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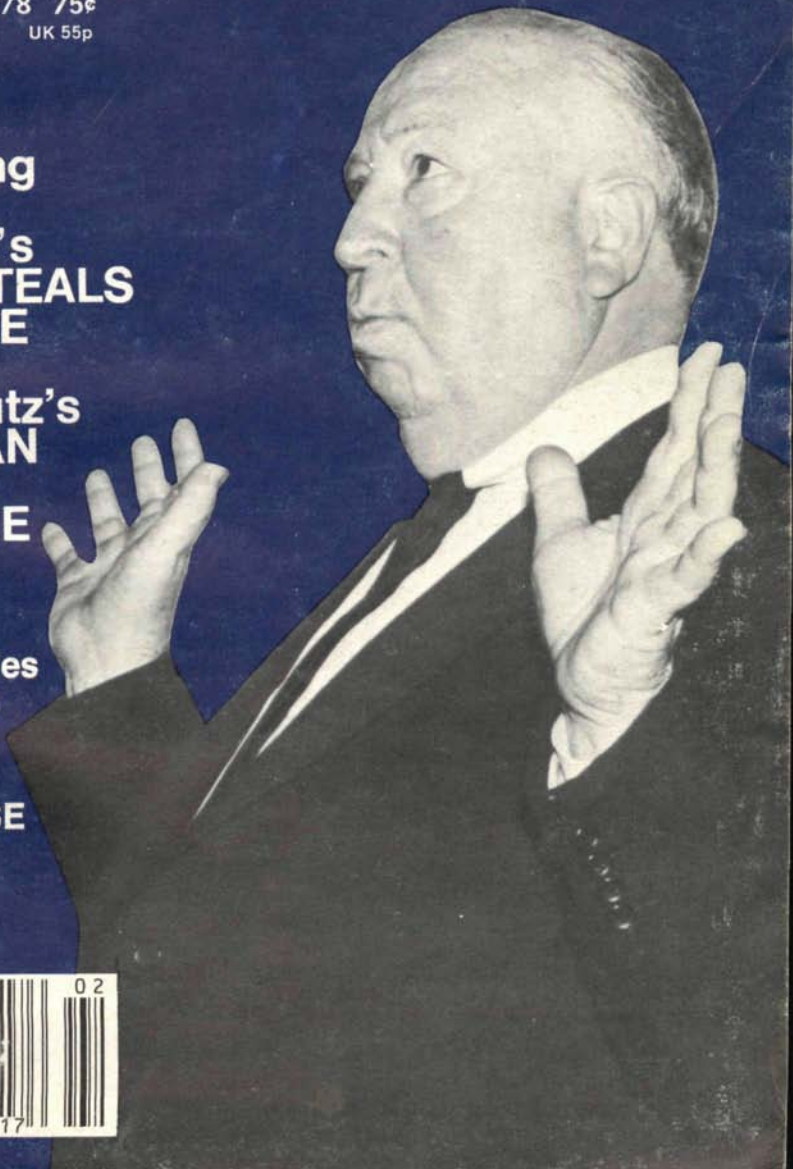
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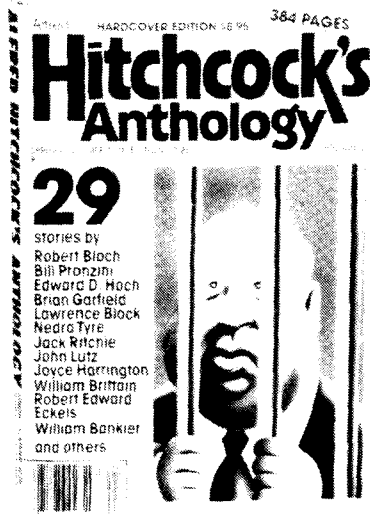
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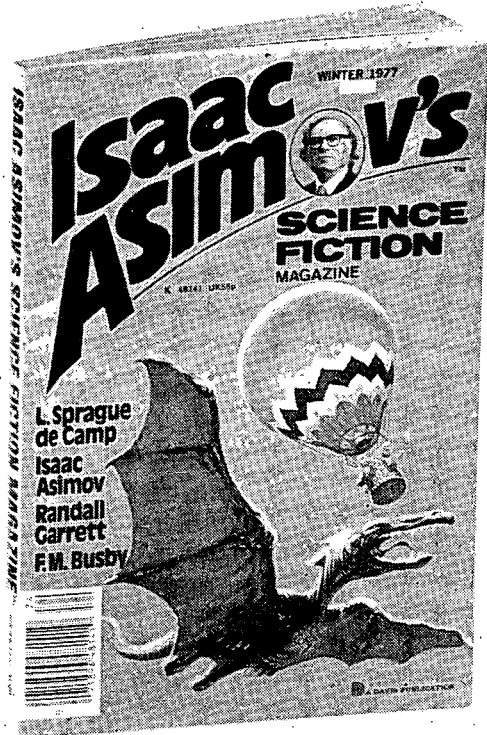
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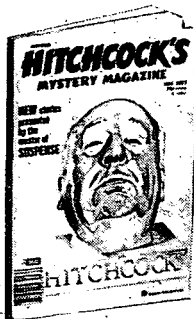
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February 1978

