a woman named Glenda Moore."

"Then there's nothing more to be said. Goodbye, Mr. Summit."

"I'm sorry if you flew all the way across the country just for this," I told his retreating back.

I watched while he got into his car and drove away, leaving me alone in the empty garage. The fact was that he *had* flown all the way across the country just for this foolish, inconclusive meeting, and I wondered why. Certainly he was acting on Charles Wheat's orders, but that still didn't explain it.

I'd parked my own car outside on the street and now as I headed for it I became aware of someone else in the garage. He came out of the shadows ahead of me, walking my way. He was a well-dressed young man with black hair and a moustache. His hands swung empty at his sides, and for a moment I was taken off guard.

He was five feet in front of me when his right hand came up and I saw the knife shoot out of his sleeve and settle into his grip as if by magic. Then I knew I was looking at Glenda Moore's killer.

I sidestepped at the instant of his lunge, feeling the blade rip the front of my shirt. He came at me again and I danced back a few steps, trying to pull the revolver free of my pocket. Finally I fired through the cloth without aiming. The bullet was wide of the mark but he hesitated just long enough. I grabbed for his wrist with my left hand, giving him a quick short jab with my right fist. One more punch and he fell at my feet. . .

Sergeant Dally of the Washington police was an old friend. After an hour's questioning he came out of the interrogation room and gave me a full report. "His name's Mendoza. He's an Argentine national who's wanted for murder back home. He's ready to talk. He likes our jails better than theirs."

I followed Dally back into the interrogation room and took a chair near the wall. Mendoza glanced at me with a sour expression. "All right," Dally said. "What about Glenda Moore?"

"If that was the woman near the Griffin Hotel, I killed her."

"Why?"

"I was paid five hundred dollars."

"What about me?" I asked. "Same amount?"

"Same amount," he replied, avoiding my eyes. He seemed embarrassed, not by the crime but by its failure.

"Who hired you?"

"I don't know names. A phone call. I get it and I get out on a job. The money comes in the mail."

Sergeant Dally nodded. "That was a fancy spring-knife gadget up your sleeve. Did you get that back home?"

"We have a long tradition of knife fighting in the Argentine," he said. There might have been a trace of pride in his voice.

"Too bad Glenda Moore wasn't armed," I told him. "That might have made it a fairer fight. What time did they call you to kill her?"

"Early that evening. I was told to look for a woman alone near the Griffin Hotel just before eleven. She would be carrying a big green purse. After I stabbed her I had to take some papers out of the purse."

"Where are they?"

"I was told to burn them."

I leaned forward in the chair. "A smart guy like you wouldn't burn something that might be worth money now, would you?"

He didn't answer right away. He stared at me and then shifted his gaze to Dally, as if trying to decide which one of us was really in charge. Finally he said, "I might make a deal."

"No deal," Dally told him. "The only deal you get is we try you for murder here instead of shipping you back to Argentina."

I left them to argue about it. There was someone I had to see. The call to Mendoza might have come from Houston, but somebody in Washington had fingered Glenda Moore, just as the good Dr. Memlo

had fingered me. I thought I knew who.

I drove over to George Howff's apartment, with the revolver still in my coat pocket.

He was in his pajamas when he let me in. He might have been sleeping, though it was only eleven o'clock. Just about the time Glenda Moore had died.

"They arrested her killer tonight," I said. "I thought you'd want to know."

"Glenda's killer? Who was it?"

"A man named Mendoza. He was paid five hundred dollars to do it."

George Howff sat down, running a hand through his hair. "It's funny—her death never really hit me until this instant."

"Somebody had to tell Mendoza where she'd be. You were the only one who knew she was to meet me, George."

"Me! You think I—?"

"I think you're still friendly with Care-Wheat, in spite of being fired. I think you told them Glenda was meeting me."

"That's crazy!"

"Is it?"

"Look, I can prove I'm innocent! I didn't know she was meeting you until she got back here and asked for the records she'd mailed me. I couldn't have phoned anyone then, with her right here!"

"You could have gone out for cigarettes and used a pay phone."

"I could have, but I didn't!"

He sounded like a man telling the truth. I was about to question him further when I remembered something. I remembered the suitcase he'd shown me, with Glenda Moore's meager possessions.

The purse, with her airline ticket inside.

"All right," I said suddenly. "I'll talk to you later."

I left him and found a pay phone, putting in a call to Ray's home. Mrs. Larson told me he was working late at our office. Sure enough, when I reached the building I could see a light burning.

He looked up as I unlocked the hall door. "I thought I was the only one who worked late around here. It's almost midnight!" he said.

"I've had a busy night. I'm just returning the office cannon." I put it back into Audrey's filing cabinet and started telling him about Mendoza and the attempt on my life.

"Damn! You actually shot through the coat pocket, like some sort of private eye?" He grinned at the idea. "And this Mendoza confessed everything?"

"Everything. If we're lucky we might even find that he's still got the AV-5 records. I don't think he destroyed them like he was supposed to."

Ray shook his head. "God—to kill a woman for that! Couldn't he have just knocked her on the head?"

I walked to the window and stared out at the city, focusing on the lights of the Capitol dome. "Is that what you thought he was going to do when you told them about Glenda Moore?"

"Huh?"

"You sold out to Care-Wheat, didn't you, Ray? That's why Charles Wheat felt he could offer me a bribe, because you'd already taken one to lay off them!" I turned toward him and his face was ashen under the fluorescent light.

"Dan—where'd you get such a crazy idea?"

"It's written on your face, Ray. I've known you a long time, remember? Mendoza was told Glenda Moore could be identified by a large green purse she was carrying—the one we saw her with. Now only the two of us and George Howff knew the time and place of the meeting. Even Audrey wasn't here when we set it up. But Howff would never have used the purse for a description because he knew she'd brought two purses with her. A brown leather one in her suitcase had her plane ticket inside. She must have arrived at his place carrying that one, and as far as he knew she might have decided to switch back to it when she met me."

"Let me explain, Dan."

"You phoned Wheat and warned him she'd been to see us. You told him she was delivering those records to me at eleven. And you described what she was wearing. He said he'd take care of it, and he did." My anger had boiled over. "My God, Ray—do you need money that badly?"

"Dan, just give me a chance, will you?" He was trembling as he spoke, going to pieces before my eyes. In all those years of battling together for a cause I'd never seen him like this before. "I've got a wife and family, Dan. You don't understand how it is. The lectures, the grants—they don't bring in half enough! When Wheat offered me

money I saw nothing wrong with taking it."

"Money for what, Ray? For fingering a poor woman like Glenda Moore?"

"He wasn't supposed to kill her, for God's sake!"

"Mendoza is a hired murderer. That's all he does is kill people. You don't hire him to snatch a purse!" I started for the door.

"What are you going to do, Dan?"

"Tell Sergeant Dally what I know."

"What about Larson and Summit? What about all the good we've accomplished?"

"Maybe Larson and Summit was nothing but a dream," I said.

I slammed the door behind me, hearing him call my name for the last time. I was halfway down the hall when I remembered the gun in Audrey's file.

My hand was on the knob of the door when I heard the single shot from his office.

There wasn't much I could say to Mrs. Larson at the funeral. You don't like admitting that you've driven your best friend to suicide. I stayed with her for a while, and then drove down to police headquarters, where Sergeant Dally gave me the AV-5 data he'd recovered from Mendoza's apartment. Then I went down to the office.

Audrey Lincoln was back from the funeral, cleaning out her desk. "What's all this?" I asked her.

"I figured we'd be closing up."

"You figured wrong. We've still got Care-Wheat to go after, and Dr. Memlo, and after that we've got a half-dozen other projects on the fire. There's a chemical plant up in New England that's—"

"You're sounding just like Ray did, back in the early days," she said. She'd stopped taking things out of her desk.

"Yeah," I said. "That's the way I like to remember him. Come on, let's get to work."

Who was the betrayer? Who was the betrayed? . . .

POOR EVA

by JANE SPEED

"Well-ordered days make a well-ordered life." Barry Protheroe couldn't remember where he'd first heard that, but he heartily subscribed to it. This fine crisp Sunday was laid out like a map.

Even the annoyances were predictably in place. Barry poured himself another cup of coffee and cast a wryly indulgent eye at the kitchen door. No need to wonder what his wife was doing out there so long. "Fixing something special for Sunday breakfast," he mimicked her.

"Eva!" he called out. "Don't make such a big deal of it. You know I want to catch the 10:26." For quite some time now Barry had left his car at home on Sunday and taken the commuter train instead. "It makes a relaxing change" was the way he put it.

His entreaty having had no effect, Barry went over and pushed open the swinging door—and shook his head in exasperation. For there stood Eva, time and train schedules be damned, doggedly sprinkling some last something or other on her creation.

"Please—" She jumped at the sound of his voice so near, setting the shaker down with a clatter. "Just bring it in now, will you?"

She picked up the tray and followed him back into the dining room. "I wanted to fix something special for Sunday breakfast," she explained as she set his plate in front of him.

"Mmmmm," Barry murmured politely after he'd taken a couple of bites. Whatever it was, it tasted no worse than usual.

Good old Eva, she never gave up and she never improved. She'd learned to cook in the same plodding way she tackled everything. Got herself a basic book and followed the instructions, line by line, till she'd grasped the rudiments. But the rudiments were all she ever grasped. She simply lacked whatever it took to rise above the mediocre. No matter how exotic the recipe she started from, her every dish turned out as uninteresting as Eva herself.

Yet, funnily enough, she enjoyed quite a reputation for her cooking. Since it couldn't possibly be because she did it so well, Barry supposed it must be because she did such a lot of it; or, more likely, because it was the only thing she did even passably. When people wanted to say something nice about poor Eva, they seized upon her cooking. What else was there?

Across from him Eva sighed. "I don't see why you have to work every Sunday."

It was a familiar plaint and Barry was not about to listen to it again. "It can't be helped," he said brusquely and pushed back his chair.

"You didn't finish your breakfast," Eva protested.

"I've had all I want."

"But I made it especially for you."

"Eva, I just haven't time!"

Her face fell. "You don't like it."

"It's great—delicious," he lied. She remained uncheered. "Oh, for

God's sake. Look, I love it." He grabbed up his fork and shoveled in a huge final mouthful.

Which only set her off on another of her favorite tacks. "You always do that," she scolded, "bolt your food, eat on the run." Then, with a kind of sullen certainty, she added, "You'll get indigestion again."

As though she'd pronounced a curse, he did feel a small visceral twinge. "I feel fine," he said testily and strode out of the room.

But it was too much to hope that she'd let him go in peace.

"Barry. . ." Her voice and then Eva herself pursued him into the hall. "Did you take your car in to have the brakes checked?"

Why, oh why, he beseeched the heavens as he struggled into his coat, did she always save up these little fussings to bombard him with just as he was ready to leave?

"I'll do it the first of the week," he said evenly, picking up his briefcase.

"You shouldn't keep putting it off," she persisted in that earnest worrying drone. "I was talking to Clifford Baker about it and he says if you let it go, you might—"

"All right!" Barry snapped. "You've made your point!"

Which shut her up on that subject, but before he could get out the door she put a detaining hand on his sleeve to ask, "When will you be home?"

Barry shrugged the hand off in annoyance and replied coldly, "I wouldn't wait up if I were you." So then, of course, she put on her woebegone look, making him feel like a brute.

"Oh, come on now," he coaxed. "You ought to be glad to have me out of the way for awhile. You've got that whole stack of library books in there. Why don't you just curl up and have a nice long read?"

She pondered the idea as though making some earthshaking decision. Poor Eva was not the quickest-witted soul in the world. "Maybe I will," she said finally. Then she actually smiled. "And maybe I'll have a surprise for you when you get home."

Barry knew all too well what that meant; another culinary venture. His stomach churned a little at the prospect. "I can hardly wait to see what it is," he said, smiling back. Then he kissed her lightly on the tip of the nose and at last made his escape.

Briefcase in hand, Barry looked the very model of probity as he walked to the end of the street, down the steep incline of Maple Hill,

taking a sharp left under the bridge and over the four blocks to the railway station.

There, as was his custom, he purchased a round-trip ticket to the city, exchanged the usual pleasantries with the man on duty, then mounted the steps to the platform and boarded the next city-bound train.

The city, however, was not his destination. At Cedarbrook, a suburb just two stops beyond his own, Barry left the train. He trotted smartly down the steps, out of the station, and around the corner to a shady side street where Margot James was waiting for him in her car.

He slid in beside her and tossed the useless briefcase onto the back seat. Then they sped away to her place, as they had done every Sunday for several months.

But the day was not, in Barry's view, an unqualified success. And that evening, when Margot was driving him back to the station, he came to the regrettable conclusion that his interest in her had just about run its course. Yes, another week or two perhaps, and then—gently but firmly—he would. . .

"Oh," Margot said as he was getting out of the car, "I can't see you next week. I'm going out of town."

Barry didn't bat an eye. "Some other time then," he said lightly, and they parted, their smiles cool with the knowledge there would not be another time. No muss, no fuss; a neat and painless ending to a brief affair.

Just the way he liked it, Barry insisted to himself as he boarded his train, trying not to admit how profoundly shaken he was that Margot had usurped the initiative in breaking it off. It was the first time such a thing had happened to him. All of a sudden he was quite anxious to get home.

He walked quickly back the way he'd come. In fact, he started up the punishing grade of Maple Hill too fast and was puffing well before he reached the top. But he pressed on, dogged by an irrational notion that the very street he lived on might somehow have altered.

It hadn't, of course. Silly of him. He paused a moment to catch his breath and savor the heartening normalcy of the scene. A few lights were still on here and there—it was only a bit after 11:00—but his own house was already dark. Eva, as usual, had retired early.

He felt an uncommon rush of warmth for her as he let himself in and

hung up his coat. Say what you like about Eva, at least you always knew what to expect from her.

Indeed, as if to bear him out, there on the hall table was her cozily predictable "surprise," a huge plateful of cookies; and on a chair beside the table a pile of those library books she was so addicted to, syrupy romances every one. Barry shook his head and chuckled. Poor old Eva. She never changed.

He sauntered over and glanced with tolerant scorn at the top title—then blinked and looked again. *Furniture Refinishing Made Easy.* Frowning, he bent down and examined the others. But those, too, plopped into his consciousness like so many non sequiturs: *Design Your Own Clothes. Home Auto Repair. Common Poisonous Plants. The Art of Macrame.* Not a sentimental novel in the lot. Barry straightened up with extreme care. Another chunk of familiar ground seemed to have given way beneath him. What the devil could have got into Eva?

Unless—he brightened as an explanation dawned. Well, of course! That must be it. Only a couple of weeks ago he'd taken her to task about her low taste in reading. "You'll soften your brain with that pap!" he'd chided her. "Why don't you branch out a little? Try something constructive?"

And, bless her simple heart, that's exactly what she'd done, or thought she had. What he'd intended, naturally, was that she read some of the classics for a change. But literal-minded Eva had interpreted "constructive" to mean this bunch of how-to books. Oh, Lord—she really was incorrigible. But rather sweet. And he'd better eat a few of those cookies so as not to hurt her feelings.

He sampled one. Edible. But only just, he amended tartly. He tried another. Come to think of it, he'd had precious little else to eat since breakfast. His stomach had been too unsettled most of the day to cope with the takeout hamburgers and greasy french fries which were the usual fare at Margot's. "Cooking just isn't my thing" was her line.

This reminder of Margot unleashed Barry's unspent outrage at having been beaten to the punch. In an excess of misdirected venom—against Margot, against the perfidy of women in general—he bit savagely into another cookie, and another and another until, before he realized what he was doing, he'd wolfed down the whole disgusting plateful.

It was a grievous mistake. His stomach was already protesting as he

trudged up the stairs. He undressed gingerly, hoping the feeling would pass. But he'd barely managed to crawl into bed when the first cramp seized him. He dashed to the bathroom and was sick.

And that was just the beginning. For the next couple of hours he was up and down repeatedly. So often, in fact, you'd think Eva might have awakened—shown a little concern, for God's sake—fixed him a cup of tea. She was all over him with attention when he *didn't* want it!

When the cramps subsided, he decided he really could use some tea. It might warm him up a little too. The house was like a barn at night.

"Eva," he said plaintively, then more sharply, "Eva!" But her rhythmic snoring merely faltered for a second, then resumed even louder than before.

Eva had always snored a little, of course, a sound Barry was very relieved to hear on those nights when he crept home in the wee hours. But now he found it irritating beyond measure. And faintly unnerving somehow. In the nighttime stillness it seemed aggressively loud, even hostile. As if she were malignly gathering to herself all the sleep there was in the world, shutting him outside in some eternally wakeful limbo. An involuntary shiver ran through him.

He shrugged off the feeling with a shaky laugh. "Self-satisfied cow," he muttered, venting his discomfiture in spite. Who needed her? He'd fix his own cup of tea. He pulled on a pair of pants and a sweater against the unfriendly chill of the house and, leaving Eva to her greedy slumber, stalked out of the room and down the stairs.

But once in the kitchen his bravado wilted. This was Eva's domain, a place he seldom ventured. It took him minutes of poking around just to find where she hid the tea bags and frustrating minutes more to locate the cups and the spoons. The blasted water took forever to boil and, to add injury to insult, when his efforts finally produced a cup of tea, the first incautious swallow nearly scalded his insides. Damn Eva and her fool kitchen!

He carried the cup over to the table and, smarting in tongue and spirit, sat down to wait for the tea to cool. But everything he viewed only heightened the growing feeling that he was the object of some fell conspiracy. From their hooks Eva's gleaming pots and pans winked at him maliciously. And that jungle of creepy green stuff she had growing in boxes on the windowsills and in planters suspended from the ceiling

seemed repellent, almost sinister.

Abruptly, Barry jerked his chair around, turning his back on the mocking utensils and the menacing greenery. But the opposite wall held bad news of another sort. The first thing he spotted was the clock, and he groaned when he saw the time. Lord, the night was practically gone. He'd be lucky if he got any sleep at all.

He sipped moodily at the cooling tea and shifted his aggrieved gaze to the spice rack. His lip curled at the sight of those neat rows of jars and shakers. Nasty dried-up bits of this and that. Eva's precious herbs and spices. The way she went on about them you'd think they were some kind of magic. Her "secret ingredients," she called them. She was always sprinkling some damn something or other on. . .

Barry paused, frowning. Now what had that reminded him of? Puzzled, he looked back at the wall rack for a clue. Herbs? Spices? Eva? Shakers. Suddenly it clicked into place.

Just this morning—yesterday morning now—the way she'd jumped when he caught her sprinkling something over his breakfast plate. And *his* plate only, as a matter of fact. He remembered distinctly; she'd dropped the shaker like a hot potato and brought the tray right in. Well, maybe she'd already seasoned her own.

But—had she? He hadn't actually *seen* her do it. Funny, now that he thought about it, it was always his portion she seemed to be adding her arcane little touches to.

And before he could halt this errant train of thought, it ran smack into the word "poison." The impact was so melodramatic as to jolt him back to his senses. Really now! The hour was playing hob with his imagination. The 3 A.M. blues, that's what he had.

And yet there was the odd coincidence of these digestive upsets he'd been having. Of course, he'd always had a nervous stomach. Lately, though, the attacks were more frequent—yes, and much more severe. *And only after he'd eaten at home.* The thought fairly took his breath away, the more so because it had surfaced unbidden.

Oh, he must be mistaken.

Suddenly, what had begun as idle speculation, a sort of bad-tempered little game, turned dead serious. Barry searched his memory diligently, desperately. But it was no use. He simply could not recall a single instance when he'd been stricken after eating at a restaurant or a friend's house. For the first time he felt the chill of real fear.

And betrayal. To think Eva would—Eva, of all people! A mocking echo of his long-ago description of her came back to him. "Done in pastels" was the moonstruck way he'd thought of her pale hair and lashes, the delicate brush of pink on her cheeks. "Gentle of coloring and gentle of manner." The recollection brought a bitter laugh. So much youthful hogwash. Those pastels quickly proved colorless, the gentle manner merely dull. He'd become inured to that, of course. But—malice? That was something he'd never expected from Eva.

And why, for God's sake? What could Eva possibly have against *him*? He'd been a good provider, a good husband. He'd never given her a moment's cause for complaint.

Well. . .once, perhaps. She'd been upset—cried, carried on—that time she found out about him and Ceil Connors. But good Lord, that was years ago! From then on he'd been meticulously careful, gone to inordinate lengths to see that she never learned about the others. He'd bent over backwards to spare her feelings. And this was the thanks he got!

What a trusting fool he'd been, disarmed by that mask of bovine complaisance. Beneath it, Eva was every bit as illogical, capricious, and ungrateful as the rest. And devious. All these years—God only knew what she'd been up to behind his back.

He sat bolt upright, stabbed by a sudden thought. Those peculiar books she'd taken to reading behind his back. Were they so innocent, after all? He slid off the chair and hurried into the hall. And, yes—cleverly tucked in among the innocuous manuals on dress design and such—there it was, the clincher, *Common Poisonous Plants.*

Barry seized it and carried it back to the kitchen. And whatever doubts he had clung to were dispelled as he read with horrified fascination of the toxic properties of various seeds, flowers, berries, and roots. It seemed as though some part of every plant that grew was lethal. Even the bulbs of those sunny heralds of spring, daffodils and hyacinth, produced symptoms that gripped his vitals with a sickening familiarity.

Barry let the book fall shut and for a moment stared unseeing in front of him. Then his eyes focused on the clock, inexorably nibbling away the precious minutes, and he realized he had to take some kind of action. But what? He couldn't think straight in this kitchen—in this house—this lair of the enemy. He had to get out, go someplace where

he could think. Make plans, talk to someone.

Suddenly he stiffened, every muscle tensed, listening. There it was again. Footsteps on the floor above. Eva!

He leaped up in such haste he nearly lost his balance. As he stumbled backwards, a vine dangling from a planter stroked his cheek like a live thing. He fought it away in panicky repugnance and made a dash for the hall. He yanked on his coat, patted his pocket for the car keys, and rushed out into the dawn.

Eva was coming back from the bathroom when she heard the garage door go up. She slipped on a robe, padded down the stairs, and opened the front door just as the car roared out the driveway.

She caught Barry's eye for a moment and waved. But he didn't wave back. He swung the car around and gunned it down the street as if the devil himself were after him. He took the turn at top speed, then disappeared over the crest of Maple Hill.

Eva remained standing in the doorway. And a few seconds later, even from that distance, she heard the crash as the brakeless car slammed into the bridge abutment at the bottom turn.

"Surprise!" she said softly, and closed the door.

On her way to the kitchen she paused beside the tumble of books on the chair. She looked at the one entitled *Home Auto Repair* and sighed. It had been difficult going, line by line, but well worth the effort.

"Much quicker than poison," she murmured approvingly.