Dear Reader:

Unless you're a winter-sports enthusiast, you may be inclined to think of winter as the underside of the year—the most unfriendly, brutal, and ungiving of the seasons. And February, coming mid-season as it does, may strike you as the darkest of a dark time. If so, we have an issue that's perfectly appropriate to your way of thinking, rife with characters who reflect the murky underside of human nature.

Vanity, greed, envy, deceit, revenge, double-dealing, and pure self-interest—they (and more) are all here to warn, educate, and entertain you through this darkest month. And remember that February is not completely heartless—it holds itself down to 28 days and one of those is Valentine's Day.

Good reading.

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As far as she knew, her picture had never been taken . . .



WHO STEALS MY FACE



by
**WILLIAM
BANKIER**

When the hospital got in touch with Bethnal Piper and asked him if he wanted to go down to the Eastern Townships as private nurse and cook for a wealthy old man who had broken his leg, Piper hesitated.

"I've got some good things going in Montreal," he said. And he had. It was a rainless summer and his evenings were being spent on Crescent Street, floating from pub to club to disco through a sea of beautiful people.

"This is for Morris Markham, the photographer," his hospital contact said. "They say he keeps a beautiful princess there who does nothing but pose for him."

It was true. Markham had been just another commercial photographer, hustling for his share of package shots and model sessions from the Montreal ad agencies. Then he came up with some studies of a face that turned the New York fashion business on its ear. They bought the pictures and everything else he sent from then on. Her name was "Silver"—only that—and as she began to appear in the top magazines Markham became famous, and rich.

"Let me think about it," Piper told his contact. "I'll call you back."

"All right, but today. The man needs somebody."

Piper's mind was made up for him that afternoon when Dallas, the world's most patient bartender, asked him to pay his tab. Piper couldn't do it. Then, as he was leaving the club, big Jonathan, the manager, stood in his office doorway looking funereal in his tuxedo at that time of day, and watched him out the door.

The Eastern Townships began to sound good.

Piper packed his white slacks and shoes along with some casual clothes and drove to the Markham place the next afternoon. It was a good hour and a half southeast of Montreal in the Lake Massawippi area. The corn was waist-high in the fields and the farmhouses all had picturesque hills for backdrops.

But there was nothing scenic about the wall surrounding Markham's property. It was brick, the color of port wine, and at least ten feet high. Piper had to get out of his car and ring a bell. This summoned a French-Canadian gatekeeper with a jaw like a marble slab. He seemed to be expecting Piper; he let him in and took him into the house, leaving him at Morris Markham's ground-floor bedroom.

It was an office, really. There was a desk, a huge flat counter running beneath a wall of windows, a swivel chair, a red-velvet chaise longue, and, in one corner, a small bed.

Markham was sitting in a wheelchair, his glasses on top of his neat grey hair, his green eyes innocently wide, his lower lip a little slack. "Mr. Piper," he said in a booming voice. "Come in."

Piper set down his bag and shook hands and a superficial conversation ensued. But what occupied his attention was the display of photographs on three walls.

They were all studies of the same girl. Sun-splashed, leaf-dappled smiles; somber interior moods; roguish grins; arrogant pouts; cheeks with freckles, cheeks with tears; distant eyes, intimate eyes; silhouettes; soft exposures; montages.

They were enthralling.

"You're admiring my work."

"Yes. She's fascinating." Piper approached the main wall. "I've seen some of these in magazines, haven't I?"

"Most of them have run in *Vogue* or *Harper's* or somewhere." Markham wheeled his chair in little military turns. "But never mind my work. Your work is what we want to talk about. You come well recommended."

"I've never had any complaints."

"Well, here's what I expect—"

What Morris Markham expected was that Piper would be much more a companion than a cook or a nurse. His leg fracture was serious enough that he would be confined to the wheelchair for some time, but apart from the preparation and serving of meals and a regular massage Bethnal's hospital training was not much needed.

The companionship, as it turned out, was no problem. The old man and the younger one liked each other from the first evening they spent together. In fact, had they met casually in one of Piper's Crescent Street bars they would probably have become drinking buddies.

"Bring out a couple more of those lagers while I shuffle the spots off these cards," Markham said early in the evening. He had been delighted to learn that Piper was a confirmed cribbage addict. "And look in the cupboard above the refrigerator. You should find a big tin of salted peanuts."

Piper found the tin and popped the lid. From the door of the fridge, massively stocked with beer, he selected two large brown bottles: Markham purchased it in quarts, one sign of the serious consumer. This was fine as far as Piper was concerned. Around the pubs he was known as a competent belter.

In the study, he found his hand already dealt. "I see you had time to cook the deck," he said, uncapping bottles and setting them by the empty glasses.

"Go to hell," Markham said, his face glistening with pleasure. He scooped a fistful of nuts from the tin and scuffed them into his mouth.

Piper sat down and picked up his cards. He put down a six. "Six," he said.

Markham slapped down a nine. "Fifteen," he said and moved his peg on the perforated board.

As they played, Piper said, "Welterweight-championship on Channel 6 at ten o'clock."

"Great. Thanks for reminding me. It's that English kid against Lewis, isn't it?"

"Yeah. His first defense. He looked good against Napoles."

"Fighting's about the only thing I watch on the box," Markham said.

It was a good match and when it was over and the introduction to the news came on, Markham said, "Turn that off before I get sick."

Piper pushed the button and as the color died his employer went on, "I saw great fights you probably never even heard of. I saw Zale and Graziano—all three times."

"I heard of them."

"You heard your father talk about them," Markham said and poured half a glass of beer down his throat with a rolling motion of his wrist. He wiped his lips. "I saw all the good ones after them too. Kid Gavi-lan. Carmen Basilio."

Piper quoted the Don Dunphy cliché. "The craggy-faced onion farmer from Canastota, New York."

Markham threw back his head and laughed with a resonance that jarred the room. From the walls, the girl faces looked at the men. Looked at them and looked at them.

It was a cheerfully drunken old photographer Piper put to bed at half past one. Not surprising, then, that the house was quiet next morning when Piper got up at eight, opened his venetian blind, looked out into an enclosed garden, and saw Silver.

She appeared at open French windows beyond the high wall carrying a laden tray. A light breeze blew wisps of blonde hair across her eyes and she turned her head to clear them. On a small area of flagstones beside a sunken garden stood a white iron table with a glass top and a single matching chair. There was something poignant about that solitary chair.

As Piper watched, feeling suppressed excitement at the sight of her, the girl placed the tray on the table, sat down gracefully, and with crossed ankles and a very straight back began to pour coffee from a

silver pot into a bright china mug.

Markham was in no mood for conversation when he rang for Piper at eleven. After a massage and some lunch he felt better, and said the cribbage should be for money from now on. Piper was encouraged to say, "I saw a young lady in the garden this morning. Beyond the wall."

"She has nothing to do with you."

"I recognized her face. She looks like the girl in all the pictures."

"That's who she is then," Markham said sharply and, turning on the spot, he wheeled himself out of the room.

Piper said no more about it but kept his eyes open. The girl was clearly Markham's model and she seemed to be alone in that annex. So it stood to reason that Markham must go through to her from time to time. There had to be a way.