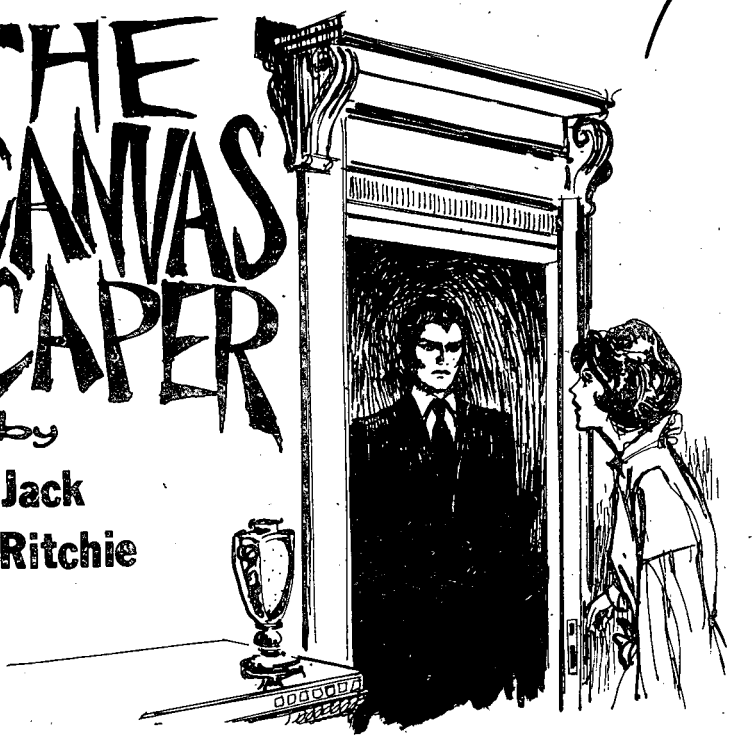
Then she went on to the kitchen and said good morning to her plants.

Here again, our late late detective from the Cardula Agency . . .

THE CANVAS CAPER

by

Jack Ritchie



"Mr. Cardula," he said, "how do you feel about blackmailers?"

"They are dastardly people, sir."

He gazed out of the window at the scattered lights in the office building across the street. "Frankly, they should be dead, don't you think?"

"Possibly, sir."

He turned back to me. "I drew the low card."

My prospective client was a tall man dressed with impeccable elegance. There was also the faint aura of liquor about him.

He continued. "We cut cards and I got the three of clubs. So that left the job up to me. It was all to be simple and direct. I would go to his home and shoot him. And if, for some fantastic reason, the police should question me, the others would swear that I had never left the table all evening."

"The table?"

"The card table. They would claim that I had never left the room all evening."

"They?"

"My associates in this matter." He sighed. "I went so far as to knock at his door, but then I turned and ran before he opened it."

He looked out of the window again. "What would you say if I offered you ten thousand dollars to kill someone? Or to find someone who would? I suppose you'd go to the police?"

I smiled faintly. "If I did, I could prove nothing. It would be my word against yours that the offer was ever made."

He remained thoughtful for a few moments. "Frankly, I don't know any killers for hire or how to go about finding them. But then it came to me that private detectives generally muck about in the seamier things of life, what with divorce work, wiretapping, and so forth, and if anyone knew of an available killer, they certainly should. Anyway, it appeared to be my only lead to the underworld. So I turned to the yellow pages of the phonebook for help."

"And why did you select me?"

"It seemed to me that any private detective whose office hours are from 8 P.M. to 4 A.M. must be closer to the night world of crime than anybody else."

I contemplated my bridged fingertips. "Perhaps I can help you at that. What would be the exact financial arrangement for this killing?"

He brightened and leaned forward. "I don't have that much money on me right now, but I will see that you get five thousand tomorrow and the other five thousand when the job is done."

I nodded. "And what is your name, sir?"

"Never mind that. It won't be necessary for you to know."

"Well then, the name of the victim. I certainly wouldn't want to kill the wrong man, sir."

"His name is Raoul Henri O'Brien. 118 Frawley Road." My client sighed. "An artist. Of sorts."

"He is blackmailing you and your associates?"

"Yes."

"About what?"

"I don't think it is necessary to your job to know why."

I accepted that. "Undoubtedly you will want to arrange an alibi for the time O'Brien dies. When do you want him killed?"

He thought about it. "How about Friday evening? Anywhere from, say, eight to eleven?"

"It is as good as done, sir. Provided, of course, that I receive the first five thousand dollars tomorrow."

He nodded and rose. "As a private detective, I suppose that you are rather good at following people?"

"Sir, that is my speciality. I am superb at it."

"Fine. But don't try to follow me. You will stand at that window and look out. When I reach the street, I will look back up. If I do not see you still at the window, I will assume that you are attempting to follow me and the whole deal will be off. I will find somebody else to earn the ten thousand dollars."

When he left, I went to the window as directed and looked down at the lighted street four stories below. At this time of night—nearly eleven—the street was almost deserted.

I saw my client leave the building and cross the street. He stopped and looked back up.

I waved.

He acknowledged this with a nod and continued walking. He turned the corner and disappeared.

I opened my window and followed.

I had, of course, not the slightest intention of murdering Raoul O'Brien. However, as I had pointed out to my client, taking the matter to the police would be futile. I had to know more about the conspiracy and its participants before I could act in an effective manner.

I sighted my client again as he slipped into an automobile parked at the curb.

He drove from the central city to the lake-shore road and on to the suburbs. Eventually he turned into a long graveled driveway. I paused at the roadside mailbox long enough to read the name "James

McQuiggley" and then continued after.

My client parked his car behind three other vehicles on an oval before a large Norman-style home. He opened the front door and entered.

I moved on to the side of the building where light streamed from a slightly opened French window. Inside I saw three men seated at a card table.

One of them looked a bit familiar. Ah, yes. The short, round man in his middle fifties would be Florian Appleby of the Appleby Galleries. I had sold him the last two paintings I had managed to bring over to America.

I sighed. When I fled the old country, I had managed to take but a few things with me—some gold, a few pieces of jewelry, and half a dozen paintings—whatever could be fitted, somewhat uncomfortably, in an eight-by-three-foot box.

But, alas, all of my possessions were now gone and I was forced to work for a livelihood.

All three of the men at the card table looked up eagerly as my client entered the room.

"Well, James," Appleby said, "is Raoul dead?"

My client—apparently James McQuiggley—went to the liquor cabinet and poured himself a drink. "Raoul is still alive. I couldn't bring myself to kill him."

Appleby registered his disappointment. "You reneged, James. I can't stand a man who reneges."

McQuiggley shrugged. "I have come up with a much more satisfactory solution to our problem. I managed to hire a professional killer who will do the job for us."

Appleby regarded him with some awe. "How in the world did you know where to contact a professional killer?"

McQuiggley smiled mysteriously. "I have my ways. He is asking for ten thousand dollars to do the job. We must each ante up one-fourth."

He sipped his drink. "He is going to kill Raoul sometime between eight and eleven this coming Friday evening, so we will all gather here again during those hours."

When Appleby and the two others left, I journeyed to 118 Frawley Road, approximately a half mile farther on.

The address proved to be a huge Victorian structure in the midst of

wooded acreage. I glided silently to the only lighted windows. A strikingly handsome woman, perhaps in her early thirties, sat watching the late movie on a television screen.

I heard a car coming up the driveway and moved back to the front of the house.

A Karmann-Ghia pulled to a stop and a trimly bearded young man stepped out. He used a key to unlock the front door.

I hied back to the window in time to see him enter the room. The woman barely looked up for a moment and then resumed her television viewing. As for the man—Raoul Henri O'Brien?—he continued through the room and up a stairway.

Light appeared from two windows upstairs and I watched O'Brien change to pajamas, yawn, and lie down on a bed where he promptly fell asleep.

I returned to the woman downstairs and became engrossed in the motion picture she was watching—something about a creature from a dark lagoon.

At the conclusion of the movie, she turned off the set and went upstairs to another bedroom.

I left her to her privacy and flitted about the outside of the building, peering into dark windows here and there (my eyesight remains rather keen even under the darkest of circumstances). At the rear of the house I found what had very likely once been a solarium was now converted into an artist's studio.

My exploration done, I returned to my office, closed the window, and consulted the yellow pages of my phonebook until I found that there existed a James McQuiggley Art Gallery.

So both McQuiggley and Appleby dealt in paintings and their intended victim was an artist. Of sorts, McQuiggley had qualified. Then was it a fair assumption that the other two gentlemen I'd seen in McQuiggley's home were also connected with the world of art in one capacity or another?

Raoul Henri O'Brien. Was he an artist? Frankly, I had never heard of him before.

The next evening at 8 P.M. when I reached my office, I found a small package had been thrust through the mail slot in the door.

I opened it and found five thousand dollars in one-hundred-dollar bills.

Should I go to the police now? Or would it be wiser to learn more about the entire matter before I made such a move? Perhaps if I asked O'Brien a few judicious questions, I could learn why McQuiggley and associates wanted him killed.

I returned to 118 Frawley Road and pressed the doorbell.

The woman who had watched the TV screen the previous evening answered the door. "Yes?"

"Could I speak to Mr. O'Brien, please?"

She had speculative grey eyes. "I'm sorry, but he's not here. He left about an hour ago."

"Could you tell me when he will return?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Would you by any chance know where he has gone?"

"He didn't tell me and I didn't ask." She looked past my shoulder. "Where's your car?"

I cleared my throat. "I parked it down the road a bit."

There seemed to be nothing more to do but say goodbye and I did. I walked down the driveway and glanced back. She still watched me from the doorway, so I continued until I was well out of sight.

What should I do now? On the assumption that O'Brien might return early, should I linger about the premises and wait? I decided that it was worth a try and made my way stealthily back to the house and the lighted windows.

The room was empty of human life, but only for a few minutes. Then the woman entered carrying a sandwich on a small plate and a glass of milk. She turned on the TV set and sat down.

We settled down to watch what the screen had to offer, which, until ten o'clock, consisted primarily of squealing tires and endless automobile chases.

After the ten o'clock news, she switched channels to the late movie, *Werewolf in the Tower of London*—really quite engrossing.

At its conclusion, she turned off the set and retired to her bedroom.

It was now nearly one o'clock in the morning. Should I continue my vigil? The dark sky threatened rain and I detest getting wet. I decided to make a run, so to speak, for my office and I arrived there just as the first heavy drops began to fall.

The next evening—a Thursday—I rose as usual just after sunset. I

showered, dressed, and settled down to read the newspaper before setting off for my office.

An item on an inside page instantly caught my attention.

A Raoul Henri O'Brien, 118 Frawley Road, had been killed by a hit-and-run driver at eleven-thirty the previous night as he left a supper club. According to witnesses, O'Brien had been crossing the street when an automobile had come speeding out of the darkness and struck him. The impact tossed him more than sixty feet, and he was killed instantly. The witnesses were unable to recall the automobile's license number, but the vehicle was described as being a light-colored late-model Lincoln Continental.

I frowned. Had McQuiggley or one of his associates decided to take the bit into his own teeth and dispose of O'Brien? Or was this a legitimate hit-and-run accident?

When I reached my office, I found another brown package on the floor inside. It too contained five thousand dollars in one-hundred-dollar bills.

Clearly all of this needed further investigation. I went to McQuiggley's home and pressed the buzzer at the door.

McQuiggley himself answered. He showed alarm when he saw me. "Good heavens, there was no need for you to come here. I dropped off the second five thousand at your office this afternoon."

"I know. However, I have a few questions to ask."

The murmur of voices from within indicated that McQuiggley had guests. He quickly pulled me into a side room. "Our agreement was that O'Brien was to be killed on Friday, not Wednesday. It was just luck that yesterday was Charlie's wedding anniversary and we were all at the party. Otherwise I doubt if any one of us would have an alibi."

Charlie? I remembered that when I'd gone to the yellow pages I had also seen a Charles Hanson Galleries listed. "Have the police questioned you?"

"No. I really don't expect them to. I just like to be prepared." He smiled. "Frankly, I thought you'd use a gun or a knife or a blunt instrument, but I suppose hit-and-run was more intelligent." Another thought came to him. "How did you know where to find me?"

I flicked a professional smile. "McQuiggley, I know all about your group—you, Appleby, Hanson, and—" I took a guess "—the one with the beard. His name is at the tip of my tongue."

McQuiggley supplied it. "Brinkmann."

Ah, yes. Hadn't I also seen a Brinkmann Galleries in the yellow pages? I seated myself. "Mr. McQuiggley, I did not kill your Raoul O'Brien."

He blinked. "You didn't? But if you didn't, who did?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Why was O'Brien trying to blackmail you?"

"That is none of your business."

"I am tempted to go to the police and tell them what has transpired between us."

"I would deny everything."

"Really, sir? Then how would you explain to the police the fact that your fingerprints are on the ten thousand dollars I have in my safe?"

Actually, I had no knowledge as to whether McQuiggley had or had not left his fingerprints on the money.

He rubbed his chin reflectively. "Couldn't you just keep the money and forget about the whole thing?"

I shrugged. "Perhaps if I learn the truth, I might not find it necessary to go to the police."

McQuiggley sighed and then capitulated. "Very well. We first met O'Brien two years ago when he arrived here from the West Coast and represented himself as a connoisseur and collector of modern paintings. He attended all the exhibitions and parties and even bought a painting here and there. He certainly had an engaging personality and he simply wormed himself into the art world here.

"Periodically he would dash off to Europe for two or three weeks and when he returned it was always with original paintings which he claimed he had purchased from private galleries or discovered in out-of-the-way pawnshops and attics. He would add them to his own collection and at various times showed them to each one of us.

"Naturally the estimated value of his paintings came into our conversations and he very cleverly left the impression that while he was quite sharp about the value of his Cezannes, he was more than a bit hazy concerning his van Goghs, Gauguins, Modiglianis, and so forth."

McQuiggley wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "And so it appeared that here was a golden opportunity for us to pick up paintings at bargain prices and turn a penny or two.

"And what with one thing and another, each of us bought canvases

which he reluctantly, *very* reluctantly, let go. For friendship's sake, so to speak. In all, over a period of two years, I bought fourteen paintings from him, and my associates perhaps a similar number each."

"And, in turn, you sold them to someone else?"

He brightened slightly. "At a modest profit, of course."

"But then something went wrong?"

"Yes. A week ago O'Brien told us that the paintings we had purchased were forgeries—every last one of them. And the reason he knew that they were forgeries was simply because he had painted them himself."

McQuiggley shook his head sadly. "I grudgingly admit that, as a forger, he was a genius. He took us all in completely. Fooled the eye and what modest tests we made. He had a good thing going, but unfortunately he was also greedy. He wanted more money than what the canvases brought him and he threatened to reveal the forgeries unless we agreed to pay him an additional one hundred thousand dollars each."

"Why didn't you go to the police?"

He seemed pained that I should ask such a question.

"The exposure would have absolutely ruined us. Our reputations, our business. Not to mention people clamoring for their money back and threatening to sue."

"But still you decided that you were not going to pay O'Brien for his silence?"

McQuiggley nodded. "There was the possibility that he would come back to us again and again with demands for more money, and it also remained that O'Brien *alive* could blow the whistle on us at any time, if only in a careless moment."

I pondered. "All of you—Appleby, Hanson, Brinkmann, and you—have alibis for the time O'Brien was killed?"

"We were on Charlie's yacht. We took a moonlight cruise that began at eight P.M. and lasted until well past three A.M. It would have been impossible for any of us to have gotten off the ship to kill O'Brien, if that's what you are thinking."

"Was O'Brien married?"

"He never said he was."

"Then who is the woman living in his house?"

"That would be Louise Peterson. She's his secretary, or something of

the sort. Mostly something of the sort, I would imagine."

I left McQuiggley and went on to 118 Frawley Road, where I pressed the doorbell.

Louise Peterson answered the door.

"My name is Cardula," I said. "Private investigator." I handed her one of my cards.

She examined it. "What is there to investigate?"

"The death of Raoul O'Brien."

She regarded me calmly. "Are you working for an insurance company?"

I smiled noncommittally. "Was Raoul O'Brien's life heavily insured? And who is the beneficiary?"

"As far as I know he didn't carry any insurance. Besides, who would he leave the money to? He didn't have any what you might call friends—or relatives."

"Possibly *you* might be his beneficiary?"

She laughed shortly. "Ha!"

"Madam," I said, "I have reason to believe that Raoul O'Brien was murdered."

She allowed me to enter the house.

"You were Raoul O'Brien's secretary?"

"You might say that."

"Then possibly you were aware of O'Brien's activities?"

"What activities?"

I thought I might as well come out into the open. "Blackmail, Madam. Blackmail."

She eyed me skeptically. "Blackmail? Who the hell would he blackmail and why?"

"Art dealers, Madam. Your employer sold a number of paintings to art dealers in this city and every last one of them is a forgery."

She folded her arms. "Really?"

"But was he satisfied with that?" I asked rhetorically. "No, he was not. After he sold the forgeries, he again approached the dealers and threatened to expose the entire racket if they did not each give him an additional one hundred thousand dollars."

She blinked. "The bastard."

"Greed is the undoing of many an enterprise," I said. "Raoul

O'Brien was not content with just painting the canvases and selling them, he had to stoop to blackmail."

She stared at the ceiling. "The canvases were forgeries and O'Brien painted them?"

"He confessed the deception to the dealers when he approached them for the blackmail." I allowed a drop of acid to creep into my voice. "But surely, Madam, working for the man and residing in his house as you do, you could not have failed to notice that there was a bit of hanky-panky?"

She seemed to be thinking. "You don't suppose that one of those art dealers got into his car and ran down the dirty dog?"

"No, Madam. Every one of them has an ironclad alibi for the time of O'Brien's death."

She shrugged. "Or possibly you think that *I* might have killed the creep?"

"Madam," I said. "You have referred to the deceased as a bastard, a dirty dog, and a creep. I sense that you might have a motive for killing him. However, I know that you did not."

"How could you know that?"

I knew, of course, because at the time of O'Brien's death she and I had been watching *Werewolf in the Tower of London*, she in comfort and I chilled to the bone. But I said, "Suffice it to say that I have an instinct about such matters."

She regarded me with interest. "If one of the wheeler-dealers didn't kill him and I didn't, whom does that leave? Could it have been a plain-old-fashioned hit-and-run accident?"

"At the moment it appears so."

She smiled slightly. "So you're a private detective? How does it pay?"

I shrugged. "It's a living."

"You've got a certain style," she said. "Yes, I like you."

I would have blushed except that I did not want to strain myself.

Her eyes steadied into mine. "Cardula, how would you like to take O'Brien's place?"

"Madam," I said, somewhat shocked at the directness, "what are you proposing? O'Brien is not yet in the ground and already you are casting eyes. Perhaps if we waited a decent month or two—"

She went on. "Raoul was just my front. My salesman. Nothing more.

You need a man to do the talking when you're negotiating with dealers. *I* painted those canvases."

My mouth dropped. "You! *You* painted those forgeries?"

She nodded. "Though technically they are not forgeries. They are originals done in the style of anybody you'd care to name. I have a knack for that sort of thing. If I can find space on my studio floor for a canvas, I'll whip you up a Jackson Pollock that will blow your mind."

"You mean that you—a *woman*—"

"Why not? Is there a law against it? What is so ridiculous about a woman being an unscrupulous forger? I did the painting and O'Brien did the selling. But the blackmailing was his own idea. I didn't know a thing about it and may he fry in hell."

She came closer. "We'd make a great team. Of course we'd have to move to some other town. The racket is shot here. How does Miami strike you?"

"My dear Louise," I said. "I am a man of rigid moral fiber. I would not for a moment consider—"

"It's perfectly safe. Even when you're found out, nobody ever takes it to the police. It's hush-hush all around because everybody's got a finger in the pie."

"That is not the question—"

"It's profitable. Very profitable. Did you know that two weeks ago I sold a Matisse to Langley for nearly—"

I held up a hand. "Langley? Who's Langley?"

"He's that art dealer on Jefferson Avenue."

I closed my eyes. But of course. Here I had assumed that McQuiggley, Appleby, Hanson, and Brinkmann represented all of the art dealers O'Brien had tried to blackmail. Why couldn't there have been more who were not necessarily privy to McQuiggley's group?

"How many dealers did you sell your paintings to?" I asked.

She thought for a moment. "Five. McQuiggley, Appleby, Hanson, Brinkmann, and Langley."

I smiled. "Would you by any chance happen to know if Langley drives a light-colored late-model Lincoln Continental?"

"Why, yes. He once drove O'Brien and me to an exhibition." She stopped, her eyes widening a bit. "Oh. The newspaper said O'Brien was run down by a light-colored late-model Lincoln Continental, didn't it?"

"Exactly," I said. "Langley is our murderer." I went to the phone.

"Hold it," Louise said. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm phoning the police. I'll wager that in Langley's garage they will find a light-colored late-model Lincoln Continental with a badly damaged fender or hood or both. And by comparing the paint chips undoubtedly found on O'Brien's clothes with the paint of the Lincoln Continental, they will unquestionably find that they match."

"So they match," Louise said. "But I still don't think you've got enough evidence to sustain a murder charge. If he admits to anything at all, it will be simply hit-and-run. And if he is convicted of that, what do you think will happen to him? He is an upstanding member of the community with some degree of money and an unblemished past. At the worst he will be given a year's probation and his driver's license will be suspended for thirty days."

I brooded on that darkly. Here I uncover a murder most foul and the murderer faces nothing more than the possibility of having his driver's license suspended for thirty days. Was it worth the trouble?

I sighed and put down the phone.

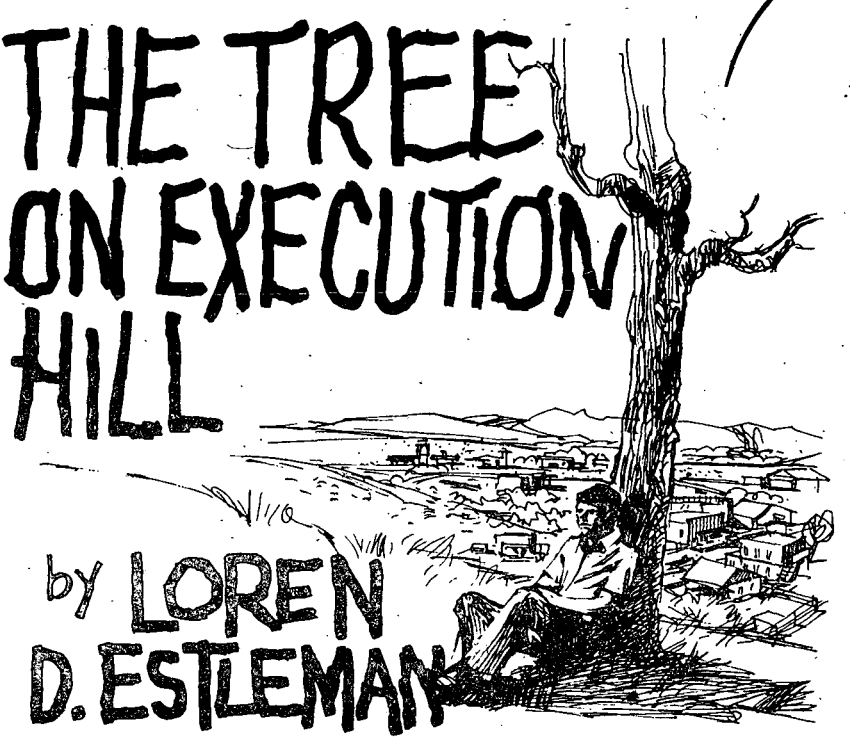
"Now now," Louise said, "don't take it so hard. You can't expect justice to triumph all the time." She led me to the couch. "Sit down and we'll talk some more about my proposition."