It was obvious enough when it was revealed. That afternoon Markham said he was going to classify some negatives. Piper would not be needed until dinner time. Piper retired to his room up the stairs but came out in time to see Markham wheel himself down a narrow corridor that extended past the kitchen. Piper followed silently and came to an oak door. It was locked. It would be useful to know where Markham kept the key.

Piper now decided to use the telephone while his employer was out of his office. He dialed the Montreal number of a friend in the advertising business.

"Hey, Bethnal. What happened? They were saying in the Boiler Room you must have been nabbed by Interpol."

"I'm earning wages, Marty." And Piper explained his new status. Then he went on to inquire about the mysterious model.

"Mysterious is the word. Apart from the name Silver, nobody knows anything about her."

"But if she's so famous, haven't other photographers tried to book her?"

"You bet. Kirschner for one. And Fenway. They call up from New York to hire her, but no go. She is exclusive to Morris Markham."

At the sound of a key in the oak door, Piper ended his call and got out of the office. But he lurked around a corner from where he was able to see Markham wheel in and stow the key in a desk drawer.

Piper began dropping the girl into conversation. Working at the old man's massage one day, he said, "I do this for ladies too. If you think

that model of yours would benefit."

"Forget her," was all Markham said, half asleep, his voice slurred.

Barbecuing spareribs one night, Piper suggested, "There's lots of food here. Why don't I take some in to the young lady?"

"She has her own kitchen facilities, Beth. Don't concern yourself."

One night, as they drank beer on the front patio listening to cars thundering by on the highway beyond the brick wall, Piper became more direct.

"Morrie."

"Yeah, Beth."

"That woman in the annex, she's starting to get to me."

"I made it plain at the start. The annex is off limits. The girl is, with respect, none of your business. Put her out of your mind."

"That was O.K. at first. But now I'm curious as hell. Why can't you open up about her?"

"Because it's a complicated story. And it's irrelevant where you're concerned."

From the annex beyond the wall came the sound of music—mandolins at a quick tempo.

"Vivaldi," Markham said. "There. I've told you she likes Vivaldi. Will that do?"

Piper got up and moved toward the door. "I'll be out of here in the morning."

"Oh, come on—"

"The hospital will send you a replacement. But whoever it is will be curious about the girl too. And maybe not as good company as I am." Piper went inside.

"Aw, Beth, come back and finish your beer."

Piper went upstairs and slammed his bedroom door.

Next morning he found Markham awake in his bed and ready to talk. "I was going to tell you soon anyway."

"There's nothing to worry about, Morris. I'm not going to spread your secret."

The old man struggled up while Piper wedged pillows behind his back. "You're like a member of the family now anyway. You ought to know." Then, as Piper served them both coffee from a bedside percolator, Markham told the story.

"Silver Christopher. That's her name. I knew her parents very well.

Back about eight years ago, when she was ten, Montreal was having that terrorist activity, remember?"

"The FLQ?"

"After them—the next lot. One of their bombs went off under a car Jim and Millie Christopher just got into. They were killed instantly. That left Silver with nobody so I stepped in—there were no other relatives—and got the courts to assign her to me. She's been here ever since.

"But why shut away like this?"

"It isn't a prison," Markham insisted. "She has the best of everything—food, clothes, books. She's got her own little screening room in there where we run films. The only things she doesn't have are television, radio, and newspapers."

"Why?"

"Because to keep her here, I've had to tell her the world is a little different than it really is."

Piper said nothing but began to get the feeling that his employer was a plausible madman.

"She knows her parents died by a bomb set off by terrorists. There was talk then of revolution. I've told her Quebec has been torn all these years by civil war. I tell her it's never been resolved and that sniping and bombing go on every day with heavy casualties, but that we're safe out here."

"And she buys that?"

"She has so far. I suppose one day she'll insist on coming out. If that happens, I won't prevent her."

The coffee tasted sour. Piper said, "But why? What's the reason for this complicated charade?"

There was pride in Markham's voice as he said, "I've always had a theory about photography and now I've been able to prove it. Take the models we use. A new face is discovered and for a while her work is fresh. It's naive. But then she starts seeing herself in print. She begins to imitate her own expressions and the spontaneity is gone. It's game over for that girl."

Piper said, "I think I see."

"I brought up Silver Christopher in total seclusion. I began using her when she was sixteen. Not in a studio. I have various locations around the grounds and one room in particular where I can shoot

without her knowing it, from hidden apertures in the walls. As far as she's concerned, she's never had her picture taken."