I am utterly incorruptible and I knew that I could not be swayed. However—in the interest of open-mindedness—I thought I ought to give her the opportunity to exercise her logic, her persuasion, or any possible wiles she could think of to tempt me to join her in her nefarious activities.

The late movie featured *The Beast with Four Fingers,* which we watched now and then.

He was determined to spare it . . .

THE TREE ON EXECUTION HILL



by LOREN D. ESTLEMAN

It seemed as if everybody in Good Advice had turned out for the meeting that night in the town hall. Every seat was taken, and the dark oaken rafters hewn and fit in place by the ancestors of a good share of those present resounded with a steady hum of conversation while the broad pine planks that made up the floor creaked beneath the tread of many feet.

Up in front, his plaid jacket thrown back to expose a generous

paunch, Carl Lathrop, the town's leading storekeeper and senior member of the council, stood talking with Birdie Flatt from the switchboard. His glasses flashed a Morse code in the bright overhead lights as he settled and resettled them on his fleshy nose. I recognized the gesture from the numerous interviews I had conducted with him as a sign that he was feeling very satisfied with himself, and so I knew what was coming long before most of my neighbors suspected it.

I was something of a freak in the eyes of the citizenry of Good Advice, New Mexico. This was partly because I had been the first person to settle in the area since before 1951, when the aircraft plant had moved on to greener pastures, and partly because, at 42, I was at least ten years younger than anyone else in town. Most people supposed I stayed on out of despair after my wife Sylvia left me to return to civilization, but that wasn't strictly true. We'd originally planned to lay over for a week or two while I collected information for my book and then move on. But then the owner of the town newspaper had died and the paper was put up for sale, and I bought it with the money we'd saved up for the trip. It had been an act of impulse, perhaps a foolish one—certainly it had seemed so to my wife, who had no intention of living so far away from her beloved beauty parlors—but my chief fear in life had always been that I'd miss the big opportunity when it came along. So now I had a newspaper but no Sylvia, which, all things considered, seemed like a pretty fair trade.

The buzz of voices died out as Lathrop took his place behind the lectern. I flipped open my notebook and sat with pencil poised to capture any pearls of wisdom he might have been about to drop.

"We all know why we're here, so we'll dispense with the long-winded introductions." A murmur of approval rippled through the audience. "You've all heard the rumor that the state may build a superhighway near Good Advice," he went on. "Well, it's my pleasant duty to announce that it's no longer a rumor."

Cheers and applause greeted this statement, and it was some minutes before the room grew quiet enough for Lathrop to continue.

"Getting information out of these government fellows is like pulling teeth," he said. "But after about a dozen phone calls to the capital, I finally got hold of the head of the contracting firm that's going to do the job. He told me they plan to start building sometime next fall." He waited until the fresh applause faded, then went on. "Now, this doesn't

mean that Good Advice is going to become another Tombstone overnight. When those tourists come streaming in here, we're going to have to be ready for them. That means rezoning for tourist facilities, fixing up our historic landmarks, and so on. The reason we called this meeting is to decide on ways to make this town appealing to visitors. The floor is open to suggestions."

I spent the next twenty minutes jotting down some of the ideas that came from the enthusiastic citizens. Birdie Flatt was first, with a suggestion that the telephone service be updated, but others disagreed, maintaining that the old upright phones and wall installations found in many of the downtown shops added to the charm of the town. "Uncle Ned" Scoffield, at 97 Good Advice's oldest resident, offered to clean out and fix up the old trading post at the end of Main Street in return for permission to sell his wood carvings and his collection of hand-woven Navajo rugs. Carl Lathrop pledged to turn the old jail, which he had been using as a storeroom, into a tourist attraction. The fact that outlaw Ford Harper had spent his last days there before his hanging, he said, could only add to its popularity. Then, amidst a chorus of groans from scattered parts of the room, Avery Sharecross stood up.

Sharecross was a spindly scarecrow of a man, with an unkempt mane of lusterless black hair spilling over the collar of his frayed sweater and a permanent stoop that made him appear much older than he was. Nobody in town could say how he made his living. Certainly not from the bookstore he had been operating on the corner of Main and Maple for thirty years; there were never any more than two customers in the store at a time, and the prices he charged were so ridiculously low that it was difficult to believe that he managed to break even, let alone show a profit. Everyone was aware of the monthly pension he received from an address in Santa Fe, but no one knew how much it was or why he got it. His bowed shoulders and shuffling gait, the myopia that forced him to squint through the thick tinted lenses of his eyeglasses, the hollows in his pale cheeks were as much a part of the permanent scenery in Good Advice as the burned-out shell of the old flour mill north of town. I closed my notebook and put away my pencil, knowing what he was going to talk about before he opened his mouth. It was all he ever talked about.

Lathrop sighed. "What is it, Avery? As if I didn't know." He rested

his chin on one pudgy hand, bracing himself for the ordeal.

"Mr. Chairman, I have a petition." The old bookseller rustled the well-thumbed sheaf of papers he held in one talonlike hand. "I have twenty-six signatures demanding that the citizens of Good Advice vote on whether the tree on Execution Hill be removed."

There was an excited buzz among the spectators. I sat bolt upright in my chair, flipping my notebook back open. How had the old geezer got twenty-five people to agree with him?

For 125 years the tree in question had dominated the high-domed hill two miles outside of town, its skeletal limbs stretching naked against the sky. Of the eighteen trials that had been held in the town hall during the last century, eleven of those tried had ended up swinging from the tree's stoutest limb. It was a favorite spot of mine, an excellent place to sit and meditate. Avery Sharecross, for reasons known only to himself, had been trying to get the council to destroy it for five years. This was the first time he had not stood alone.

Lathrop cleared his throat loudly, probably to cover up his own astonishment. "Now, Avery, you know as well as I do that it takes fifty-five signatures on a petition to raise a vote. You've read the charter."

Sharecross was unperturbed. "When that charter was drafted, Mr. Chairman, this town boasted a population of over fourteen hundred. In the light of our present count, I believe that provision can be waived." He struck the pages with his fingertips. "These signatures represent nearly one-tenth of the local voting public. They have a right to be heard."

"How come you're so fired up to see that tree reduced to kindling, anyway? What's the difference to you?"

"That tree"—Sharecross flung a scrawny arm in the direction of the nearest window—"represents a time in this town's history when lynch law reigned and pompous hypocrites sentenced their peers to death regardless of their innocence or guilt." His cheeks were flushed now, his eyes ablaze behind the bottle-glass spectacles. "That snarl of dead limbs has been a blemish on the smooth face of this community for over a hundred years, and it's about time we got rid of it."

It was an impressive performance, and he sounded sincere, but I wasn't buying it. Good Advice, after all, had not been my first exposure to journalism. After you've been in this business awhile, you get a feeling for when someone is telling the truth, and Sharecross wasn't.

Whatever reasons he had for wishing to destroy the town's oldest landmark, they had nothing to do with any sense of injustice. Of that I was certain.

Lathrop sighed. "All right, Avery, let's see your petition. If the signatures check out, we'll vote." Once the papers were in his hands, Lathrop called the other members of the town council around him to look them over. Finally he motioned them back to their seats and turned back toward the lectern. For the next half hour he read off the names on the petition—many of which surprised me, for they included some of the town's leading citizens—to make sure the signatures were genuine. Every one of those mentioned spoke up to assure him that they were. At length the storekeeper laid the pages down.

"Before we vote," he said, "the floor is open to dissenting opinions. —Mr. Macklin?"

My hand had gone up before he finished speaking. I got to my feet, conscious of all the eyes upon me.

"No one is arguing what Mr. Sharecross said about the injustices done in the past," I began haltingly. "But tearing down something that's a large part of our history won't change anything." I paused, searching for words. I was a lot more eloquent behind a typewriter. "Mr. Sharecross says the tree reminds us of the sordid past. I think that's as it should be. A nagging reminder of a time when we weren't so noble is a healthy thing to have in our midst. I wouldn't want to live in a society that kicked its mistakes under the rug."

The words were coming easier now. "There's been a lot of talk here tonight about promoting tourist trade. Well, destroying a spot where eleven infamous badmen met their rewards is one sure way of aborting any claims we might have had upon shutter-happy visitors." I shook my head emphatically, a gesture left over from my college debating-club days. "History is too precious for us to turn our backs on it, for whatever reason. Sharecross and his sympathizers would do well to realize that our true course calls for us to turn our gaze forward and forget about rewriting the past."

There was some applause as I sat down, but it died out when Sharecross seized the floor again. "I'm not a Philistine, Mr. Chairman," he said calmly. "Subject to the will of the council, I hereby pledge the sum of five thousand dollars for the erection of a statue of Enoch Howard, Good Advice's founder, atop Execution Hill once the tree has

been removed. I, too, have some feeling for history." His eyes slid in my direction.

That was dirty pool, I thought as he took his seat amid thunderous cheering from those present. In one way or another, Enoch Howard's blood flowed in the veins of over a third of the population of Good Advice. Now I knew how he had obtained those signatures. But why? What did he hope to gain?

"What about expense?" someone said.

"No problem," countered Sharecross, on his feet again. "Floyd Kramer there has offered to bulldoze down the tree and cart it away at cost."

"That's true, Floyd?" Lathrop asked.

A heavy-jowled man in a blue work shirt buttoned to the neck gave him the high sign from his standing position near the door.

I shot out of my chair again, but this time my eyes were directed upon my skeletal opponent and not the crowd. "I've fought you in print and on the floor of the town hall over this issue," I told him, "and if necessary I'll keep on fighting you right to the top of Execution Hill. I don't care how many statues you pull out of your hat; you won't get away with whatever it is you're trying to do."

The old bookseller made no reply. His eyes were blank behind his spectacles. I sat back down.

I could see that Lathrop's attitude had changed, for he had again taken to raising and lowering his eyeglasses confidently upon the bridge of his nose. Enoch Howard was his great-grandfather on his mother's side. "Now we'll vote," he said. "All those in favor of removing the tree on Execution Hill to make room for a statue of Enoch Howard signify by saying āye."

Rain was hissing on the grass when I parked my battered pickup truck at the bottom of the hill and got out to fetch the shovel out of the back. It was a long climb to the top and I was out of shape, but I didn't want to risk leaving telltale ruts behind by driving up the slope. Halfway up my feet began to feel like lead and the blood was pounding in my ears like a pneumatic hammer; by the time I found myself at the base of the deformed tree I had barely enough energy left to find the spot I wanted and begin digging. It was dark, and the soil was soaked just enough so that each time I took out a shovelful the hole filled up

again, with the result that it was ten minutes before I made any progress at all. After half an hour I stopped to rest. That's when all the lights came on and turned night into day.

The headlights of half a dozen automobiles were trained full upon me. For a fraction of a second I stood unmoving, frozen with shock. Then I hurled the shovel like a javelin at the nearest light and started to run. The first step I took landed in the hole. I fell headlong to the ground, emptying my lungs and twisting my ankle painfully. When I looked up, I was surrounded by people.

"I've waited five years for this." The voice belonged to Avery Sharecross.

"How did you know?" I said when I found my breath.

"I never did. Not for sure." Sharecross was standing over me now, an avenging angel wearing a threadbare coat and scarf. "I once heard that you spent all the money you had on the newspaper. If that was true, I wondered what your wife used for bus fare back to Santa Fe when she left you. Everyone knew you argued with her bitterly over your decision to stay. That you lost control and murdered her seemed obvious to me.

"I decided you buried her at the foot of the hanging tree, which was the reason you spent more time here than anyone else. The odds weren't in favor of my obtaining permission to dig up the hill because of a mere supposition, so it became necessary to catch you in the act of unearthing her yourself. That's when I got the idea to propose removing the tree and force you to find someplace else to dispose of the body."

He turned to a tall man whose stetson glistened wetly in the unnatural illumination of the headlights at his back. "Sheriff, if your men will resume digging where Mr. Macklin left off, it's my guess you'll find the corpse of Sylvia Macklin before morning. I retired from the Santa Fe Police Department long before they felt the need to teach us anything about reading rights to those we arrested, so perhaps you'll oblige."

Did Alexander Graham Bell have any idea it could come to this? . . .

TWO SMALL VIALS

by ELSIN ANN GRAFFAM

He awoke at 6:55, five minutes before the alarm was to sound. Turning on his side, he gazed with dispassionate interest at the woman who lay sleeping beside him.

Such a cow, he thought. When he thought of who he could be sleeping next to—

Sighing, he sat on the edge of the bed and pushed the alarm button in.

"Is it seven already?" Joanne asked sleepily. "I'll get breakfast. Hotcakes O.K., honey?"

"Sure," he said, not looking at his wife.

Her banal chatter at breakfast was almost suffocating.

"And this woman who won the jackpot was rich, from Great Oaks—can you imagine! How come poor people never win?"

Cow, he thought, rising. "I'd better get going," he said, slipping on his topcoat.

The ride to work was pleasant. Peaceful, after a breakfast with Joanne.

He tuned in his favorite FM station and drove slowly, thinking of Chris. Chris, with her long golden hair, her youthful figure, her blue eyes.

"You'll get over her, Bill," Joanne had said a hundred times, humoring him, forgiving him. The placid, long-suffering wife. Cow! he thought.

He turned the car into the immense parking lot of the Willsin Chemical Plant and parked at the spot marked MR. REED.

It was nice, he thought, to be only 27 years old and a production manager with his own private parking spot. Willsin Chemical Plant was relatively new, but growing fast. Maybe in five years, ten at the most, it would be rated Triple-A, Dun & Bradstreet.

He'd had the best—college, good connections, looks, ambition; everything but the right wife.

He could never have his colleagues and their wives to dinner. They'd sit down to one of Joanne's insipid dinners—tuna casserole, say. She'd open her mouth and say, "And this woman who won the jackpot was rich, from Great Oaks—can you imagine!"

Wincing, he locked the car and headed for his office at the front of the plant.

I could have bought her off, he thought. I could have given her money and seen her through an abortion. But not Mr. Nice. I marry her.

And she loses the baby. And I'm stuck. With a *cow*! A—

"Good morning, Mr. Reed."

"Morning, Susan," he said to the bookkeeper.

"We're getting a rush of orders for that new explosive. Harper Construction Company, Mideast Construction, Fallstaff." She flipped through a stack of orders.

"Well, it's good, cheap, does the job."

"And you have to use so little of it," she said.

Suddenly he felt light-headed. He sat down.

"Is something the matter?" she asked.

"No. I just thought of something, that's all."

Joanne glanced at the skillet clock on the kitchen wall. Five of ten. In a few minutes her TV programs would begin. She poured herself a glass of soda and padded to the living room to turn on the set. Drawing her fuzzy-slippered feet under her, she settled down.

In seven hours Bill would be home. Maybe. The week before he'd come home late three nights in a row. How late, she hadn't known; she'd been asleep. He no longer bothered to call to say he'd be working late. He simply wouldn't show up. In frustration she'd eat her meal—and his. All 55 of her overweight pounds, she reflected, were his fault.

She was willing to put up with his tomcatting. Someday he'd settle down and realize what a comfortable, homey place she'd created for him. Realize, more importantly, that he still loved her as he once had. He'd come to his senses. All she had to do was wait.

The first show, *Mister Dollar*, was on. Leaning back, she immersed herself in the program.

"You're tense tonight, honey," Chris said, drawing on her robe.

"I've got a lot on my mind."

"Poor Lumpkin."

"It's just—a lot of pressure at work."

"Well, I've got my problems too."

"I know, I know." Bill lit a cigarette. Sometimes she nagged him a little too much for comfort.

"I mean, I don't want to wait so long for my ship to come in that my pier collapses."

He smiled, despite his mood. "It won't be much longer. One of these days Joanne'll see the light and give me a divorce."

"And one of these days I'll win the lottery."

"Oh, come on, Chris. Be patient. We still have each other, haven't we?"

"Sure," she said. "How about a drink?"

He nodded. His mind returned to the two small vials tucked into his jacket pocket. Getting them that afternoon had been absurdly simple. Now all he had to do was figure how to combine the two chemicals.

The telephone rang.

"Damn," she said, going to answer it. "I'll bet it's Mother, *again*."

The alarm went off at 6:30. Quickly he reached over and silenced it. Joanne was still asleep, he saw, relieved. Easing himself out of bed, he tiptoed from the room and went down the carpeted stairs to the kitchen. The two vials were at the back of the cutlery drawer where he'd left them the night before.

The beauty of the new explosive was not only that such a small amount was needed to do the job, as Susan had said, but that just the slightest vibration—like the ringing of the telephone—would set off the explosion. Apart, the two chemicals were inert. Combined, he guessed most of the downstairs would be blown to a powder. And Joanne with it.

He knew that she sat down fatly on the sofa at ten in the morning to start watching her precious TV shows. The telephone was on the end table next to the sofa. At ten-fifteen he'd dial his home number. The vibration from the ring would be more than enough to do the job.

For a moment he clasped his hands together to stop their trembling. Then, the phone cover removed, he placed a drop of dioxorb and one of riantrin on the bell.

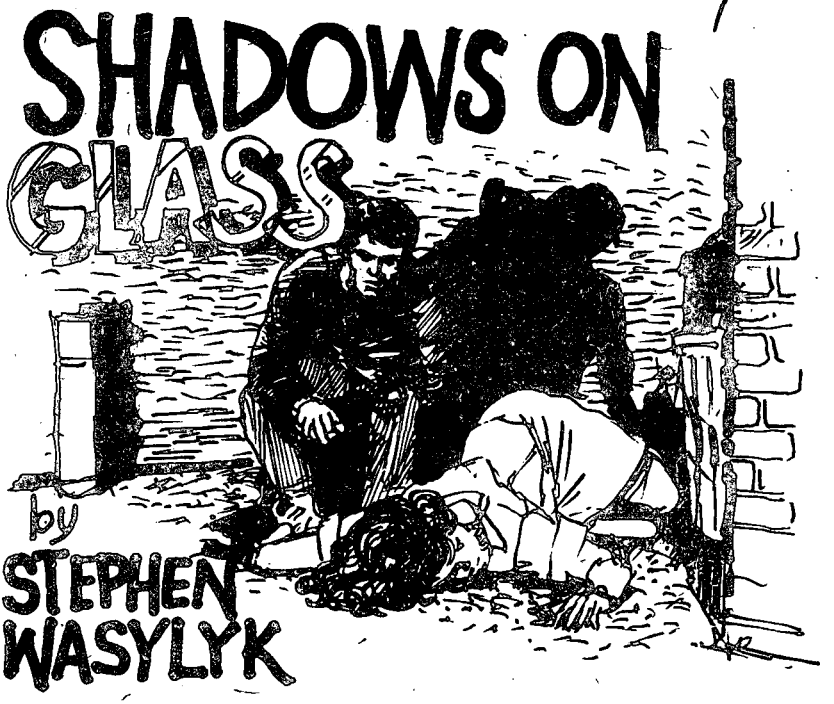
Did he hear her coming down the stairs? Holding his breath, he listened. No, it was just the thumping of his heart. Gently—*gently*—he replaced the cover of the telephone. There. It was—

She'd been thinking about him and his "Be patient" all night, unable to sleep, more infuriated with each passing hour. He had been stringing her along for far too long. How was she supposed to explain her time to her mother, her sisters, her brother, her friends?

Well, an early call *at home* should let him know how serious she was! *When* her call finally got through. She raised her finger from the cradle button and dialed again.

His days were turning into night . . .

SHADOWS ON GLASS



by STEPHEN WASYLYK

He crouched over the body of the woman crumpled in the gloom of the entrance to the small areaway alongside the darkened stores. Her pose was one of arrested motion, as if she had been cut down in flight, her legs bent, arms outflung, her white uniform a pale blotch against the grey cement.

He lifted his head, listening. The street was quiet, the only sound that of traffic occasionally purring by the intersection some hundred

feet away on the other side of the block of buildings.

In the opposite direction, the street arrowed into the night, yellow patches from tree-screened overhead lights forming regularly spaced pools in the blackness. Small lawns held sedate old porch-fronted homes away from the sidewalks, untrimmed hedges and sagging picket fences deteriorating testimonials to the desire for privacy in the crowded city.

Headlights flashed as a car turned into the street.

He ran, hurdling fences and hedges on sneakered feet until he reached a house several doors down the street, where he leaped, caught the lower branch of a broad elm and lifted himself into the protection of the leaves. He edged along a limb toward the porch roof of the house, dropped to the shingles, and scuttled to the open window of a lighted room.

He wriggled through into the brightness, an average-sized young man, perhaps nineteen, with broad shoulders and a thin waist, his face sharp and bony beneath long straight hair. He was wearing a dark-blue sweat shirt and faded denims, both worn and slightly outgrown.

He moved to the closed bedroom door and listened, hearing nothing. Heart rapid, he leaned against the door, breathing deeply, perspiration beading his face, an inner pain distorting the muscles of his face until a slow succession of tears joined the perspiration.

To his left, a sagging bed stood along the wall, a cheaply stained and scarred dresser against another. A makeshift desk, nothing more than a piece of plywood across two trestles, lit by a small lamp and holding a stack of books, occupied the space alongside the bed. In the corner, a television with volume turned low showed a snowy picture of the closing moments of a late-night talk show.

The faint yapping of a police siren sounded in the distance, came closer, and sighed to a halt.

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, dried his face, opened the door, and went down the stairs into a drab living room with a shabby rug and even shabbier furniture.

The woman seated in the easy chair watching television stood up as he descended the stairs. She was in her middle forties, dressed in slacks and a flowered blouse. Her body indicated a tendency to acquire weight but it was still well shaped, her face a slightly softer mature version of his.

Her voice was apprehensive. "You're not going out, Josh?"

"You heard the siren," he said. "Something's happened."

"Don't go," she pleaded. "It isn't your concern and the streets are dangerous at this hour."

"The police will be there."

"I wish you wouldn't. I'll be here all alone. You know I hate to be alone."

He ignored the wistful quality in her voice. "You'll be all right."

Her voice turned sharp. "It isn't necessary for you to go at all."