"But what about the clothes she has to wear? Or the products she's seen with?"

"They're sent to me and I fit her out. Put on this gown, Silver, and take a walk in the garden. Or try this soft drink. Or hold this perfume. Just try some on your hand." Markham was flushed with enthusiasm. "The agency people don't like it. The fashion coordinators hate being kept out. But if they want Silver, they have to go along."

"And all this just to keep her from seeing her own picture?"

"To keep her fresh and unaffected."

A couple of days went by before Piper brought up the subject again. It was late evening, after the beer and the cards, best time for talking. "I don't know if I know you well enough to say this," he began and paused, waiting for the anticipated permission.

"We can tell each other anything, Beth. Shoot."

"Well, I don't know how you manage to sleep nights."

"What do you mean?"

"Because of what you're doing to that girl."

Markham laughed and slapped the palm of his hand three times on the leather arm of his chair. "Lochinvar, will you get it through your head I am not doing anything to that girl. She's happy as clams in the ocean."

"You're cheating, Morrie. You're telling it to yourself the way you want it to be."

Piper put the cards away and started clearing away the empty bottles and glasses. He thought the evening was over, but it was not. The photographer was watching him. At last he said,

"If you meet her and talk to her and see for yourself how content she is, will you believe me then?"

They went down the oak-panelled corridor, Piper pushing the wheel-chair, Markham holding the key. He unlocked the door and when they went through Piper sensed a change in the atmosphere, a cleaner, sweeter smell, a garden fragrance. Somebody was playing a Spanish guitar in the distance.

"Follow the music," Markham said, indicating an open doorway across the vestibule.

Silver was sitting on the edge of a caneback chair in the center of a carpeted room, her right foot raised on a small footstool, the guitar resting across her knee. She was playing a poignant melody Piper had heard before. He thought it was called "Lagrimas." Fench doors stood open into the garden, revealing the dark edge of grass and a rose trellis. Cool moist air filled the room.

When Silver finished playing and looked up from the strings, Markham said, "Here he is, Silver, the man I told you about. My new companion."

She stood and balanced the guitar against the chair, each movement careful and complete. She crossed the room and offered Piper her hand. "How do you do."

It was a disturbing experience, seeing her face close to after looking at so many photographs of it. The familiar oval shape was there, the perfect features, the widely spaced eyes. But innocent? There was something else beneath the placid surface—a flicker of movement as her hidden soul swam briefly into view.

Of course, Piper would tell himself later, she was ten years old when Markham's experiment began. At that age, or long before, human character is totally formed. Silver Christopher's darker emotions, the hostility, the mischief, the pride, had to be in there, buried under years of artificial tranquility.

"It's nice to meet you," Piper said. "I've seen you—from my window upstairs." He had almost mentioned seeing her photographs. Markham turned and looked up at him; the near thing was that apparent.

"Mr. Piper can't stay long," the old man said. "He just wanted to see what a nice set-up you have in here."

"Oh, I have everything I want," Silver said without smiling. Her face when she played the guitar and now when she spoke was the same—the cool introspective face of the thousand photos. "Thanks to Uncle Morris, I have everything."

They stayed only ten minutes and even that seemed a long time. No one had anything to say. It was unsettling and it made up Piper's mind for him. He was going to get to this girl alone. He was going to read her the news and take her out of this creepy half existence.

To do this, Piper had to get Markham out of the way. So after a few days he engineered a plan one afternoon. He claimed it was his birthday and produced at lunch a cake with one large candle burning in it.

"Why didn't you warn me, Beth?" Markham scolded. "I would have gotten you something."

"That's why I didn't warn you."

It was an excuse for a couple of bottles of wine and then a bottle of brandy. By two o'clock there was only one place for Markham—the recliner at the far end of the garden, where he lay in a stupor.

When he felt secure in the house, Piper found the key in Markham's desk and used it to open the oak door. He left it open and walked along the corridor extension on the other side. His excitement was intense; again there was the different atmosphere, the delicate fragrance in the air.