"I have to know what's going on." He slid the bolt on the door, pulled it open, and went out. On the sidewalk he could see a small knot of people gathering where several police cars headed into the curb, their headlights aimed at the entranceway where he had left the body of the woman.

He joined the fringe of the crowd.

The police went about their business with impersonal efficiency, several holding back the curious, others using flashlights to scan the area around the body. A car pulled up and two detectives pinned badges to their lapels and knelt by the dead woman. A photographer seemed to come from nowhere, taking flash picture after flash picture. An ambulance arrived, two white-coated orderlies examining the body along with a bookish-looking man carrying a medical bag. The uniformed policemen circulated through the crowd, asking questions and taking notes.

One stopped before a fat man standing in front of Josh.

"How about you?" he asked. "Do you live around here?"

"Down the street," said the man.

"Did you see or hear anything?"

"No. Who was she?"

"They're checking her ID."

"Was she a nurse?"

"She's wearing a white uniform."

The man cursed softly. "I guess she was knifed like the others?"

The policeman didn't respond.

"What is it with you guys?" asked the man angrily. "She's the third nurse killed in this neighborhood in the last six weeks. Can't you protect these kids? They work late, they have to come home late, and some psycho just waits and knocks them off."

"You tell me," said the policeman. "You tell me why none of you ever see anything. Nobody in the street. You sit in your houses with the doors locked and the blinds drawn and you don't want to know anything about anything."

"Whose fault is that?" asked the fat man. "Nobody dares sit outside these days. Not in this neighborhood. It didn't used to be that way. On a warm night like this, everybody used to be out on their porches. Now we have more sense. You tell me. Is it our fault we can't sit out on our own front porches anymore?"

The policeman tugged his cap down over his forehead and moved away.

The orderlies disappeared into the waiting ambulance with the covered body and people began to drift back to their homes.

The two detectives moved in widening circles around the chalked spot that indicated the position of the body.

"Waste of time," grunted the fat man and moved away.

Josh stayed.

One patrol car remained along with the detectives' car. A police panel-truck arrived. The detectives consulted with the two men who arrived with it, pointed at something on the ground near where the body had been found, and stood back.

One of them, middle-aged and with a beer drinker's belly, his suit wrinkled, his tie loose, pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lighted it, holding it like a cigar and puffing leisurely. He ran a hand through his hair, saw Josh, and grinned.

"Hi," he said.

Josh nodded.

"A bad scene," said the detective. "You live around here?"

"A few doors away," said Josh.

"I don't suppose you saw or heard anything that could help?"

"No," said Josh. "I was working in my room."

"At this hour?"

"Homework," said Josh. "I go to college."

"College? That's great." The detective jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "The state university?"

"The only one I could afford. Living close saves me money."

The detective sighed. "I sort of wish I had gone to college, but I joined the force young and just stayed."

Josh indicated the spot where the girl had been found. "What about—?"

The detective shrugged. "I dunno," he said. "Poor kid. I guess we'll find she worked at the medical center at the university like the others. I don't know what possessed her to walk home alone at this time of night, especially after the others." He looked at Josh. "Name was Cora Sands. Address in the next block. Did you know her?"

Josh shook his head.

"I thought maybe you might. Young guy like you probably doesn't miss too many good-looking chicks in the neighborhood."

"No," said Josh. "I didn't know her."

His mother came up behind him, her arms folded, hugging herself, her eyes wary.

"You were gone so long," she said, "I was worried."

The detective smiled. "Nothing to worry about with us here."

His mother straightened and ran her hands down over her hips in a preening gesture, her eyelids fluttering. Josh knew the reaction was almost automatic when a man smiled at her.

"I'm Mrs. Cavallo," she said. "This is my son, Josh."

The detective nodded. "I'm Ed Mitchell. Everybody calls me Mitch."

"What happened?"

Mitch explained. "I guess we have a psycho on our hands."

"Psycho." Her lips twisted. "I hate that word. Whenever people don't understand something, it's the work of a psycho."

Mitch shrugged. "I let the shrinks worry about the fine points. My job is to find whoever it is and end it."

"I suppose you'll be here most of the night now," she said, "looking for clues or whatever you do."

"We've done about all we can," said Mitch. "We'll be back in the morning to take another look around. Right now, all we can do is rope off the scene, get a cup of coffee, and call it quits."

"Coffee?" Mrs. Cavallo's eyelids fluttered again. "I have some made. Won't you join me?"

Mitch smiled. "That's real nice."

"Are you allowed?"

"We'll just put it down as an interview of a possible witness," said Mitch. He went over to the other detective, said something, and came

back.

Mrs. Cavallo took his arm as they walked to the house. Josh stayed a few paces behind, his hands in his pockets. His mother's face was turned up to Mitch's, her body close, her eyes alive and interested.

Josh felt sick. He let them go into the kitchen and went up to his room, closing the door behind him.

She's off again, he thought. Why did she have to pick a man who could be dangerous? He's fat and sloppy, hardly the kind women fight over. But he was a man and he had smiled at her and that was enough.

"It's good to have a man in the house," she had said as they came through the door.

Josh had heard her say that before.

He turned out the lights and went to bed, unable to sleep for a long time, but when he finally dozed off Mitch was still there. There was nothing unusual in that. He might stay all night. There would be nothing unusual in that either.

The class in literature the next afternoon was hardest of all to take. The last of the day, it had always been a bore to Josh, and lack of sleep and the image of Mitch destroyed his concentration.

The classroom was in an old building, the ceiling fixtures huge milk-white globes suspended on chrome rods from the high ceiling. Josh found himself staring at the one above his head where flies had somehow worked their way into the globe, had been trapped there and died, their bodies forming a dark circular shadow on the bottom of the white glass. One more had found its way inside and buzzed frantically, looking for a way out, a nervously moving black spot that appeared whenever it landed on the glass to rest.

It will die in there and become a shadow, thought Josh, and no one will ever notice.

The class ended and he closed his notebook gratefully and headed for the door.

A gentle hand tugged at his arm. "Josh."

He looked down. The girl was small and dark-haired, her face too sharp to be pretty, but the softness of her body compensated for her angular face.

"I heard it on the radio," she said. "About the nurse. It happened near your house, didn't it?"

Josh nodded. "A few doors away, Cass."

Several other students gathered around.

A blond-haired young man said. "Did you see any of it, Josh?"

"I was there," he said carefully.

"It's awful," said Cass. "The poor girl."

"Did you see the body, Josh?"

"They don't let you get too close," he said.

"Is it true that after the guy stabs them, he slashes them across the face?"

Being the center of attention irritated Josh. "Look," he said. "The reporters know more than I do. The information is in the papers."

The group drifted apart.

Cass held his arm. "I have to go to the library tonight," she said. "I need protection. How about it?" She smiled.

Josh smiled back. "You needn't worry. None of the girls were killed on campus and you don't wear a nurse's uniform. Besides, you know I work in the supermarket from four until nine."

"You're always working," she said. "Sometimes I think it's your polite way of brushing me off."

He touched her hair gently. "You know better."

"Saturday night as usual?"

He nodded. "I wouldn't miss it."

She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. "One date a week may be enough for you, but it's not enough for me."

She was right, he thought. Seeing each other once a week outside of class wasn't enough, but his job came first because there was no father to pick up the tab for living expenses for him and his mother, and for the unpaid bill that was making the university finance office impatient. He felt hemmed in, angry.

"Get someone else," he said stiffly.

"Josh," she said reprovingly.

He shrugged off her hand. "I'm late for work," he said.

The hours in the supermarket dragged. He caught himself placing merchandise on the wrong shelves several times.

It's like living in two different worlds, he thought. Wasn't that characteristic of schizophrenia? And then the worlds blend together and you can no longer tell what is real and what isn't.

At nine, he hung his apron in his locker and walked out into the night.

The university campus was about a mile from his home and the supermarket halfway between. The streets he followed would have been the same the nurse took the night before, but when she passed they would have been more deserted, the small shopping district along the way closed for the night. It was still open now, the windows bright.

He was passing the spot where the body had been found when Mitch stepped out of the shadows.

"Hi, Josh," he said. "Do you mind if I walk along?"

Josh shrugged.

"I had a long talk with your mother last night."

I'll bet, thought Josh. "She gets lonely. She likes to talk."

"You're not home much."

"I go to school from nine until three," said Josh. "I carry extra classes because I'm trying to get through faster. I work from four until nine and then I hit the books when I get home until one or two in the morning. I work all day Saturday and study all day Sunday. It's the only way I can keep up."

"What do you do on Saturday nights?"

Josh hesitated. "I go out."

"Good," said Mitch. "You can't work all the time. As it is, I think you work a little too much."

"There's no one else," said Josh sharply.

Mitch nodded. "She told me your father left a couple of years ago. He ran off with a woman, she said."

Josh said nothing. They reached the house and turned up the short walk.

Mitch indicated the porch steps. "Let's sit down for a minute."

They sat and surveyed the dark street.

Mitch sighed. "The pressure is on. The way it is, the medical center is uptight because they're having trouble getting nurses to work the night shift. They have to promise them escorts or cab fare. Many of the nurses from out of town have always lived in this neighborhood because it's within walking distance, but that's no advantage since this began. So the medical center is leaning on the commissioner and he's leaning on the district captain and the captain is leaning on us, particu-

larly me. Do you know what I have to look forward to if I don't break this thing? The South Street District. The pimps and the prossies and the dopers." He shook his head. "I'm too old for that. I just want to put in my time and retire in one piece. It would be hard to do out of South Street."

"That's tough," said Josh. "But what I meant was, do you have any leads?"

"We're getting a picture," said Mitch. "The captain has given me a half-dozen men and we're working over the entire neighborhood. We've turned up a couple of things."

"Like what?"

"Ah, well," said Mitch, rising. "You'll hear about them, I guess. Is your mother home?"

"She's always home."

"Tell her I'll stop by later."

"What for?"

Mitch leaned forward a little. "Just a social call," he said. "Maybe you don't know it, but your mother is an attractive woman and she's not the only one who gets lonely. Do you have any objections?"

"No," said Josh. "You want to make it more than a one-night stand, that's your business."

Mitch's eyes narrowed. "I ought to hit you for that, but I guess you've got your reasons for saying it." He looked up at the spreading branches of the elm. "You know, I grew up in a house sort of like this. Had a big tree out front like this one. I used to climb out on the porch roof and down the tree when I wanted to leave the house without my parents knowing. You ever do anything like that, Josh?"

"I'm too old to climb trees," said Josh.

"Yeah, well, times change. Like when I was your age, I used to hang out on the corner with a bunch of guys. We never did much but stand there and look the girls over and give them a hard time, but we thought we were real big men. The good thing about it was that we knew everything that went on in the neighborhood, even a lot of things we weren't supposed to know." He sighed. "Too bad those days are gone. A gang hanging out on that corner up there would keep this knife artist from operating. The nurses walking home would have to put up with a few wise remarks but at least they would be alive."

"A shift in urban mores." Josh stood up and headed for the door.

"You'll tell your mother?" asked Mitch.

"I'll tell her," said Josh.

He didn't bother. She was watching television. He said good night to her and went to his room, closing the door and throwing himself on the bed, digging his fingers into the coverlet.

What had Mitch meant with that remark about climbing the tree? Had it been casual conversation or had someone seen something and told him?

It had to be a chance observation. No one could have seen anything. The leaves of the elm screened the window too well.

Mitch talked as if he considered himself stupid and had accepted it, but no one became a detective without some intelligence and Josh had the feeling that Mitch had graduated cum laude from the streets of the city.

Damn him, anyway.

The next day was Saturday. At eight, Josh was at the supermarket, more tired than ever. He lost himself in his work, trying not to think, an automaton stacking depleted shelves with groceries, pricing cans and boxes with red ink that stained his fingers and reminded him of fresh blood.

At mid-morning, he was working in the frozen foods aisle when two young nurses, their nylon uniforms white and well fitting, their rubber-soled shoes whispering, started to squeeze by, saw something they wanted, and edged him aside. Both were pretty, no older than he was, and he watched as they fumbled in the case, destroying the neat stack he had just created. One noticed him watching and nudged the other. They whispered and laughed. Josh felt a quick surge of anger.

It wasn't his first encounter with the nurses who lived in the neighborhood and came into the market. Most ignored him as they busily compared prices, but a few, like these two, seemed to go out of their way to put him down as if they were better than he was. At first he had thought it was their way of inviting conversation, so he had smiled and said a few words to break the ice. Most had stared him down as if he had said something obscene.

I hate them all, he thought as he straightened out the case.

He was collecting carts from the parking lot when he saw the car

pull up and Mitch and another man go into the market. He waited behind a car, watching, until he saw them come out, looking for him.

Josh pushed the row of carts he had collected out into an aisle between two cars.

Mitch put a hand on his shoulder. "Hold it, Josh."

Josh straightened, his hands on the handle of the last cart, keeping it with him as the stack rolled a few feet away.

"I'd like you to come with us," said Mitch.

"What for?" asked Josh.

"A few questions."

"No," said Josh.

Mitch sighed. "Don't give us any trouble, Josh. We just want to talk to you."

"About what?"

"The nurse."

"I already told you I didn't see anything."

"There are things I need to clear up. You can help me."

The other man moved toward him.

Josh slammed the cart hard into the man's mid-section, whirled, and shoved hard at Mitch. Mitch stumbled over his own feet and went down hard.

Josh sprinted across the parking lot, zigzagging between the parked cars. Behind him, he could hear Mitch shout. A police car turned into the lot, cutting him off. He veered, saw Mitch angle toward him, and veered again. They had him hemmed in, forcing him to run straight toward an old apartment building across the street. Josh went through the door, saw steps, and went up three at a time. He swung around landing after landing until there were no more, only the door to the roof. He went through, stumbling and falling to his hands and knees, picking himself up and looking left and right and seeing nowhere to run.

He heard Mitch come through the door and ran to the edge of the roof. Below him were eight stories of smooth red brick and a courtyard.

Stepping up on the foot-wide parapet, he turned to face Mitch, ten feet away. They stared at each other, both panting, perspiration drenching their faces.

"Oh Josh," Mitch said. "You wouldn't."

"Yes, I would."

"There's no reason for anything like that."

"Yes," said Josh. "There is."

Two uniformed patrolmen came through the door and stopped, watching.

"I just want to talk," said Mitch.

Josh shook his head. "How did you know it was me?"

Mitch took a step.

Josh held up a hand. "No more," he said. "How did you know?"

Mitch stopped and fumbled for a cigarette, protecting the flame from the slight breeze on the roof as he lit it. "Does it matter, Josh?"

"It does to me."

Mitch sighed. "Yeah, well, all right. We sent men into the neighborhood and asked questions about everybody because we figured that whoever was using that knife probably lived there. We asked about you and your mother. They all told us that after your father took off with one of those pretty little nurses from the medical center two years ago, your mother locked herself in the house for weeks. She wouldn't see or talk to anybody and when she came out she went heavy on the men, bringing home a different one just about every night. The department shrink says it was her way of compensating for the loss of her husband to a younger woman, a way of proving to herself that she was still attractive. I guess you had to sit there and see all that without being able to do anything about it. The shrink says you could have gone two ways, hating your father or building up a pretty good hatred for nurses in general, especially young and pretty ones."

The sun was soothing. Josh felt himself relax a little.

Mitch was smoking the cigarette as if he had all the time in the world.

"You need more than that," said Josh.

"We have more. Near where the last girl's body was found, one of the cement blocks had sunk a little, forming a little pocket that had collected a layer of dirt. In the dirt was a footprint, the tread of a sneaker. It had rained earlier that night, so if the footprint had been made while the water was still in that little pocket the mud wouldn't have held the impression. That print had to be made after the water was gone and while the dirt was still soft but not too dry. The brains in forensic got out their calculators and charts and came up with the con-

clusion that the footprint had to be made just about the time the girl had died, give or take half an hour. O.K., one sneaker print is like another, but this one had a little triangular piece missing from the tread, as if the wearer had stepped on something sharp." Mitch tossed away the cigarette. "We wanted to look at the sole of your right sneaker."

"You don't have to," said Josh. "A customer broke a jar the other day. When I cleaned it up, I stepped on the broken glass."

The two patrolmen spread out and watched him closely.

I'd be gone before they could move, thought Josh. He could see people gathering below, staring up at him. He felt calm, different from the Josh he had been living with over the last few days. That person seemed remote, not really him at all.

"Is that all?" he asked Mitch.

"What difference does it make, Josh? You don't want to go over the edge. Step down and I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"Tell me now," said Josh. He knew that Mitch would keep talking all day if necessary, anything to keep him from stepping off the roof, hoping for a break, the chance to grab him.

Mitch ran a thumb across his jaw, his eyes narrowed. "All right, Josh. You want it all, you'll get it. We ran lucky on this one. We just kept looking and looking and it paid off. We found the knife caught in one of the hedges, just hanging there. It was an ordinary kitchen knife, like hundreds of others, but I remembered that when I had coffee with your mother, I saw a holder in your kitchen that was supposed to hold three knives but one of them was missing. The one we found looked like it might belong to that set, so I sent a couple of men to check it out, and it *was* part of it. They lifted some prints from your room and sent them with the knife to the lab to be compared. They haven't called me yet, but I guess if there's a print on that knife we'll have a match."

"It sounds as if you have everything you need."

"That doesn't mean anything, Josh. It's not the end of the world—but it will be if you step off this roof."

"If I go, is it all over? Will you close it out?"

"I told you. You don't have to do anything like that. There are a lot of people who want to help you."

Everything must have a beginning and an end, thought Josh. Some-

where during the past few days he had forgotten that, but since there had to be an ending, it was best that he should determine what that ending was.

He looked at Mitch. "What I want to know is, are you satisfied? Does it end here, one way or the other?"

"One way or the other," said Mitch.

Josh took a deep breath. The sun was warm, the breeze gentle. He turned to look out over the flat roofs of the houses and the rows of trees that marked the rectangular pattern of the streets, losing himself for a moment in a final contemplation of what had been.

He sensed the sudden movement behind him. He leaned out over the courtyard and, just as his feet left the parapet, Mitch's arm clamped around his waist. The weight of his body smashed Mitch forward against the parapet and that strong arm was all that kept him from going down. The patrolmen's frantic hands were under his armpits and pulling. He came up and over and back onto the safety of the roof, all four of them falling in a tangled mound, lying there and breathing hard.

One of the patrolmen cursed angrily as he pulled Josh's hands behind him and locked the handcuffs in place.

"Let him alone," said Mitch. He pulled Josh erect and stood rubbing his chest, pain twisting his face. "I owe you one, Josh," he said. "I think I broke a rib. You really wanted to go over, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Josh.

A plainclothes detective came running across the roof. He looked at Josh, then at Mitch. "Did he try?"

"He tried," said Mitch.

"Somebody smarter than me will have to tell me why," said the man. "The call just came in. His prints weren't on the knife, but there were others on the blade, touched with blood. No question that whoever made that print used the knife on the girl. Anyway, they got a match."

Mitch stared at him. "Who?"

The man's eyes shifted to Josh and he jerked his chin forward. "His mother."

"God!" said Mitch. He stalked halfway across the roof and stood there for a few long minutes before coming back. "What a mistake it

would have been," he said. "Everything that fits him fits her. Where is she now?"

The detective took his arm and led him a few feet away, whispering in his ear. Mitch listened, his face impassive, his eyes fixed on Josh. When the detective finished, Mitch rubbed a hand over his face, then walked back to Josh.

"Your mother is dead," he said. "They found her when they went back to pick her up. She left a note saying it was all something she had to do." He motioned. "Take off the cuffs."

Josh let his hands drop as they were freed, tears hot against his closed lids.

Mitch placed a hand on his shoulder. "I don't understand the sneaker print," he said.

Josh opened his eyes. "I was looking out the window," he said dully. "I saw her leave the house. That wasn't right. She was afraid to go out unless I went with her. I went through the window and down the tree and followed her. I saw the nurse coming. The nurse was scared until she saw it was another woman. The next thing I knew, the nurse was on the ground and my mother ran past me on the way home. I still didn't know what she had done, not until I went to look at the nurse. She was dead. Then a car came, so I ran too."

"And you thought that if you went off the roof, we would close the case up and look no further. You're a damned fool. Did you think she would stop? The killings would have gone on. People like that don't stop until they're caught and put away. You should have told me."

"I couldn't do that," said Josh.

Mitch wrapped an arm over his shoulders. "I can understand that. Listen. Maybe we can track down your father and let him know what's happened. You could use a little moral support, and just because he took off with another woman doesn't mean he's a bad guy."

Josh hesitated. She was dead, he thought, and that obligation was ended, but there was another still with him that had to be fulfilled.

"He didn't take off with another woman," he said.

"Both she and the neighbors—"

"I know," said Josh. "Because that's what my mother wanted everyone to believe. She spread the story herself."

He had thought the words would come easily, but they stuck in his throat. "She lied," he said. "She made it up. After two years of saying

it, she had talked herself into believing it because she wanted to believe it, had to think he had run away with another woman. It must have been the only way she could go on, and all the men and the nurses were part of it, her way of convincing herself it really happened. I believed it because I wasn't home when he was supposed to have left and all I could remember was the arguments they used to have."

"I don't understand," said Mitch. "If he didn't take off, where is he?"

"She put the belongings he had left behind in a locked room in the basement," said Josh. "I never had a reason to look in that room. I didn't want anything of his. But last night I went down to see if he had left anything behind that would tell me where he went."

Mitch stared at him.

Josh closed his eyes and saw the milk-white globe shadowed with the dark bodies of flies that had been trapped and had died, and he heard again the buzzing of the fly that had struggled to find its way to freedom. She had been like that, he thought, trapped in a globe of her own making with no one to set her free.

"The house is old," he said, his voice a whisper. "The basement floor is dirt. You'll find him where she buried him two years ago."

Well, at least one of them fulfilled his contract . . .

THE CONTRACT

by James Holding

It was almost two o'clock in the afternoon when I telephoned the bank from a public phone booth and asked to speak with Mr. Clifton, the president.

His secretary gave me the usual treatment. What was my name? Would I care to state my business with Mr. Clifton? I told her my name was Angelo Cremona and I wanted to talk with Mr. Clifton about a contract.

That seemed to satisfy her. In a few seconds Mr. Clifton's phone clicked and he said, "Yes, Mr. Cremona, can I help you?" The voice was bass register, smooth and controlled, and sounded puzzled. "I don't recall your name, I'm afraid—"

"You wouldn't," I said. "We've never met."

"Then how can I help you?" The smooth voice took on an edge of impatience. Or was it nervousness?

"I've been out of work for quite a while, Mr. Clifton," I said, "and I was told by a friend in New York that if I came here and contacted you, you might offer me a temporary job of some kind."

"Who was this friend?"

"He didn't want me to say, sir. I'm sorry. But he's always leveled with me before, so here I am."

"You came here from New York?"

"Yes."

"On the remote chance that I'd offer you a job?"

I said humbly, "I sure hope you've got one I can fill, Mr. Clifton."

He hesitated. "Do you know anything about banking?"

So the rumor was true. Otherwise he'd have told me to get lost long ago. The nervousness was plain in his voice now.

I answered, "Enough to get by, I think. Can we talk about it?"

"Not now," said Clifton, "I'm busy."

"When?"

He hesitated again. "Tonight maybe? I walk the dog about ten o'clock. You can join me then."

"Right."

"You know where I live?"

"I'll find out," I said and hung up.

A little before ten that night, I stationed myself in the shadow of a pyracantha hedge that bordered Clifton's place on the street side. A crushed-shell driveway led from where I stood through half an acre of manicured lawn to a handsome fieldstone house. Loitering near the tall hedge, I kept out of sight of passing cars or pedestrians, an easy thing to do because there weren't many of either in this exclusive neighborhood after dark. A full moon peered fitfully from behind racing clouds, and sudden gusts of wind with a faint chill in them rattled the hedge.

I hadn't waited more than ten minutes when Clifton came out of his

front door and started down the driveway toward me. His footfalls crunched on the driveway. When he got close enough, I could see that he was holding tight to one end of a leash that had a big black standard poodle on the other end of it. It was a stylish-looking dog, show-clipped. Clifton was a stylish-looking man too. Wearing a business suit, complete with vest and necktie, to walk the dog. The poodle was pulling back on the leash, snuffling at the edge of the flower beds beside the driveway so that Clifton had to keep jerking on the leash to make the pooch follow him.

I stepped out of the shadows and said, "Mr. Clifton?" I kept it very quiet. I didn't want to startle him.

He wasn't startled. He gave another casual jerk on the dog's leash and said, "Oh, here you are. Cremona, wasn't it?"

I fell into step with him and the dog. We walked down the road toward the next estate to his, using the grass verge because there weren't any sidewalks.

"Angelo Cremona," I said.

He looked hard at me in the uncertain light, a big man who topped me by almost a foot. He said abruptly, "*Now* can you tell me who sent you to me?"

"No, I can't. What difference does it make? I can do the job you want done, Mr. Clifton. Isn't that enough for you?"

"And what exactly *is* the job you think I want done?"

"I told your secretary. And she obviously told you. A contract job."

He wasn't quite ready yet to take the plunge. "What kind of a contract job?" Maybe he was trying to test me, or maybe he wanted the suggestion to come from me, I didn't know.

I said, "Why don't you quit stalling, Mr. Clifton? The word is out that you want something to happen to your wife. That's the kind of contract job I mean. If you want to talk to me about it, fine; otherwise tell me now so I won't waste any more time in this godforsaken town."

He stopped in the middle of the road, pulling on the leash so hard that he almost choked the poodle. "I had to be sure of you," he said softly. "You can see that, can't you?"

"Sure." I soothed him a little. "So now you're sure of me, let's settle the deal." I paused and pulled out a cigarette and lit it with my lighter. "Fifteen thousand was the figure mentioned to me."

He cleared his throat as though he were smoking the cigarette in-

stead of me. "Yes. Fifteen is all right. That seems—ah—reasonable enough, I suppose."

I grinned in the darkness. The figure I'd heard was ten. The job was looking better all the time.

Clifton was saying, "Of course I must be absolutely certain that no breath of suspicion will ever attach to me." As though he'd invented the phrase.

I let my contempt show in my voice. "Listen," I said. "Even you ought to be able to figure that I couldn't stay in this business very long if I didn't guarantee *that*. You think I'm a moron, for God's sake?"

"Don't take that tone with me!" Clifton snapped. The dog growled at the sudden crackle of ice in his master's voice. "You must understand one thing clearly. My reputation in this community is impeccable, Mr. Cremona. My moral standards have never been questioned by anyone. And my deep love for my wife, in spite of her alcoholism, is well known to all our friends. I want to keep it that way."

"Except that you would find it convenient if your alcoholic wife was removed from the scene, right?"

Clifton sighed. He started to walk again. The dog and I went with him. "I wish there were some other way," he said. "Things have just become so goddamn complicated. . ."

"Never mind," I interrupted. "I don't want to know any reasons. All I want to know is what your wife looks like, what kind and color of car she drives, her habits, her schedule, things like that. And how many servants or children live in your house with you, what *their* schedules are, and so on. Including your own movements for the next day or two, so that, as you put it, no breath of suspicion will attach to you when it happens."

He nodded. "I can give you all that. No children. Only one servant who sleeps in. And you can come back to the house with me now and familiarize yourself with my wife's appearance. She's drunk. When I left the house, she was about to pass out on the living-room sofa. You can look through the front windows when I take in the dog and make sure of identification. O.K.?"

"O.K."

Neither of us said anything for a minute or two. Then Clifton said, "It's got to look like an accident, Cremona. Whatever happens to Nancy must look like an accident. Can you arrange that?"

"No problem. Or a suicide."

"Suicide?" He seemed shocked at the idea.

"Why not? If it works out that way, I'd like the option."

"Well," he murmured. "I suppose so, although I fail to see—"

"It's sometimes more convincing than an accident." I felt the poodle rubbing his muzzle against my leg as I walked. I patted his head. I didn't have to stoop to do it.

"I'll leave it up to you then. Shall we go back now?"

"Not yet. We've settled on fifteen thousand for the job. I usually get half in advance."

Even in the gloom I could see his incredulous expression. "In advance?" he said sharply. "Before you've done anything? Before you've given any evidence of good faith? Before I even know for sure that you are capable of carrying out such an assignment?"

"Yes," I said. "Before all that, I usually get half in advance."

"Not from me you don't!" said Clifton. "You think I've become a bank president by *trusting* people?" He laughed bitterly. "When the job is done, you'll be paid, don't worry about that. Maybe even a bonus thrown in. But not a penny until I'm convinced that you've—ah—performed satisfactorily."

It was funny to hear this bankerlike talk coming from a guy who was hiring me to kill his wife. I said, "Speaking of convincing, what will you accept as convincing evidence that I've done the job for you?"

He didn't say anything right away. Finally, in a low voice that carried a thread of horror, he said, "I'll want to see her body, Cremona. Her dead body."

"Fair enough."

"And the sooner the better."

"I'll move as quick as I can. You better get the money together tomorrow."

"I'm playing in a member-guest tournament at the golf club tomorrow," he protested. "I'll be leaving the office before noon and—"

"Get the money together," I said.

He swallowed. "How do you want it?"

"Hundreds will be O.K."

"After the job is done. You understand that?"

"You've told me often enough." We were walking under the overhanging branches of some big oak trees that bordered the road. It was

so black that you could hardly tell the poodle from the darkness.

He said, "And don't call me at the bank again, Cremona."

"I won't. Suppose I meet you here each evening, walking the dog, to report on progress? And to collect my fee. *After* the job is done, of course."

I saw the white flash of his teeth as he smiled at my feeble sarcasm. After a few steps more he said, "How will I know when you have—ah—been successful?"

I laughed. "You'll know all right, Mr. Clifton. Don't worry about that."

He grunted and began to whistle under his breath with the air of a man who has just reached a final decision on a difficult problem and is feeling relieved about it.

I said, "How about going back now so you can show me Mrs. Clifton?"

Without a word, he turned and started to jerk the dog toward home.

I followed along, estimating that a hundred and fifty hundred-dollar bills ought to make a pad about an inch and a quarter thick. Compact enough to go into a number ten envelope. A very stimulating thought.

I didn't know whether Clifton would be at home the following night when it came time to walk the poodle. But sure enough, as I waited in the shadow of the hedge again, here he came, crunching down the driveway, jerking on the dog's leash and hurrying a little.

I fell into step with them again and we started down the road together. The dog panted noisily and led the way. I lit a cigarette.

Mr. Clifton turned to me and said with an approving nod, "Well, Cremona, you certainly didn't waste any time, did you?"

"Today seemed as good a time as any," I answered. "With you at your golf club and the maid's day off."

"It was perfect! I was just sitting down to dinner with my guests when the police called to tell me about Nancy—that she'd committed suicide by jumping into the river off the old bridge in Locust Grove."

"It seemed a good spot for our purpose."

"Perfect!" he said again. "How'd you ever find it?"

"The first thing to do on a job, Mr. Clifton, is to scout the territory." I looked at him. "Who discovered her?"

"A farmer driving a truckload of produce into the city for the

farmer's market. He noticed Nancy's car in the middle of the bridge with the door hanging open and the keys in the ignition, but nobody around. Then he found the suicide note in the front seat and notified the police."

"Good," I said. "Good."

The poodle nudged my knee. He was getting to know me. I scratched behind his ears.

Clifton said, "Are you going to tell me how you worked it?"

"No," I said. "Did they find her body yet?"

"Not yet." He wagged his head. "They dragged the river till it was too dark to see anything, then called it off until morning. I just left the river half an hour ago."

"The maid?" I said. "Is she home from her day off yet?"

"She doesn't come back till tomorrow. Why?"

"She might have thought it was funny for you to walk your dog as usual the day your wife jumped off a bridge, that's all."

Clifton slowed his pace, resisting the poodle's strong surging on the leash. "At least tell me how you worked the suicide note," he demanded. "I saw it. It was in Nancy's handwriting."

"You'd be surprised what a half-drunk woman will do when you scare her enough."

"You scared her?"

"I made her write the suicide note, so I must have."

"How?"

"Never mind."

Clifton persisted. "I want to know."

I lost patience. "All you need to know, Mr. Clifton, is that I tossed your wife, dead drunk, into the river to drown and left a suicide note on the front seat of her car to explain her death. I've therefore solved your problem, right? So how about laying my fifteen grand on me?"

Clifton swore at the poodle before he replied. It was unnecessary swearing, because the dog was marching along like a gentleman. I thought maybe he was taking time to consider a new angle. Stalling.

When he did speak, I knew I'd been right. He said, "You know something, Cremona? I think there's a very good chance that I don't owe you a cent."

I stopped in the middle of the road. He stopped too. So did the dog. "How's that?" I asked mildly, holding myself in.

"Nancy may *really* have committed suicide, all by herself. That's what I mean. Without any help from you at all. She's often talked about what a great place that old bridge would be for a suicide. And she's been very depressed lately."

"Now just a minute," I began.

But he rushed on, caught up in his new idea. "*I* told *you* about Nancy committing suicide in the river, and about dragging the river, and about the suicide note and all that. *You* haven't told *me* anything! All you've done is nod your head and make cryptic remarks."

"I told you last night I might opt for suicide," I reminded him. "That's some indication that I helped Nancy on her way today, isn't it?"

"Or a lucky coincidence. You don't tell me how you scared Nancy into writing the note. You don't tell me how you knew about the old bridge. And you don't tell me about the suicide note. *I* tell *you*!"

I was sick of this. I said in my toughest voice, "You hired me to kill your wife for fifteen thousand dollars, Mr. Clifton. I've killed her. Let's have the money."

He paid no attention. After all, there's no way a guy who stands six-two in his socks and plays golf and squash three times a week to maintain his muscle tone is going to be cowed by an unarmed five-foot four-inch mini-man like me—especially when he has a dog at his side big enough to treat me like a Gainesburger if his master tells him to. He said, "I'm sorry but I'm not satisfied, Cremona. Maybe you were responsible for Nancy's suicide, and maybe not. In any case, I won't pay you until I see her dead body. That was our agreement. And Nancy is still in the river."

"It may be three or four days before they get her out," I said. "On a drowning job I did two years ago in Illinois, it took them three days to locate the body. I'm not going to hang around town that long, Mr. Clifton. And I shouldn't think you'd want me to."

"I don't give a damn what you think. If Nancy actually killed herself, I'm in the clear anyway. And if she didn't, if you arranged it, I still want to be sure she's dead."

I played my last card. I edged Clifton out into the middle of the road where the moonlight was a little brighter than under the trees and put my hand into my pocket. "How about these?" I asked him. I held out my cupped hand.

He looked at them silently, bending close, his eyes only a few inches from the diamond engagement ring and the wristwatch on its gold band. He straightened up and grabbed my wrist. "They're Nancy's!"

"Oh, are they?" I said sarcastically.

"She was wearing them when I left for the office this morning."

"And now I've got them," I said. "Does that mean anything to you?"

He wilted. "Yes. Yes. Of course. I'm sorry, Cremona." He thought about it for a minute. "That's proof enough, I guess."

"Good," I said. I put the jewelry back in my pocket. "All right if I keep them? You mentioned a possible bonus."

He waved that aside. "Keep them. You've earned them, Cremona."

"Thanks," I said. "And my fifteen grand?"

"Right here." He reached into his inside jacket pocket and brought out a fat envelope. I noted with pleasure that it was about an inch and a quarter thick. Any way you look at it, a nice package.

I took the envelope from his fingers and peeked inside to make sure he hadn't tried to pay me off with cut-up newspapers or Kleenex. He hadn't. The envelope was stuffed with real hundred-dollar bills, just as ordered.

I looked up at Clifton and raised my voice a little. "Do you mind if I count it, Mr. Clifton?"

"Go ahead," he said, cheerful as you please. "You'll find it's all there."

"I'm sure it is," said a voice behind my shoulder.

Two shapes materialized from the shadows and stepped smartly abreast of Clifton, one on either side.

"O.K., Angelo," the biggest shape said. His name is Brannigan. "We'll take it from here. You're under arrest, Mr. Clifton." He snapped a handcuff on Clifton's right wrist before my client knew what was happening to him. The other cop, Phillips, grabbed the poodle's collar.

I put the fifteen thousand into my pocket to hold for evidence, and said to Clifton, "The charge will be conspiracy to murder your wife."

He turned a furious face on me. "You're a cop, Cremona? A *cop*?"

I nodded. "Only undercover though," I said. "Too short for much of anything else."

He squirmed in Brannigan's grip and cursed me. "This is entrapment!" he faltered. "False arrest! You'll never make it stick! Commissioner Raleigh is one of my best friends."

Brannigan is even bigger than Clifton. He said roughly, "Angelo's got you on tape, Clifton. You're cooked."

Clifton looked at me and I nodded and held up my cigarette lighter rigged with the miniature mike. I was beginning to feel sorry for him. I said, "I can show you your wife's body now, Mr. Clifton, if you want to see it."

Nothing about him but his eyes moved. He said huskily, "Then Nancy *did* drown herself? And you've found her body?"

"It was never lost," I said. "We've kept your wife under close surveillance for a week—ever since one of our stoolies told us you were offering a contract on her life. She's down at headquarters right now, alive and well and sober, waiting till we bring you in. She helped us set you up."

That shook him more than anything. "Nancy wouldn't be a party to such a rotten plot against me!" he said. "I won't believe that! She loves me, she's always said she couldn't get along without me! That's why she's never been willing to give me a divorce."

"Well," I said, "she changed her mind in a hurry when it came down to being divorced or being dead. You can't really blame her, can you?"

He didn't answer me.

Emma needed time to cultivate her garden . . .

WEEDS

by CHARLENE WEIR

Emma Trask quietly closed her kitchen door and stepped out into the frail light of dawn. She glanced anxiously at the brick house next door. Nothing stirred. Curtains covered the windows.

"Please, please," Emma whispered, "let Mattie still be asleep." She bolted past the open space between the two houses and into the shelter of her garden. She knelt in the soil and viciously yanked at the weeds threatening the tiny pansies. Such pretty little faces the pansies

had. She caressed one with a fingertip.

Mattie's like a weed, Emma thought with sudden insight. Steadily infiltrating and spreading.

Raising her head, Emma looked back at her little house. The early morning sun brushed the white wood with a delicate rosy hue. Emma caught her breath in a sob. The house had seemed so perfect when she first saw it. A perfect little pearl. But it was the garden—oh, the lovely garden—that captured her heart. All her life Emma had yearned for just such a garden. It seemed to cry out to her. *Come, come and live here. This is where you belong.*

It spoke plainly of neglect and her hands longed to set it right. To tear out the weeds choking the flowers and crawling over the pebbled paths. To neaten the straggly bushes and prune the roses and shape the fruit trees. The beautiful fruit trees—an apple and a peach and a lemon—meant to bear fruit just for her.

Yes, Emma knew immediately, this was the house to buy. From this garden of her dreams she would grow masses of flowers and fill every room in the little house. Her hand shook when she signed the papers that would make the house her own.

During the following days she barely ate and she slept poorly in her anxiety that something would happen to prevent the sale. When she caught herself daydreaming over the garden, picturing the roses in bloom and apples on the tree, she went cold with dread that some malicious fate would snatch it all away.

But her fears proved foolish and at last she received the key to the house. She clutched it tightly in her hand, her heart pounding. The garden was truly hers. Anytime she liked she could work in her own garden—all day if she wanted. And she could have flowers. Flowers everywhere. Every kind and every color, in vases all over her house. Joy bubbled in her throat with such pressure that tears filled her eyes.

Then she met Mattie.

On the very day Emma moved in, she met Mattie. The moving men had unloaded her belongings and departed. Packing boxes crowded the rooms. Mama's dainty furniture sat askew and looked offended at finding itself removed from the elegant city apartment and dumped in this plain little house in the suburbs. Emma clasped her thin hands together, feeling such happiness she had to sing. She darted from box to

box, reading her neatly printed labels until she found the one she wanted.

Unpacking it lovingly, she caressed each shiny new garden tool as she took it out—trowel, pruning shears, clippers, something that looked like a metal claw, the garden books collected over the years and until now used only for pleasant reading. She was leafing through one when the doorbell rang.

On the porch stood a plump middle-aged woman with short blonde hair and a wide smile that bared such large strong teeth that for a moment Emma was frightened.

"I'm Mattie," the woman said. "From next door." Her voice was loud and positive and she swept in. "I've been watching the movers. I thought I'd come over and lend you a hand." She looked around at the disorder and dusted her hands together. "On second thought, I'd better lend you both of them."

"Oh, that's nice of you," Emma said. "But actually I thought I'd do a little work in the garden. You see, this is my very first garden and I'm so excited—"

"It's no trouble at all," Mattie said. "I like to keep busy. I know you must feel you'll never get this mess cleared up, but don't worry, I'm here to help." She seized a carton and ripped it open. "Kitchen things. I don't have to ask where you want these. In no time, we'll have everything straight."

"But there's no hurry," Emma protested.

Mattie paid no attention. She hefted the carton and marched to the kitchen.

Emma sighed, supposing the woman was right, that it would be better to get the house settled before starting on the garden. But it was *her* house and *her* garden. Emma felt ashamed of her annoyance. Mattie was just being neighborly. And it *was* nice of her to help. After one longing glance out the window, Emma opened another box and stacked the towels and sheets out of it into the linen closet.

As order began to appear out of chaos Emma began to feel grateful to Mattie—so much was being accomplished so quickly. But although Mattie worked hard, she talked in a loud voice all about herself. About being a widow, about her husband dying after a lingering illness, about having no children. About living alone in the big brick house next door that was much too big for her.

After several hours Emma, exhausted from the unpacking and limp from Mattie's voice booming at her, talked simply to keep that voice from pounding her eardrums. At first she spoke of general things like the weather and the number of closets in the house, but Mattie asked so many eager questions that Emma found it difficult to keep anything back. Soon she was talking about herself, about her life, about the apartment, and about Mama dying.

"I know just how you feel," Mattie said sympathetically. "It's so hard when you lose someone you love." She sighed gustily. "We're both all alone in the world."

Alone? Well, yes, Emma knew she was alone. But it wasn't a sad thing the way Mattie seemed to think. Emma was happy to be alone and free to do what she wanted instead of what Mama wanted. Free to move from the apartment she disliked so much and into her own house. Free to have a garden and flowers. Because of Mama's allergies, Emma couldn't have any flowers or plants in the apartment. Not even so much as an African violet on her window-sill.

Mama. Always doing things, playing cards, going to parties, entertaining friends and having them in for tea. And of course she wanted Emma to share it all with her. And to pour the tea from the silver teapot. Even if Emma wanted to stay home and read a book, Mama always insisted that Emma come with her.

"I'm so glad you moved here," Mattie said. "I already feel that we're good friends. Now we have each other and neither one of us will be alone."

Emma was startled and vaguely uneasy. She remembered Mama saying over the years, "We only have each other now that Daddy's gone."

The next morning Emma got up early. As she sipped a cup of spiced tea, she looked around at her tidy kitchen and thought that Mattie was right. How nice to have everything unpacked and put away where it belonged and the boxes all flattened and set out for the trashmen to pick up.

And today she could spend the whole day in the garden. She would start on the weeds. By the end of the day she should have one whole flower bed free of those strangling weeds—

A brisk rat-a-tat sounded on the door, the knob turned, and Mattie came in.

"So you're an early riser too," Mattie said. "Good. If there's one thing I can't stand it's people who stay in bed half the day. I just made some doughnuts. Have one before they get cold."

Emma felt a sharp prick of annoyance as she made tea for Mattie. The doughnuts were delicious and it was kind of Mattie to bring them, but Emma had already had breakfast and she wanted to get an early start in the garden. Well, perhaps she wouldn't stay long.

"Now," Mattie said after draining her cup, "are you ready? We won't get anything done sitting here."

"Oh, but there's nothing left to do."

"The rest of the boxes need unpacking."

"Oh no, you see—"

All the boxes had already been unpacked except those with Mama's silver and china. Emma meant to leave that packed and the boxes stacked in the extra bedroom out of the way. Silver was so much trouble, having to be polished all the time, and the fragile china collected dust and needed such careful washing.

"Of *course* you want this unpacked," Mattie said, tearing open a carton. "You can't leave all these beautiful things in boxes. They need to be out where you can see them."

They unpacked the china, carefully washed and dried each piece, and placed it in the china cabinet where it had sat for so many years. They took out the silver and polished it all, the teapot and the bowls and the platters and the candlesticks. By the time they finished, there was very little daylight left and Emma was too tired to work in the garden anyway.

Every day after that Mattie came, uninvited, often early in the morning and sometimes not leaving until after dark. With no more unpacking to do, Mattie started cleaning until every inch of the house had been scrubbed until it shone.

They painted one bedroom because Mattie convinced Emma that lavender walls made the room too dark and white would be better. The paint fumes gave Emma a headache, but Mattie smiled with her large horse teeth and said, "Isn't this fun? I'm so glad you're here. Now we have each other."

Emma felt a chill.

The house was spotless and Emma had to admit it looked lovely. But

she hadn't made much headway in the garden. The flower beds remained choked with weeds, the shrubbery was still shaggy, and she hadn't yet planted the herbs she had bought. Headaches started to plague her, occurring more and more often, the pain more severe with each one.

When not scrubbing or painting, Mattie went places and insisted Emma go with her—shopping or out for lunch or to a movie or meetings or lectures. "Now," Mattie would say when Emma protested, "I'm not going to leave you all alone to start brooding and grieving for your mother. Remember, I'm here now. You're not alone anymore."

"But the garden," Emma protested.

"That's no good. Gardening keeps your hands busy, but it leaves your mind free to feel sorry for yourself."

Emma got up earlier and earlier to have some quiet time in her garden before Mattie came. She couldn't sleep at night, worrying whether she'd beat Mattie to a precious hour or two alone in her garden. But Mattie got up earlier and earlier to join Emma in the garden. She gave Emma a pair of gloves and urged her to wear them so her hands wouldn't get stained with dirt.

Emma hated the gloves. They were clumsy things that made her hands awkward and her fingers unable to feel the tender plants. Always too thin, she got even thinner and her headaches got worse.

Mattie insisted the weight loss and headaches were because Emma worked too hard in the garden. She brought over a bottle of weed killer. "There's no sense in killing yourself trying to pull out all those weeds. Just dose them with this."

"Oh, but I don't like to use this sort of thing. It's not good for—"

"There are some weeds you just have to use weed killer on."

Emma accepted the bottle, but so many warnings covered the label she was frightened of it and she put it under the sink and never used it.

If only, Emma thought in despair. If only she could tell Mattie to leave her alone. If only she could keep her door locked and not answer her phone. If only Mattie would just go away.

But Emma couldn't. Mama had taught her to be a lady, to be meek and docile. She couldn't bring herself to be rude no matter how much she wanted to. She could only smile and be agreeable and listen to Mattie's booming voice.

She did try to escape a few times. When Mattie told her they were going somewhere at a certain time, Emma went off for a walk. But Mattie looked at her so oddly and made such pointed comments about forgetfulness and senility and speaking to a doctor that Emma gave it up.

Emma had a recurring dream that she and Mattie were daisies, side by side in the flowerbed. The daisy that was herself shriveled and shrunk little by little while the daisy that was Mattie got bigger and stronger, and then dropped its petal disguise and revealed itself as a monstrous weed. It grabbed Emma by the roots and squeezed the life out of her.

Each time Emma woke up sweating and with her heart pounding. She would get up even earlier then and go out to the garden for reassurance.

There were mornings, however, when she tried to escape Mattie by staying in bed late. She kept her doors locked and, pretending to be asleep, didn't answer the phone though it rang and rang until she thought she would scream.

But nothing kept Mattie away. One morning she called the fire department and insisted they break the lock because Emma might be dying.

And Emma, lying in bed in her nightgown, wanted to die of shame when strange men came into her bedroom.

Her face grew hot just remembering.

Emma dropped a handful of weeds in her basket. "There now," she murmured to the pansies. "That's better, isn't it?" She fancied that the flower faces looked happier already.

"Yoo-hoo," Mattie called and a few seconds later her feet crunched firmly down the pebbled path.

Emma crouched over the flowers, her muscles tensing protectively.

"There you are," Mattie said. "I've been looking for you. You haven't forgotten, have you? We have appointments to have our hair done."

Emma smiled vaguely and shook her head. She felt the skin tighten on her scalp and pain stabbed behind her eyes.

"You know," Mattie went on, "I've been thinking. You gave me such a fright last week, I'll never get over it. Don't you think it would be

better if I moved in with you? Then we'd never be alone. I'd always be right here."

"Oh dear," Emma moaned, rocking back and forth. The pain swelled in her head.

Mattie looked at her with concern. "Are you all right?" She put her hand on Emma's shoulder.

Emma drew back. "Yes." She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. "I'm just a little stiff." She rose to her feet. The pain clouded her vision. She peered at Mattie through the grey mist. Mattie's face faded, the features blurred, then sharpened into Mama's face, then blurred again. A breeze lifted the blonde hair and it waved around the face like the petals in a daisy mask.

"I'll have to change," Emma said. Her voice sounded far away. "Maybe you'd like a cup of tea while you wait." Emma started for the house.

Mattie followed. In her booming voice, she pointed out the advantages of living together. Emma didn't hear. The pain was so bad now that she could barely see.

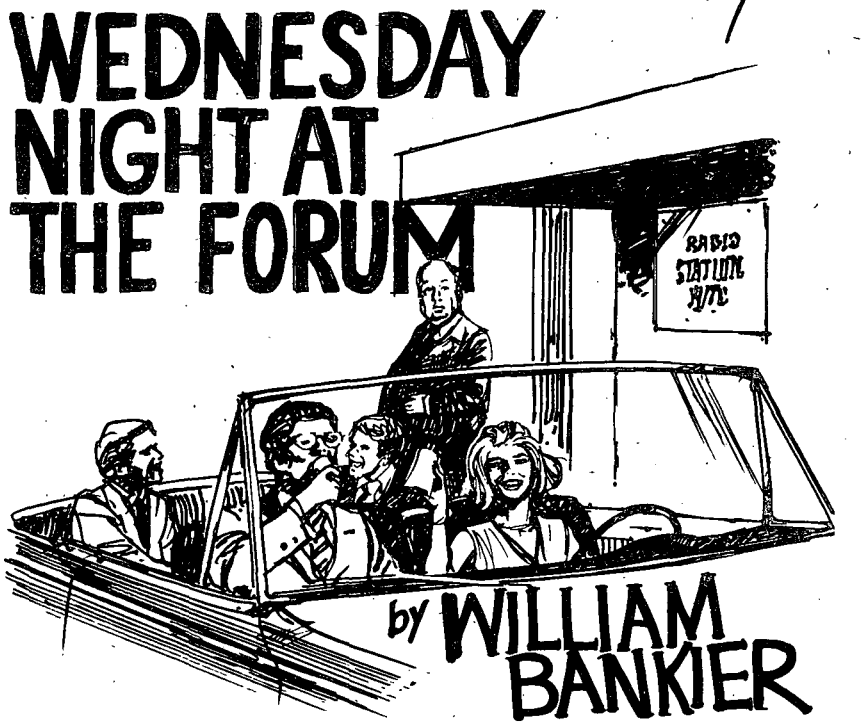
She told Mattie to sit in the living room while she made the tea. She took down Mama's silver teapot and set it on the kitchen cabinet, then patted the sweat from her forehead. She bent, almost screaming from the pain, and took what she needed from the bottom cabinet.

Straightening, she grasped the edge of the cabinet. She swayed, pain crashing through her head. Strong, she thought, it must be very strong. She unscrewed the jar and poured a generous portion of weed killer in the silver teapot before filling it with spiced tea.

Some weeds you just have to use weed killer on.

His idea was to separate Quebec from Canada . . .

WEDNESDAY NIGHT AT THE FORUM



by WILLIAM BANKIER

The Quebec referendum was only two weeks away and you could feel the tension in the Montreal population, even in a neighborhood so dedicated to drinking and relaxation as Crescent Street. Argentina Carr sat in splendid isolation at a small round table snug against the brick outer wall of El Diablo, well in the canopy's shade and as far as possible from the pedestrian flow, drinking Irish coffee and waiting for Bosco Latourelle.

Argentina loved the sensation of getting high early on a Thursday afternoon. Especially when the air was tingling with anticipation, a sort of suppressed scream in the city as if a carnival crowd was watching a jammed ferris wheel teetering and about to fall. With no program to do this afternoon at Radio-Canada, she was free to sit and drift and take whatever the rest of the day had to offer. The premier of the province was in Montreal doing an all-afternoon open-line show which was preempting her time. So the listeners were getting Yves Baril instead of Argentina Carr. And Argentina Carr was getting high.

Bosco Latourelle arrived with his customary flair. Brakes squealed on Maisonneuve Boulevard, tires ripped the pavement, and then voices rose in theatrical dispute, full of thunder but without much conviction. After all, metal had not been bent nor any glass broken, and who really minded the excuse to sound off?

Argentina could see her friend's chestnut head, large and smooth from recent attention at the stylist's, moving above the roofs of parked cars. He was doing everything at once; paying the taxi, tipping to compensate for the sudden command to stop, shouting down the offended motorists, greeting friends at El Diablo's ringside, placating the laconic cop, and then, with the immaculate timing of the successful advertising man, leaving the meeting while he was still ahead.

"You're going to get killed one day," Argentina said as Bosco manipulated a couple of Steinberg wrought-iron chairs to make a place for himself.

"No way," Bosco said. "I cause other people's deaths, not my own. I'll die in bed."

"Sounds a lonely way to go."

"Who said I'd be alone?" His mildly accented English was a sound Argentina never tired of. Latourelle—articulate as any man in Canada—knew the good thing he had going and made no attempt to lose the vocal evidence of his Gaspé origins. He sat down, the jacket of his dark-blue summerweight suit unbuttoned, his white shirt taut across his generous chest and belly. His glossy tie was loosened at the unbuttoned collar and hung like a striped flag. *"Fait chaud,"* he said, swabbing his clean-shaven face with a balled handkerchief, his pale-blue eyes never leaving Argentina's. "If June is like this, we'll roast in July."

"The long hot summer," Argentina said meaningfully. Like everyone

else these days, she seldom got the referendum out of her mind.

"What's that you're drinking?" Bosco asked her. "Irish coffee? Today? Only the English." To the waiter he said, *"Un autre cafe comme ça pour ma'm'selle, et moi, je veut prendre une grosse Canabrau."* Latourelle preferred whisky to beer but he served his brewery clients in public by always keeping his table covered with their bottles.

"I'm mystified, Bosco," Argentina said. "Why the phone call? Why the insistence on meeting me?"

"You should always keep your shoulders and arms uncovered like that," he said. "You gleam."

"Thank you." The light cotton frock, dotted like confetti and held at the shoulders by two ribbons, was one of her own favorites. Argentina was very aware of the slope of her arms, the tanned skin and the gold dusting of tiny hairs where a shaft of sunlight was penetrating the shade. "Is this courting day? It sounded very urgent on the telephone."

"Courting can be urgent, Argentina."

"As I remember, it was anything but urgent last time. Measured and contemplative would be more like it. Not that I'm complaining."

The drinks came and Bosco put down half the glass of beer at one draft, his broad muscled neck pulsing slowly. He set down the glass and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, the sophisticated man of commerce retaining his farmer charm. "O.K., my love, I need you. This is the time."

"Are we still on that subject?"

"I need you to help me bring off a coup." He lowered his voice and his eyes went flat. "A political adventure, old girl. A kidnapping."

"I don't get it."

"No joke. You and I and a few others are going to make the big move. We're going to get involved. That's if you'll agree to go along." He looked at her, measuring her. "And I hope you'll agree, because if you don't this whole population is due for the cruelest blood-bath our native land has ever experienced."

"Bosco, you don't sound like yourself."

"I don't? Well." He put the glass to his lips but set it back down, this time untasted. "Changed times, Argentina. Means people have to change too. I've been thinking for a week, ever since a piece of information fell into my lap. Never mind how. And I've decided I have to

act, before it's too late. While we still have a little freedom."

Argentina's mind was racing, stimulated by her friend's electric mood. "Are you talking about the referendum? Is this to do with Yves Baril?"

Latourelle looked at his watch. "Dennis Masterson is supposed to join us by two-thirty. We have to persuade him to come in too."

"We? How can I persuade him when I'm in the dark?"

"O.K. You're right, it's Baril. He's the man we have to kidnap."

It was hard for Argentina to know which way to look. Madness. "Kidnap the premier of the province? You have to be joking, Bosco. Come on, even the FLQ never went that far. They snatched poor Pierre Laporte and even then they ended up murdering him and getting caught and going to jail for life. Don't suggest to me that you're heading down that road. Why?"

"To prevent a civil war. Separatists fighting confederationists. Concentration camps in the Laurentians. Maybe something like Lebanon here in Montreal."

"Bosco, are you smoking something? What kind of dreams are these?" Argentina saw heads turn at other tables and she lowered her voice. "The referendum has ground rules to prevent any of that. It would have to be at least 85 percent in favor of an independent Quebec before separation would be considered. Even then it would be a slow procedure."

"That was René Levesque's policy. He was moderate. But when that plane went down at Noranda, Levesque died and so did moderation. Baril is another kettle of piranhas."

"Everybody knows Baril was an extremist but when he took over the party, he had to cool it. That's part of the job. You've heard what he's been saying."

"What he says and what he means to do are not the same thing. I've seen the document." Latourelle sounded thoroughly convinced and, knowing his reputation for common sense, Argentina felt icy claws close to her heart.

"Baril plans to act if the referendum is 51 percent to 49 in favor. He's got the contingency plans all set. Quebec will separate overnight—a fait accompli. Quebec flag, Quebec currency, Quebec customs and immigration—the lot."

"But he couldn't. The people wouldn't stand for it."

"The people will never know what hit them. Unless we tell them about it before it happens."

Dennis Masterson was threading his way between tables. Tall and broad-shouldered, in a double-breasted blazer and grey slacks, he looked as though he had just stepped off a yacht. Masterson's clothes were expensive but square; shoes, for him, had to be black and fitted with laces. Argentina could recall his friend Johnny Fist from The Ninety-Seven club teasing Dennis about it, kicking at them and calling them policeman shoes.

"*Salut*, Denny," Bosco said, half rising and indicating the chair beside him. "What are you drinking?"

"Just a lemonade, I've got choir practice at six o'clock." Squeezing past Latourelle, Masterson pulled out the chair beside Argentina. "Two more Sundays and they close the church for the summer. Then I can get bombed on Thursdays like the rest of you." He sat down and put an arm around Argentina's bare shoulders. "How's my favorite radio commentator?"

"Fine. How's my favorite radio singer?"

"Not bad, except I'm a little hoarse from rehearsal." Putting on another voice, the singer asked himself, "Where did you say you're from? Nnngaaannng, nnngaaanng. . ." Masterson had become hooked years ago on the routines of Bert Lahr and he still salted his conversation with echoes of the old comedian's vaudeville laugh.

Latourelle was watching Masterson with mixed feelings. He liked the singer for the decent man he was, but he doubted the tensile strength of his moral fibre—a serious drawback now that he needed him to help make the plot work. And then there was the singer's manicured hand on Argentina's upper arm, pressing hard enough to give the tanned skin a white border around his fingertips. He said,

"I'm glad you could make it, Dennis. I'm trying something big and I need you to help me."

"Pitching for another account, Bosco? Count on me. I'll sing your presentation jingle for nothing." He winked at Argentina. "As long as you pay me double scale when we do the finished job."

"It isn't a pitch," Latourelle said.

For the first time, Masterson felt the tension. Still, he tried to keep it light, to postpone the threatening discussion that seemed to be shaping up. "You're divorcing your wife for Argentina. Man, she isn't worth

it. Just a pair of pretty arms."

Nobody was laughing. The waiter brought the lemonade Latourelle had ordered. As Masterson sipped, Argentina said, "You're going to wish that was mostly vodka."

"It's a desperate situation," Latourelle said. "It has to do with the referendum and what Baril is up to and what's going to happen to all of us if somebody doesn't get in his way." Then he explained, enlarging on what he had told Argentina and ending up with his plan to snatch Yves Baril, to hold him in non-violent detention and thus to get the media involved in alerting Quebec and the rest of Canada.

Masterson listened with his lean face set in a rather prim frown, his lips a tight line. It was as if he was in a cramped studio auditioning a mediocre singer with bad breath. When Latourelle finished, Masterson shook his head and filled his lungs with a long intake of air.

"I think you're out of your primitive French-Canadian mind, Bosco. I've never heard such alarmist claptrap in my life."

"I can show you a copy of the document I got from my friend inside Le Parti Quebecois. This is happening, my old friend—not next decade or next year but in two weeks, after the referendum. That's why we're taking Yves Baril—tomorrow, at the Publicité Club luncheon."

Masterson blinked. "I'm singing at the luncheon tomorrow."

"That's why you're in the scheme."

"No way, Bosco. Guns and masks and speeding cars are not my specialty."

"Guns are not involved. There will be no violence in this gig at all. It's a peaceful detention. Baril will be detained while we get the television cameras focused on what he's planning."

"How will you take him without guns? He never goes anywhere without all those wrestlers around him. It's like Wednesday night at the Forum."

"I've got a plan. But I want to tell everybody at one time. Tonight."

"Nope." Masterson stood up. "I've got choir practice."

Latourelle had to laugh at that. He looked at Argentina Carr with his round blue eyes screwed up in delight and they both started laughing. Here he was, planning to kidnap the premier of Quebec in an effort to head off a civil war and his key man could not attend the briefing because he had choir practice.

"Come after practice," Latourelle said.

"Never in a million years."

Bosco stood and faced Masterson. "Go and talk to Johnny Fist," he said. "Walk over and see him right now. He's in on it. In fact, the meeting's at his place, upstairs over the club." By invoking the name of Jonathan Fitzwilliam, Latourelle as good as put Masterson in the bag, and both he and Argentina knew it. The singer and the giant club owner were inseparable and had been for years.

"Will you go and talk to Johnny?" Argentina put in. Without any conscious thought she seemed to have become Bosco's accomplice.

"All right." Masterson's consent sounded as grudging as a rusted gate. "All right. I'll go and talk to Johnny." And he left El Diablo, proud-backed, one arm trailing, the other held across his chest, a headwaiter making an exit in a 1940's movie.

For a few seconds, Argentina and Bosco looked at each other, blank as portraits in a gallery. Then she said, "He's going to give you trouble, Bosco."

"The whole scenario is flimsy and full of holes," Latourelle conceded. "But the advantage we have is that it's unpremeditated and it's quick. Give us six months to prepare and we'd get arrested on our way into the hotel. But this thing is all whim and impulse, and it *might* work. It's my forte, girl—the advertising business couldn't function any other way."

They drank up and Bosco, edgy and more electric than before, checked his watch. "Coming with me? I've got to run over and see Eloise Carpentier."

Argentina had met Eloise once or twice at jazz shows down in the Old Town. Everybody knew everybody, she realized, but why was Latourelle visiting the poor little rich girl in the middle of the afternoon? With four Irish coffees in her, it was no trouble for Argentina to put the question to Bosco.

He said, "I want to tell her the time of the meeting tonight. Can you imagine? She has this lush pad on Sherbrooke Street and she won't have a telephone put in."

Tell her the *time* of the meeting. That meant she was already in the picture, that Bosco had recruited her before Argentina. This bothered Argentina and she strode in silence beside Latourelle as they headed east on Sherbrooke; bare-shouldered and grim-faced, her sandals slapping the pavement, she was like a mythological warrior woman going

into battle beside her man.

They passed elegant boutiques set well back from the sidewalk and up flights of stairs, then the new glass towers that had replaced nineteenth-century homes, then the McGill campus with a few lads tossing a football on what was left of the grass after the new library claimed its space, and, after crossing Bleury Street, a succession of weary restaurants and shops leaning on each other in the heat, their doors hanging open, gasping for air. Finally, surprisingly, they arrived at a solitary residential tower thrusting high among the flat roofs like the first stone in a new cemetery.

As they approached, Latourelle's tumbling thoughts settled down and he heard Argentina's silence for the first time. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

His ability to read people was the characteristic which, more than brains and a willingness to work hard, had made Latourelle the head of his own advertising agency at 42. He stood with Argentina in the lobby waiting for the elevator, watching her face, doing a low-profile tap-dance on the marble floor. "Having a remote place to take Baril was the foundation of the plan. Eloise has that crazy farm she bought in the Eastern Townships. I had to get that buttoned down before it made sense to talk to anybody else."

"I understand."

"*You*, gleaming woman, are the one who moves and acts and speaks in the piece. Without you, it wouldn't happen."

Feeling better, she said, "Nobody is indispensable."

"Wrong," he said. "Yves Baril is indispensable. No villain, no plot."

The elevator lifted them twenty stories into the air, silently, with only an alarming shudder at the end and a long three seconds while it decided to open the door. Eloise was in apartment 2020, not far down the dim corridor. Bosco pressed the buzzer and a chain rattled immediately on the other side.

She opened the door and they heard a recording of Miles Davis down the hall playing "Bye Bye Blackbird," muted, wistful. Fragile as smoke, Eloise drifted aside to let them come in; a simple kiss on the cheek for Bosco, an elegiac smile for Argentina. She pushed back a curtain of long silver hair with a hand holding a tiny glass. "Let me get you both a drink."

They followed her into a living room that smashed at them with one

glass wall framing roofs, steeples, towers of windows, the sky, the river, and bridges vaulting away to the South Shore. On the horizon, the green hills of Vermont had decided to be late-afternoon blue. It was the sort of view you admired and edged away from. But even this panorama could not blind Bosco to the annoying fact that Tancrede Falardeau was in the room.

"You both know Tancrede, don't you?" Eloise was at a cherrywood cabinet, adding water to Pernod.

They exchanged three-way greetings. Argentina realized it was at The Big Bang, Falardeau's club down in Le Vieux Montreal, that she had met Eloise. But the girl had been different at that time, admittedly a couple of years ago. What was it?

Stalling, hoping Tancrede might be on his way out, Latourelle said, "I'm glad to hear you still dig Miles."

"After Otto, he's the greatest."

It was a sign of the remarkable progress made by Eloise Carpentier in picking up the pieces of her life that she could mention Otto's name as casually as this. When Otto Grant, the black man from Philadelphia and trumpet soloist in Tancrede's house band, was accidentally killed in a foolish struggle over some rare phonograph records, Eloise nearly cashed in. In those days, she weighed even less—a mere suggestion of a girl—and she was supporting a pernicious heroin habit. Otto was her lover and, so everybody believed, her strength. When they buried him, Eloise put her head down and waited for the world to roll over her.

Then a remarkable thing happened. She got up one day and signed herself into a sanitarium, where she cold-turkeyed the drug addiction. She came home, kept it to cigarettes and liquor, dated now and again, and seemed to be like thousands of pretty girls who come out in Montreal when the sun goes down; but wealthier, of course. The visible difference in Eloise now was a capability to hate. In the past, she was totally involved in what Otto and the heroin were doing to her sensations. Now she had neither and was left with time to be as hostile as anyone else.

"How do we stand?" she asked Latourelle as she handed a glass of the cloudy liquor to Tancrede.

So Tancrede was staying, as Bosco had feared. During her hard times Falardeau had been Eloise's guardian angel and he still was.

There was no way she could embark on a trip like this one without the advice and guidance of Father Superior. But Latourelle tried anyway.

"I really think the fewer people in this, the better," he said.

Tancrede sat behind his drink, fat, prematurely bald, his gold-rimmed glasses far down his nose. "From what Eloise has told me," he said, "I think *no* people would be best of all."

"You think the best idea is to let this happen?"

"O.K., let's talk about that," Falardeau saud. "You claim to have some document that says Baril means to separate the province on a 51 percent vote in favor."

"I don't claim it. I've got it."

"Right. Then call a press conference. Tell the reporters. You'll achieve the same thing with no risk."

Latourelle tossed down the dreadful drink and shook off Eloise's sign suggesting another. "Tancrede, how can you be so naive? For one thing, half the reporters are in Baril's pocket. And even if some take me seriously, Baril comes out next day with one of his plausible denials and that's the end of that. The hungry press rushes onto the next course. So where am I?"

"Nowhere," Argentina said. "He's right, Tancrede. This thing is big enough and sinister enough; we have to make a large wave."

"Be careful you don't drown yourselves."

Latourelle was working at containing his irritation. "Tancrede, I don't really care if you're with us or not. All I ask is that you keep quiet for a couple of days till it's over, and that you don't discourage Eloise—we need her."

"You need her? *I* need her." Falardeau shouted this and Eloise showed surprise. For years their platonic friendship had gone along without demonstrations or declarations. "Not shot or in prison, I need her just the way she is now."

"There won't be any shooting. And not much prison for anybody except maybe me. This thing is peaceful, a unique action for a unique situation. If we confound Baril the moderates will give us medals."

"Yeah, sure."

"I wouldn't expect you to agree, Tancrede. You've got your big club down near Place Jacques Cartier where all the revolutionaries hang out. Hell, if Quebec separates, you'll be doing just fine, *merci beaucoup.*"

"I never said I was a separatist."

"No, and you never said you were for confederation either. Stand up, Falardeau. That fence must be starting to hurt."

Tancrede did stand up and he approached Latourelle who squared off to meet him. But neither of them was a fighter by nature and there was about as much menace in the situation as in a collision of two old women in a supermarket. The girls noticed it together, glanced at each other and shared a smile. Then Eloise let them off the hook.

"Come on, Tancrede. Cut it out, Bosco. Go outside if you want to fight."

"I'm leaving," Bosco said. "I only came to tell you the time of the meeting tonight. Can you be at The Ninety-Seven club any time after nine? We'll be in Johnny Fist's place, upstairs."

Falardeau clucked his tongue. "You're working with that ruffian? And you say this will be a peaceful affair."

"Johnny's no ruffian," Argentina said. "Just because he's big, people think he's tough."

"No, it's because he takes the law into his own hands. You can believe that."

Plunging back to earth in the elevator with Argentina, Latourelle put an arm around her shoulder. She could feel the sag in him and it occurred to her that he needed whatever she could supply just then. "I've got some cold white wine at my place," she said. "We can rinse away the Pernod."

Latourelle should have accepted, should have realized that there might not be a surplus of pleasant hours from here on. But his work habits were too rigid to be set aside. "Another time, Argentina. Thanks. I've been out of the shop most of the day and there's a recording session tomorrow morning at Daisy Studio. I've got to go through the copy so the client will think I was in on it."

"If you're recording in the morning, will you be all right for Baril at the Publicité Club lunch?"

"I'll be there. Don't worry, we'll set the timing at Johnny's place. Are you O.K. for nine o'clock?"

"I may go there early and eat. That's one good thing about Jonathan Fitzwilliam's place—you can always read a book."

When the elevator door opened they were embracing. The deserted

lobby watched in silence as the door counted its slow three and closed on them again. By the time they woke up, they'd been transported to the penthouse and had to ride down again, whispering and laughing under the disapproving eyes of an elderly resident.

As soon as he opened the street door of Club Ninety-Seven, Dennis Masterson was reminded of what it had been before Johnny bought it and turned it into a bar and restaurant—the smell of old bookbindings was unmistakable. Fitzwilliam had cleared out the center of the place but kept the wall shelves in place and loaded with volumes. A couple of library ladders were in position and there were books resting on many of the small tables and leather armchairs.

By this hour, the luncheon crowd had gone and there were only a few regulars in attendance. Dallas was behind the bar engaged in a game of chess with Lucien Lacombe. They made an amusing contrast: the bartender looking like an Indian with his long hair held by a cotton headband, Lacombe in his square suit looking like what he was, a former Police Constable promoted to plainclothes division because of his good work a few years ago in finding the body of a New York millionaire's kidnapped son.

"One Guinness, coming up," Dallas said when he spotted Masterson approaching.

"Not today, Dallas. I've got choir practice."

"Let's all sing like the birdies sing . . ." the bartender droned. He had no ear.

"Is Johnny around?"

"Upstairs counting his money," Lacombe said.

Masterson began to climb the spiral iron steps, his clanging tread giving his old friend plenty of notice of his arrival. In the big open-plan apartment with its large window overlooking Stanley Street, Jonathan Fitzwilliam was watering his potted plants, looming in silhouette over the row of foliage on the window ledge, the long spout of the watering can poking and prying among the leaves.

"Right with you, Den," he said, and he went on muttering to the plants, "Hey, you've got a new leaf. Lovely. Look at all that gorgeous stuff." He set the watering can on the floor and turned to look down on Masterson who had lowered himself into the corduroy bean-bag chair. "Want a beer?"

"No, thanks. Choir practice."

"Well, I will." Fitzwilliam moved into the kitchen end of the area, opened the refrigerator and took out a brown quart bottle that looked like a pint in his massive hand. He thrust the cap into a wall opener, snapped it off with a hiss and a clatter as the cap bounced on the counter, took down a huge glass shaped like the face of a smiling gnome on a Doric column, and brought both into the main room where he sat on the sofa opposite Masterson. As he poured, he kicked off his sandals and sat bare except for denim shorts.

"Here's looking at you," he said, raising the glass. It held the whole quart of beer and the gnome's face was amber now with a foam crew-cut. "You're worried to death, aren't you?"

"What's going on, Johnny?"

"Bosco said he was going to talk to you."

"He did. But all I've got is some crazy stuff about kidnapping the premier at the luncheon tomorrow. And I'm supposed to be part of it."

"I thought it was crazy myself. But then I thought about it. Bosco may just be the right guy at the right time. For the future of this country."

Masterson struggled up out of the shapeless chair and walked to the window. "There's no future in kidnapping. Anybody but you would see that. I'm talking to the wrong guy."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I haven't forgotten Linda Lennox."

"That's good. You keep remembering her. But don't forget Disco and Kingbright and Cleary, and how she would have gotten away with all those deaths if it hadn't have been for me."

A couple of years back, Linda Lennox, an American copywriter, had surged through Johnny's like a tidal wave. It was a complex summer, full of jealousy and ambition, and when it was over Emery Disco and Noble Kingbright were dead. For a while it looked as if Fitzwilliam's old Baytown friend, Don Cleary, was the killer and when Johnny went after him, Cleary directed a bullet into his own head. Then, just as Linda was about to fly off to California, Jonathan put it all together. It had been the Lennox woman all along and the only way to stop her, since there was no proof, was to pitch her from the roof and let it look like suicide. It was swift brutal justice and Masterson had swallowed it. But ever since, he had experienced difficulty in keeping it down.

"You could have given Linda to the police," he said.

"We've been over that, Den. They'd closed the case with Cleary. And she'd have denied everything. It was my word against hers."

Masterson struggled out of the past. "And now you're going to help Latourelle go the same way with Yves Baril. Hell, all Latourelle has to do is blow the whistle. Let the public in on what he knows."

"Half the public wants Quebec to separate and the other half would never believe Bosco's story."

"Snatching Baril will make them believe?"

"It will concentrate attention on him. Long enough so that he can't smooth it over with a fast answer."

"Just supposing somehow he brings it off, although I swear to God I don't see any way."

"That's what he'll tell us here tonight."

"Then what happens to us? How do we go on living here after a thing like that? We'll be jailed. We'll have to be."

"Bosco says nobody will get hurt. He believes the moderate politicians who take over will go easy on us."

"He believes! He's wrong."

"If he is, then maybe we just have to be ready to pay a price. If the alternative is no more Canada."

"Listen," Masterson said, "if they want their own country, let them have it. They can build a monument to Charles de Gaulle at the corner of Peel and Ste. Catherine. All I have to do is get on a train to Toronto."

"You think it's that easy?"

"Why not? I've sung on CBC network shows, I'm known up there. I could be working in a matter of weeks."

Fitzwilliam had finished the beer. He set the glass on the floor, the gnome face transparent again and curtained with foam inside. "Don't talk about jobs. How long have you been in Montreal? Twenty-five years? All your working life? Your roots are here, and so are mine. I could sell The Ninety-Seven and open a club in Toronto or Vancouver or anywhere. But it would never be the same. This is our city, man, and some ambitious bastards are trying to take it away from us. Without a fight, they *think*. Hoo-boy, have we got a surprise for them."

This was exactly what Masterson was afraid of. Maybe the civilized Bosco Latourelle meant to carry out a symbolic kidnapping, a sort of

street-theater happening with nobody getting hurt, but Johnny Fist was another breed. He was ready to punch heads and he didn't mind suffering bruised knuckles or even a broken hand.

"And I've got a surprise for Latourelle," Masterson said. "I'm not going along with this."

"Denny, I know you better than you know yourself. Beneath that cowardly exterior beats the heart of a true fellow traveller."

"That's a rotten thing to say."

"Come to the briefing tonight, hear what's expected of you. You'll feel different, I guarantee it."

"You're like a bunch of school kids scuffling on the playground." Masterson stomped across the room and began to descend the winding stairs.

"Go to choir practice. I'll see you here after nine."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"And the glory of the Lord shall be reveal-ed," Fitzwilliam chanted in a fair tenor.

Bosco Latourelle felt safer in his office than anywhere else in the world. The wall-to-wall carpet, the gleaming oak furniture, the clean desk surface, his view from corner windows of Mount Royal and the Cross, not yet illuminated at 5:30 on this early summer evening—everything around him was comforting. He had worked with paper and the telephone for an hour after leaving Argentina Carr outside Eloise Carpentier's building. Now, cooling off his mind after intense concentration, he found his eyes drifting, as usual, to the carved wooden anchor hanging by its wooden chain from a hook in the painted wall.

The anchor, a fine example of some Gaspé carver's craftsmanship, had become a talisman for Latourelle. He looked at it several times a day and occasionally, when alone, he took it down and caressed it. He dated his current run of almost-uninterrupted good luck from the day he purchased the anchor last year during a motor trip home to Rimouski. It had not escaped his notice that the anchor was a cross of sorts with its horizontal bar near the top of the central shaft. But he would not have identified himself as a religious man.

A knock at the door, it opened, and John Keeley stuck his head inside. Speaking in his quite good French, he said, "I hope I'm not bothering you, Bosco. May I speak to you for a moment?"

"Come in, John. *Je t'en prie.*"

The copywriter came in and sat in the chair facing the desk. The sleeves of his striped shirt were rolled just below the elbows, and his tie, neatly coiled, was tucked inside his shirt pocket. He took out a cellophane package of bubble-gum balls and offered one to Latourelle, who refused it politely. Keeley popped one into his mouth and held another ready in his hand.

"I was wondering if you're going to be doing anything in a recording studio in the next week or so," he said, still talking creditable French.

Keeley was a rarity in the agency or anywhere else in Montreal. He was an Ontario native who had taken the trouble to master the second language. He did it the only sensible way—not by enrolling with Berlitz or by listening to recordings. Keeley simply talked French every day to as many people as possible. At first it was painful, his speech halting and three-quarters English. But gradually he improved, reading *Montreal Matin* aloud to himself at his desk in the mornings and *La Presse* silently to himself on the bus going home at night.

Now he was, in effect, bilingual. Latourelle wished he could afford to have him on staff, but Keeley worked for Bosco's affiliated English agency down the hall, R&M Advertising.

"I have a session at Daisy tomorrow morning," Latourelle said. "I booked an hour and a half, from ten to eleven-thirty."

"Think you'll use every minute of it?"

Bosco grinned. "Debbie wants another chance?"

"She knows she can do better; she was nervous as hell the first time. I said I'd ask."

A couple of months before, Latourelle had allowed Keeley to bring his girl friend, Debbie Thielmanns, to an agency session. She was a semi-professional folksinger who worked in clubs around town but she had never made a recording. The hope was that the session might run short and she could slip behind a microphone with her guitar and lay down a track. There was time, but the results were disappointing—almost embarrassing. However, she wanted to try again and Bosco gave her credit.

"Bring her along," he said. "We're bound to have lots of time tomorrow."

"Thanks, Bosco." Keeley put the other gumball into his mouth and began to grind it in with the softened gum already there. "They tell

me we're getting seven hours off work on Referendum Day."

It seemed like a lot of time and Latourelle raised his eyebrows. "Is that right?"

"Yeah. Three hours to vote and four hours to pack."

They both laughed and Latourelle said, switching to English, "You don't have to worry in any case. If all the blokes were like you, Baril wouldn't have a leg to stand on."

Keeley chewed thoughtfully. "I worry anyway," he said. "I know I can hack it in French. And I love this city and the people in it—I really do."

"It shows."

"But if Quebec separates, then I wouldn't want to stay. I'm Canadian inside, Bosco. Can you understand?"

"Certainly. I'm the same way. But you don't have to worry about the referendum, it's going to come out fine."

"There's a funny buzz in the air these days, as if something is going to happen. Don't you feel it?"

"Yes. But it's going to be O.K."

"How do you know?"

"I just know."

Keeley slapped the arms of the chair and stood up. "O.K., papa. I feel better." He went to the door.

"Besides," Latourelle said, "you could never leave Montreal. We've got the best hockey players."

Keeley put on a public address voice and chanted, *"Le but du Canadiens conté par Rocket Richard!"* As he walked away, both he and Latourelle were making hoarse roaring crowd noises into their cupped hands.

Keeley had to cab all the way down to Le Big Bang in the Old Town to see Debbie because she was intermission singer at the club this week and, although not on until nine o'clock, she liked to be there early and get the feel of the room. As Keeley entered the club, he passed Tancrede Falardeau and gave him a greeting. The owner was usually buddy-buddy, but something was on his mind tonight and he seemed not to see Keeley.

Debbie was out back in a room piled with soft-drink cases, tuning her guitar. Her chestnut hair hung down both shoulders, front and

back, smooth as a waterfall before it hits the riverbed. Keeley kissed her cheek and got one back on the lips. "Good news," he said. "Bosco has a session at Daisy tomorrow. Says we can come around eleven."

She hunched her shoulders and made a little-girl grimace. Debbie was 26, almost Keeley's age, and her experience growing up in Detroit had made her a far more worldly person than the young adman from small-town Ontario. But she wore no makeup and her expressions and her voice were those of a teenager.

"Hey, man," she said, "you just scared me to death."

"I thought you wanted to get a good track down."

"I do. But I can still be scared, can't I?" She played a couple of minor chords, then progressed to a vamping strum and sang,

"I'm goin' down this road feelin' bad . . ."

The voice was tiny and clear, as if a bell had taken lessons from a bird.

"Listen, when do you want to eat?"

"Never again, since you gave me the news."

"Come on. Something from the kitchen here or do you want to go out?"

"Give me twenty minutes and we'll go out."

"O.K." In the doorway, Keeley said, "What's the matter with Tancrede tonight?"

"Tancrede is Tancrede," Debbie said. "What do I know from Tancrede?"

He left her vamping.

Latourelle was surprised that everybody turned up. Looking around Johnny Fist's apartment at the expectant faces, he experienced a crushing realization that tomorrow lunchtime they would make a crazy attempt to alter the course of history.

He started by running over the background so that everybody would be in the boat together. When he finished with Baril and his illegal takeover plans, supporting this by reading from the secret document provided by his Parti-Quebecois friend, Latourelle said, "Any questions so far?"

"I've got one." It was Tancrede Falardeau, the man Bosco least wanted at the briefing. But Eloise was there, so the portly clubman had to be by her side. "How come you have to use Eloise's farm?" He

'as jumping ahead, using information he must have been given by er. "That means transporting Baril all the way to the Eastern Townıips. Why not stash him someplace here in the city?"

"O.K., let's deal with that," Latourelle said. "This is a peaceful deɜntion, remember. No ropes, no gag in the mouth. If we keep Baril in ɔwn, he'll scream and be heard. Eloise's farm is remote—only the hickens will hear him."

"But if he isn't bound and gagged, how are you going to persuade im to leave the Publicité Club and take an 80-mile drive with you on Friday afternoon?"

"That's part of the plan. I'm coming to that."

"I can't wait."

Eloise Carpentier spoke. "Baril is a monster," she said. "We ought ɔ kill him and be done with it."

"And make him a martyr," Bosco said. "His radical friends would ɔve that. They'd turn Quebec into a police state before you could say ıello."

"It would be justice. How do you think he got to be premier? The ılane crash that killed René Levesque at Noranda, that was too convenɜnt to be an accident."

"We've all heard the rumors, Eloise. Maybe they're true. But that's ıeside the point right now. Our job is to hold Baril for a couple of days vhile we tell the world what he means to do. Then he won't be able to lo it. Simple as that." Latourelle glanced at Masterson. "Are you with ıs, Denny? I hope your presence means you are."

Masterson had gone home from choir practice and changed into ılack slacks, black turtleneck, and black suede shoes with crepe soles. He was no longer dressed like Xavier Cugat, he was dressed like a cat ɔurglar. Bosco's question made him stiffen. With everybody watching ıim and waiting, his tongue froze.

Fitzwilliam made up his friend's mind for the hundredth time in heir relationship. "He's with us," he said.

Without denying it, Masterson was now free to express a little indi'iduality. "Hell, I could move to Toronto next week," he said. "They ɔay singers more up there anyway."

"If you're thinking of the CBC," Argentina said with quiet authority, forget it. I just saw a memo about the new budget cutback. Toronto vill be firing, not hiring. You'd better hang onto what you've got."

There was something disquieting about this emphasizing of Denni Masterson's vulnerability. It would be damaging to let it hang there So Latourelle went right on, deliberately involving Dennis in the firs stage of the planning. "O.K., let's get down to details," he said "You're the guest singer at the club luncheon, right? Any idea how tha will work?"

"Just that I'm to do two songs. One in English and one in French, o course."

"If he gets an encore," Johnny Fist said, "he's going to do 'My Yid dishe Momma.' "

The laughter that followed was what was needed to clear the air anc bring them all together. "Right," Bosco said briskly, and went ahead tc explain what each of them would be expected to do tomorrow.

The client was still hanging around the control room at Daisy Studic and Bosco Latourelle, appearing impatient, had to wait and make conversation. Max Acton was at the console, preparing to get a test level on Debbie Thielmanns, who was sitting on a stool in the big studio, her guitar across her knee and a boom mike suspended in front of her. Finally Bosco referred to his committee duties that day at the Publicité Club, the client realized he was not going to free-load a lunch, and he left, thanking Bosco and Max for a great session.

Bosco hurried into the studio and told John Keeley, who was hovering anxiously, "I've got to go to the Publicité Club lunch. The studio is yours till eleven-thirty. Max knows."

Keeley said, "I'm disappointed. I thought you'd stay and hear my song."

"I didn't know you write songs."

"If this one works, it'll be the first. Go ahead, Bosco. I'll bring a dub to the shop so you can hear it."

When Latourelle was gone, Debbie went right into a rehearsal while Keeley returned to the control room to sit in the vacated producer's chair beside Acton and hear the song on mike. In her clear, sweet voice, Debbie sang,

"I came from Trouble City
To a younger, happier place
Where people walk the streets at night
And no one hates my face.

I've got a man who leads me
Where I don't mind being led—
But still I go to sleep at night
With a handgun by my bed . . ."

Max Acton listened to the song, adjusting levels, watching the VU meter. As Debbie played some chords and tried a new introduction, Acton said absently, "I heard you say you wrote this."

"Yep."

"Mmmmm. Very nice." Acton was so drugged from his daily exposure to trashy commercial music and so dedicated to telling his clients it was all great that not even he believed in his judgment any more. They put down three takes in the half hour and kept two of them. Debbie was much more relaxed than she had been the other time and while Max was making a dub from the master, Keeley went into the studio and embraced her. She was still euphoric from the playback of her performance which Acton had enhanced with a bit of echo.

"It sounded good," she said. "I couldn't believe it was me."

"You were fantastic."

With the tape in his pocket, Keeley drove his car slowly through heavy midday traffic along Ste. Catherine Street toward the office. Then, suddenly, he darted through an opening and headed down MacKay toward Dorchester Boulevard.

"Where are we going?"

"To the Queen E. I want to tell Bosco about the session—I can't wait." Approaching the Queen Elizabeth Hotel, Keeley turned off Dorchester and found parking space in the Central Station lot. "We have to eat somewhere," he said, "we might as well attend the Publicité Club lunch."

"Don't you have to be a member?"

"I am."

They were unable to get close to Bosco Latourelle before or during the lunch. They were there a bit late and only managed to find seating at the end of a table near the door. Attendance was exceptional today because everybody wanted to hear the premier of Quebec with Referendum Day only a little over a week away.

Keeley and Debbie ate their consommé and crusty roll while chatting with the executives on either side of them, Keeley rattling on in his loose accented French, which amused Debbie because she had never

heard him use more than a couple of sentences to a waiter or a cab driver. Another thing that changed him slightly in her eyes was the plastic name-badge on his lapel. Debbie Thielmanns had gone through her teens and early twenties developing a strong disdain for the establishment. Now here was her writer of hard-core folk music looking like a Kiwanian.

"There's Bosco at the head table," Keeley told her, "and one over from him is Yves Baril." He pointed out a wedge-headed man with gleaming black hair and rimless glasses. Baril was so short his head was six inches lower than all the others along the row. "Bosco's agency does some advertising for Le Parti Quebecois. That's why Latourelle is so close to the premier." What Keeley did not know was that Latourelle was preparing, if Yves Baril should remain party leader, to resign the account.

The food served and cleared away, waiters now doing coffee, the club president stood at the table lectern and read some announcements, then said that prior to the guest speaker they were going to have something nice to listen to. This unintentional faux pas drew laughter. He was referring to the famous singer of CBC Radio, Dennis Masterson, who would now favor the meeting with a couple of songs.

Masterson went to stand beside a grand piano on the dais and sang a Broadway musical hit followed by a French-Canadian folk song delivered with more grace and feeling than Debbie Thielmanns had ever heard. She whispered to Keeley, "There's a guy who doesn't have to worry where his next meal is coming from."

Everybody thought Masterson was finished, but he walked from the piano to the head table and stood behind Yves Baril, raising his hands for silence. When the applause faded, he called, "We all know our premier has a reputation as a singer." It was true. Before the political career took over Baril had been active in club singing around the city. Now he kept his baritone in shape and still performed whenever he was asked.

"I promise you, Monsieur Baril knows nothing of this," Masterson went on. "But I have a duet all set up on the piano, and I know he reads music . . ."

It was all he had to say. The applause rose to a crescendo and Yves Baril, beaming and nodding, waved a linen napkin over his head as he arose and followed Dennis to the piano. The duet was called "Tenor

and Baritone," a comic song based on the operatic aria, *"La Donna e Mobile."* It was new to Baril, but he knew the tune, and with his training he was able to give a creditable performance. The few breakdowns were used by the singers for laughs and the result was a sensation. Any politician would have paid dearly for the image of warm honesty, the willingness to allow a chuckle at himself, that Baril got across in those impromptu five minutes.

His speech, which occupied the next half hour, was not so entertaining. Once a prepared text was placed in front of him, Baril became didactic and his head appeared snakelike as it scanned the room, cold eyes glittering. The words were harmless enough, the usual fuzzy generalities delivered mostly in French with the occasional sentence in flawless English inserted glistening and whole and appearing to the drugged audience like a sausage in a yorkshire pudding.

When it was over and the membership was milling about, many of them heading for the hotel bars because it was Friday afternoon, Keeley told Debbie, "I'm going to try to speak to Bosco. Hang on."

They were not the only ones pressing through the crowds surrounding the guest speaker. There was Bosco Latourelle holding Dennis Masterson in one hand and Argentina Carr in the other. Keeley did not know the lady by sight but he got close enough to hear Latourelle say to Baril, "Monsieur Baril, this is Miss Carr from Radio-Canada. She does an afternoon commentary show on the network."

"Ah yes, Miss Carr, *enchanté*." Baril shook her hand. "I listen to you whenever I have the opportunity." In fact, he had heard her name but never her program.

"Thank you," Argentina said. "I'd like to use that fabulous duet on my show next week and I wondered if you and Mr. Masterson would agree to record it, just the way you sang it now."

The premier looked pleased. *"Avec plaisir,* but I'm afraid my schedule . . ." He gave that eloquent shrug, making himself even smaller.

"We could do it in half an hour. I just made a phone call, so the engineer is standing by in a studio. Dennis has agreed." Argentina looked very feminine. "Won't you please say yes?"

Bosco clinched it. "Just a quick ride down Dorchester Boulevard.

Then I'll deliver you to your next appointment."

Baril considered, then threw up his hands. "For such a charming lady, how can I refuse?"

John Keeley heard all this and said to Debbie, "We're not going to miss this. Come on, let's get the car."

Yves Baril was not alone when he accompanied Latourelle and Masterson to the car park, guiding Argentina by the arm as if she were his lady. Three huge, neckless men floated beside the party, moving with astonishing agility; Wednesday night at the Forum.

Outside, the group gathered around Argentina's small sportscar, a convertible. The movements were confused but quickly accomplished. "Sit by me, Mr. Premier," Argentina said as she got behind the wheel. His eyes on her tanned legs below the hoisted skirt, Baril did not have to be told twice. He dropped into the passenger seat beside her while Latourelle and Masterson climbed into the narrow back seat.

One of the bodyguards said something in French and Baril told the three of them, impatiently, to follow in the other car. They ran and began piling into a black sedan a few ranks away. Argentina turned the key, gunned the engine, and pulled out fast into the exit lane. She turned two corners quickly, tires squealing, and then the bodyguards' car was out of sight.

As the black sedan moved into the exit lane and headed for the first corner, a station wagon pulled out at speed and took its bumper on the left front fender. Headlight glass rained on the pavement, car doors opened, voices shouted in French and one replied in English.

"What the hell!" Johnny Fist said. "Didn't you guys see me pulling out?"

"Get that car out of the way!" one of the wrestlers, crewcut, with boiled blue eyes and a cylindrical face, said.

"No way. We're waiting for the cops. You guys were driving like maniacs. Are you drunk?"

"Move it!" The man leaned against the station-wagon fender and his companions took up positions at the hood and began to push. Metal screeched as the prang was separated.

Johnny Fist could not have been more delighted. An explosion of ad-

renalin in his veins almost blinded him, his heart pounded, and he felt a sensation of massive expansion inside. He clapped both hands on Crewcut's shoulders, spun him around, and drove the crown of his own head into the man's face. As the wrestler fell, Fist had a glimpse of his smashed nose and blood streaming. Now it was not anything like Wednesday night at the Forum.

Now came the other two, knees up and elbows out. Johnny kicked at one's crotch and missed, but landed his boot damagingly on the man's thigh above the knee. This left him a few free seconds to face the third. They squared off like boxers but quickly closed, punching together. Johnny took a couple on the face but his blows overpowered and battered down the other's, leaving an opening for him to drive a punch against the side of his head. The wrestler stumbled back and sagged to his knees; Fist took two steps at him and put the boot into his stomach.

A knee caught him punishingly in the small of the back. He ducked and spun, saw an opening, drove his fist up and into the second man's throat just below his chin. The man sat down, fell over onto his side, hands to his neck, making swallowing sounds.

It was very quiet after the brief battle. A few observers were standing well away. The first wrestler was sitting on the pavement with his back against the side of the sedan, his hands catching the blood from his smashed face. He made no attempt to continue the fight.

"Who paid you, you bastard?" he said.

"Nobody. I do this because I like it," Johnny Fist said.

"We'll find you. And next time, we'll know what to do."

"I doubt it."

But as he left on foot, Johnny knew that they probably would find him soon enough. The car was not his—he had chosen it at random and jumped the wires to start it so they could not trace him that way, and the denim work clothes and boots he was wearing were not his style—but they would describe him and he was not exactly an invisible man about town.

Crossing Dorchester and heading for his rented tourist room to change out of the bloodied clothes, he concentrated on getting used to the new life he had just advanced into. His back was numb, his hands were aching, and his face felt marked in a couple of places. Maybe Denny was right, he told himself. Perhaps the time was right for a fast

move to Toronto. Or ultima Thule.

Argentina wheeled the convertible into the parking area beside the tall new Maison Radio-Canada. Masterson and Baril had been singing "Tenor and Baritone" all the way down the Boulevard, rehearsing their act. The truth was, the premier was a little high, having put away two double scotches before lunch and a whole bottle of wine during.

With the engine dead, Baril reached for his door handle when Argentina said, "One moment, Mr. Premier." She was fumbling in her giant handbag on the floor beside her. She brought out a chrome flask. "A little cough medicine to help the performance. And so we don't lose that lovely glow."

Baril accepted the large capful she poured, raised it and said, "You think of everything, Miss Carr. Will it always be this way?"

"*Santé, monsieur,*" she said and watched him drink it down.

She had closed the flask and put it back in her bag when Masterson said, "Don't I get any?"

"Yes, why not see what the boys in the back seat will have?" Bosco said.

Argentina feigned beautiful embarrassment as she fumbled in her bag and brought out the second, identical flask, the one with the undoctored brandy. "I don't know what I was thinking of," she said.

By the time the two of them had taken slow drinks, Baril's head was beginning to sag. "Don't know wassa matter . . ."

"That's all right. You just put your head back," Argentina said soothingly. "Plenty of time."

Baril's eyes closed and his head turned, one cheek on the leather upholstery.

Masterson was staring at him, his eyes filling with apprehension. "He's going to be very mad when he wakes up," he said. "We must be crazy." Until now, everything had been harmless. But now they had committed a crime, they had drugged the premier of the province.

"Don't be silly," Bosco said, climbing out of the car. "Everything is working like a charm. Quickly, help me put up the top."

From his car across the lot, John Keeley and Debbie Thielmanns watched the whole scene. They had arrived early and, seeing the convertible pull in, had decided to let the official party enter the building before approaching Bosco with their tape. Debbie said, "They've put

him to sleep."

"I don't believe it," Keeley said.

"What do we do?"

The convertible was enclosed now, and driving at speed from the parking lot. Keeley started his car. "I don't know. I've got to follow them. I've got to find out what Bosco is trying to do."

The farm had never been a success for any of its owners down through the years. Situated on high rocky ground a couple of miles from Lake Massawippi, its paint-peeling clapboard walls and tiny windows presented a dismal appearance to visitors approaching along the narrow, pine-lined dirt road.

The convertible was parked in the yard now, the party inside, and Masterson had not stopped moaning. "This is going to blow up in our faces," he said, looking out one of the windows, afraid to face Baril who had come round but was sitting head in hands, claiming to be sick.

"Dennis," Argentina said, "will you shut up?"

"Yeah, come on, Den. Give it a rest."

"It isn't too late. We can apologize and drive Mr. Baril back to Montreal. He'll let us off easy if we do that."

"The singer is right," Baril said through his hands. "Any other way, I'll throw the book at you."

"You aren't going to do anything, Yves," Latourelle said. "By the time I go on television and expose your takeover document, you'll be out of a job. The moderate wing of the party will take over again, and we'll be laughing."

"That's naive," Masterson said. "A hundred things can go wrong. And even if it all works, we'll have made an enemy of this man. He's got friends, powerful friends. He'll never let us walk away from this."

Baril looked up. His eyes were black pits. "You really should listen to him, Bosco."

Eloise Carpentier said, "The answer is to kill the bastard. Right now. Then at least we'll have done some good." She went to a cupboard, opened it, and took down a rifle. "This is loaded."

Latourelle started toward her. "I told you, Eloise, no violence."

But Argentina stopped him, whispered to him. "The rifle is a good idea, Bosco. You and I have to go back to the city. And Denny is weak. The rifle will keep Baril quiet."

Latourelle hesitated. Then he said, "All right. We're leaving now. Eloise, you keep him quiet. And Dennis, keep your cool. You're in this now and the only way out is to see it through and come out the other side. Yves, there's steak in the kitchen, good wine, your brand of cognac. Relax, get happy, nobody wants to hurt you."

Baril's laugh was bitter. "No, you just want to end my career and you'd like me to hold still."

In Montreal that night nobody talked of anything but the kidnapping. Special editions of the daily papers were on the streets. All four television channels had gone over to continuous emergency programming. The police were keeping quiet, but the names of Bosco Latourelle, Dennis Masterson, and Argentina Carr were being used. They had taken the premier away in their car and none had been seen since. Had underworld forces or some political activist unit snatched the lot?

And what about the bodyguards? Three of them were badly beaten in the parking lot and eyewitnesses said there had been at least seven men in the fight.

Then, at nine o'clock, the real bombshell exploded. There, on all screens simultaneously, was Bosco Latourelle, explaining that he had arranged the kidnapping, that Baril was alive and well and would remain so, but that his place of detention could not be revealed until an opportunity was provided for him to publicize the premier's secret plan for a takeover after the referendum. And he was ready to prove the charge with documentary evidence. Nor would he say where Baril was being held until moderate politicians—and he named a couple—would agree to step forward and put the party platform back in order.

At The Ninety-Seven club as elsewhere, the patrons were watching the telecast in tense silence. Johnny Fist sat at the bar, raising a glass of bourbon to bruised lips. Dallas could not even bring his eyes back to his interrupted chess game.

Latourelle had just read the incriminating document and one of the moderate politicians, quickly and triumphantly on hand, had verified its authenticity. Dallas said, "Can you believe a thing like that, Johnny? It's fantastic. A private army, concentration camps in the Laurentians—they were going to take over."

"I believe it," Johnny said. "And I suggest you believe it."

Somebody eased onto the stool beside him. It was Lucien Lacombe

in his cheap dark suit, and he was reading the bruises on Jonathan's face. "Been in a fight?"

"A disagreement. Nothing serious." They both looked at Dallas. He took the hint and moved down the bar.

"I heard it was a war," Lucien said.

"Who says?"

"The three guys you hammered." The detective nodded silently. "I'd give anything to have seen it. How'd you manage the three of them?"

"I still don't know what you're talking about, old friend."

Lacombe turned over one of the bigger man's hands, saw the swollen knuckles. "That won't help you catching a baseball," he said.

"The ball team's pretty far from my mind at the moment, Lucy."

Lacombe stared at the television for half a minute. Then he said, "That's what I can't understand. Why'd you get mixed up in a thing like this? You've got this club. We've got the ball team all summer. The fun we have—it's so sweet. And what's it matter what these stupid bastards do at the parliament buildings? Or who ends up in charge? Nothing would change for us. We could go on just the same."

Jonathan thought about that. He knew the answer but he did not want to say it to his friend. Lacombe waited and then sighed.

"I knew it was you as soon as they described the man in the fight. But they don't know your identity yet. So I'm giving you till tomorrow afternoon, Johnny. Pack your stuff, take your money, and run. Go somewhere you can't be extradited. Otherwise you come back here and those guys are going to hurt you."

"Thanks, Lucy. I appreciate the warning."

Lacombe slid off the stool. "I still don't see why you did it."

"I know you don't, old friend." Jonathan put an arm around Lucien's shoulder and hugged him hard, the way they did when one of them got the hit that drove in the winning runs. "And you will never see it the way I do. Because I'm English and you're French."

Lacombe left the club and Jonathan sat alone at the bar, staring at the television screen, wondering what to do. How the hell could he flee the country and leave his life here? The intention had been to stay and brazen it out, backed by the moderate politicians. But now, with the beaten bodyguards somewhere in the city brooding about the big stranger who had taken them apart, it seemed a different ballgame. Jonathan listened to Latourelle on the TV, wishing he would tell him

how to play it now. But Bosco was indulging in abstract political rhetoric and he appeared quite pleased with himself.

Down in Old Montreal, they were watching at Le Big Bang too; Tancrede Falardeau, his waiters, his musicians, his customers. No jazz tonight—music would have sounded inappropriate. The little girl from Detroit he had hired, Debbie Thielmanns, had been hovering around all evening, looking as if she had been shortchanged at the bar and was trying to psych herself up to complain. Falardeau had too much on his mind to consider her but now here she was, confronting him.

"Tancrede, can I talk to you?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"In your office?"

"O.K." He led the way out of the dim club and into the bright atmosphere of filing cabinets, typewriters, and a crowded bulletin board. "What is it?"

"It's about this kidnapping." Debbie paused.

Falardeau said nothing.

"Johnny and I happened to see the whole thing. You'll never believe it." And she went on to describe the event up to and including their encounter on the dirt road with Bosco and Argentina as they drove down from the farm. Keeley's adman friend had levelled with them and asked him not to say anything for 24 hours, claiming this was all the time he needed.

"Then why are you telling me?" Tancrede asked.

The girl's face looked older now, and harder. "Because I've been part of the movement. I know what it's like to try to fight the establishment and turn things around. I think Baril has the right idea. If he wants Quebec for the French, he has to take it. They'll never get it by negotiation."

Tancrede almost smiled. "What sort of revolutionaries were you involved with?"

"The Weathermen," Debbie said. "In Detroit, and out on the Coast for a while after they killed my friend."

"Who killed your friend?"

"The FBI. They shot him in his bed. Because he was with the movement. And because he was black."

"Well, right now," Tancrede said softly, "we don't have that situation

here. What we have is a politican, not much different from the other ones, trying to take a shortcut to power. Because he knows he can't get it any other way."

"What does that mean?"

"That Baril is no idealist working for the benefit of the French-speaking population. He's out for himself."

"So you won't call the police?"

"Why don't you call them?" Tancrede had, in fact, been thinking of blowing the whistle, saying Eloise had been coerced by Latourelle.

"They'd believe you better than me." Debbie's eyes shifted. "Besides, I don't like dealing with the fuzz."

The door opened and John Keeley looked in. He sensed from the abrupt silence what had been going on. He came in and closed the door. "You told him."

"Yes, I did. If he doesn't call the police, I will."

Keeley advanced on her. "No way, Debbie. We promised Bosco."

Debbie Thielmanns always carried a large denim shoulder bag. Now her hand flashed into it, and came out with a snubnosed pistol which she levelled at Keeley. "Don't look so surprised, John," she said. "I told you about it and you put it in our song. Go ahead, Tancrede," she added. "Dial. Tell them Latourelle is holding Baril at Eloise Carpentier's farm. Johnny can tell you the way."

"I know where it is," Tancrede almost whispered.

"Then call!"

"In a minute. Maybe. I haven't made up my mind yet."

At the farm, Baril was on his feet, walking around. Masterson was lying on the sofa, his eyes closed. Eloise was sitting crosslegged on a table, the rifle across her knees. The television set was on and they, like almost everyone else in Quebec, were watching Bosco Latourelle make his astonishing accusation.

Eloise said, "Wake up, Dennis, I have to go to the john." She got off the table, handed Masterson the rifle as he sat up, and said, "Never mind what Bosco said. If he makes a move, blow his head off."

When they were alone, Baril turned to Masterson and said, "We don't have much time. Listen. You're the only sane man here. Believe me, *you* are not in trouble. I've heard you doing everything you can to dissuade Latourelle. It isn't too late. Let me go and your future is

guaranteed in Quebec, whatever happens politically."

"How can I let you go? There's no car. You're miles from a road."

"Just give me the rifle. I'll find my way out. Quickly—there's no time."

Masterson wavered. How in hell had he gotten into this? Argentina was right, they'd never accept him in Toronto. And the public would never again believe in him as a singer of romantic ballads. He was a kidnapper now, a desperado.

"Come on, Dennis. One singer to another." Baril grinned. "Tenor and baritone."

Masterson blocked out his thought processes. He handed over the rifle. Baril had time barely to heft it in his hands when the door opened and Eloise Carpentier walked in, carrying three opened bottles of soft drink.

Baril swung round and fired. The sound in the room was deafening. Eloise was thrown back against the door frame, the bottles caroming off the wall and falling to the floor where they rolled and lay, spilling and foaming. Blood gushed from her chest.

"Good Christ, no!" Masterson screamed as Baril stepped over to the girl, cranking another bullet into the chamber. He hung the barrel straight down and shot her again in the head.

Masterson was weeping so hard he could not answer when Baril asked about a telephone. Baril found it himself and began dialing.

The police, having been called by Tancrede Falardeau, were on their way to investigate the farm when the confirming message came in. Baril was free and in charge. Other calls were made and the premier's private bodyguards got onto the highway.

The police arrived first, saw the dead girl, interviewed Baril briefly, then turned to the silent Masterson, who seemed to be in shock. "Is this the brave kidnapper?"

"He's all right. He's with me now," Baril said.

When his fleet of bodyguards arrived, Baril sent the police away. He would drive back to Montreal himself, with his cortege, free and in triumph. As the blue-and-white vehicles left, the premier took Masterson into a bedroom.

"Listen, my boy. Listen. Can you hear me?"

Masterson nodded and mumbled something.

"Take this. It's all the money I have on me. Three hundred dollars. Here are the keys to the black limousine. Take it and drive. Go into Ontario. I can protect you legally here, but I'm not sure about some of these hotheads of mine. Stay out of sight for a few weeks. Then call me and we'll set up something permanent for you. Got that?"

"Mr. Baril, I really haven't—"

"Not now. There's no time. Just go!"

Masterson left the farmhouse, stumbling into the cool night, almost falling off the porch. He found the black limousine, got in under the eyes of the watchful men, started up, and drove away haltingly. The car smelled new inside. Was all this really happening to him? Was this really the end of it?

Back on the porch, Yves Baril waited until the limousine was on the dirt road. Then he hurried and spoke to his biggest bodyguard, a crew-cut man with a smashed face.

"Catch that bastard and kill him," he said flatly. "He stole my money and my car."

The appearance of Yves Baril on television side by side with Bosco Latourelle was a media coup that newsmen believed would never be surpassed in Canada. Many people said that the whole thing was a put-up job, an elaborate public-relations dodge to convince the part of the population who suspected the premier's motives and methods that he was really a good guy.

Anyway, here they were, flanking each other on the flickering screen, kidnapper and victim. Latourelle made his accusation face to face and then he held up the memorandum which outlined the 51-49 percent takeover plan. Baril listened to it all, nodding encouragement to Bosco as he spun it out. Then he said,

"My old friend, if only you'd come to me with that piece of paper. You are holding one of several scenarios which I and my advisory committee worked out as possible courses of action, post referendum. We considered every possibility, everything that could take place. It goes without saying we rejected that particular scenario out of hand. As we rejected several others."

"Mr. Premier, that isn't the information I was given."

"Then you were given incorrect information." And now Baril turned to the camera and looked down the lens. "In any case, my promise to

all Quebecers now, my absolute guarantee, is that after next week's referendum we will only consider setting up a separate Quebec if the vote is at least 85 percent in favor."

Bosco said, "Well, you heard him, ladies and gentlemen. I'm sure, after all that has happened, you'll be on your guard."

The politician had the last word. "And I'd just like to say, Bosco, that I intend to see no charges are pressed against you and your associates in this action. Some would call it a crime. I see it as the efforts of a group of public-spirited citizens to head off what they sincerely but mistakenly believed to be an undemocratic action. In truth, we are on the same side. I only regret the deaths of the young woman and the young man at the farmhouse who made the mistake of holding me at gunpoint and were accidentally killed during my release."

Watching in The Ninety-Seven, Jonathan Fitzwilliam was shaken. Woman and man killed at the farmhouse? That must have been Eloise and Dennis. Dennis!

He went up the iron stairs to his apartment and after some trouble got through to Lucien Lacombe. Lucien had the information. It was secret under threat of dismissal, but everybody was whispering and he was ready to tell his friend. Baril got a rifle somehow and shot the girl. Then he let Dennis drive away in a car and sent his boys to kill him.

There was a lot of silence now on the line. The detective coughed. "Are you still going to cut out, Johnny? Baril said you're off the hook legally. But those three guys may still try to get you in an alley."

"The three guys don't concern me," Fitzwilliam said.

"What, then?"

Johnny's thoughts were not very admirable but he was stuck with them. It was sinking in that his best friend was also the only one who knew he had thrown Linda Lennox off a roof. Dennis's death left him feeling free and lonely at the same time. He said,

"I've got to decide whether I'm supposed to do something about Mr. Baril."

Leaving the television studio with Argentina beside him, Latourelle ran into the premier coming down the same corridor. There were so many big men around Baril now he could hardly be seen. But he broke through the cordon and stepped into an alcove, drawing Bosco and the girl in with him.

"That was good brandy, Miss Carr," he said gleefully. "Where do you get that stuff?" He was exuberant, wide-eyed as a child on Halloween.

"I should have given you the whole flask," Argentina said bitterly. "It would have killed you."

"Save it for yourself, dear. You may need it."

Bosco put his arm around Argentina. He said, "Well, we won anyway. You came out smelling like a rose, Yves, but at least you can't take the province on a moonlight flit after the referendum."

"No, not next week." Baril's grin widened. "But there's plenty of time. You haven't stopped me, Bosco. You've only delayed me. I'll be back on the track soon enough. And listen, old friend—" his smile died like a lamp going off "—once Quebec finally separates, you'd better get onto Highway 401 that same day and drive to Ontario as fast as you can. Because if you try to live in my country, you'll have no advertising agency. You'll be lucky if you're allowed to sweep streets in Rimouski."

Bosco and Argentina went to her place, where they drank the brandy in the second flask and finished the bottle it had been filled from. Then, just before they went to bed, Latourelle said, "Be sure you spill out the flask with the dope in it. You don't want anyone drinking it by mistake."

Argentina said, "Right," and went into the kitchen to attend to it. But she thought for a minute and then stored the flask of doctored brandy, still almost full, on a high shelf.

She kept waking during the night, her mind full of Eloise, whom she never much liked, and of Dennis, whom she admired in spite of his weakness. And she knew Bosco Latourelle was thinking of his dead friends too, because she heard him quietly weeping.

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