The entrance hall at the end of the corridor was smaller than it had seemed at night. Light streamed through stained-glass windows on a landing halfway up a flight of broad stairs. Dazzled by the light, Piper did not at first see the girl standing on the steps.

"You came back," she said, startling him.

He changed his angle, brought her into focus. "Don't worry. It's all right."

"No, I don't think it is. Morris wouldn't like you being here alone. He warned me." She descended the last few steps and faced him.

"He doesn't know I'm here," Piper said. "And by the time he finds out, it won't matter."

"Why?" She smiled at him for the first time and he felt his legs give way. He had to step back to hold his balance.

"Because I'm going to show you something that will change your life." He took her hand.

She resisted entering the corridor. "I'm not allowed in there."

"It's all right. Come."

He showed her a thousand pictures of herself. She had to sit down, staggered by three walls covered with her image. He brought her magazines with her photograph on the cover. He leafed through and showed her advertisements with Silver Christopher the model. At first the magazines fell from her fingers, but then she began to grip and hold them, on her lap and in her hands, grasping and possessing all these pictures of herself.

Meanwhile, Piper was talking. He told her about the hidden cameras, about Markham's theory that if she saw her picture it would spoil her as a model. Then he explained the false terms of her

confinement—there was no war in Quebec, life was going on outside.

A fretful call sounded from the garden. Piper left Silver clutching the magazines and photoprints, staring at herself. "All this time," she said with amazement. "All this time—"

The scene when Piper brought Markham into the room approached violence. First the photographer went half mad and cursed his companion for his criminal interference, threatening to have the police on him. Piper shouted in reply that if the police were summoned, their duty would be to arrest Markham for kidnapping or at least for unlawful detention.

Then Silver's tears and screaming ended their discussion. When Markham tried to comfort her, she sobbed, "How could you do this to me? All these years out of my life."

"Dear child," he said, "you haven't lost anything. You've been given peace and tranquility, which you needed. And now you're a world-famous model. With a lot of money in the bank."

"She has lost something all right," Piper said. "She has lost her right to choose where she wanted to go and what she wanted to do."

The girl turned cold eyes on Markham. "He's right. You should have told me. You should have let *me* decide."

"But then you'd have seen your pictures. My experiment wouldn't have worked."

"To hell with your experiment," Piper said. "She's a woman, not a guinea pig." He went to Silver. "I'm going to pack a bag," he said. "You do the same and I'll drive you to the city."

She was a sensation when she appeared in Montreal and so was Bethnal Piper, the man who had released the princess from her prison in the castle. They did a lot of carousing and a bit of travelling, using a portion of the money in her bank account.

But Silver was too valuable a property to be kept on a string by a man as insignificant as Piper. A darkly tanned, tight-suited agent flew in from New York, talked to her, and offered her a contract designed to make the most of her current notoriety. Piper tried to convince her to take it slow, to walk for a while with him in Montreal before she started to fly.

"You're barely nineteen, Silver," he said. "You've got your whole life ahead of you."

"I'm starting late. I've got a lot of catching up to do."

"Yes, but if you take it easy, you'll last a lot longer."

It was then he noticed the stubborn set of her lower lip, and the glassy look of her eyes. He was dealing with a willful child whose resentment of discipline left her only one way to go. So she signed the New York contract and from then on Piper saw her as everybody else did—on the cover of *Harper's Bazaar* and in the pages of *Vogue*.

She also began to make the pages of the scandal tabloids, especially when she was married and divorced within a period of six weeks. She began being seen with the rougher night-life element. Reading of this, Beth was not surprised. She was busy showing her dead parents and her wicked conniving uncle what a bad girl she could be.

A year elapsed and Piper, making some money the hard way at Montreal General, was beginning to get her out of his system when, unexpectedly, he ran into Morris Markham in the hospital corridor, coming from a blood test. Piper tried to walk on by, but Markham stopped him.

"Beth, listen," he said. "There's no point us being enemies. Things are bad enough."

"I'm not mad if you're not."

"I was. But I can't afford to be any more. I'm too lonely."

Piper looked closely and saw a shrunken version of the man he had worked for only a year ago. "You've lost weight," he said. "You need some of my wieners and beans to get you back in shape."

Markham flashed a haunted smile. "Come on then. It has to be better for you than this." He glanced at the towel-shrouded tray Piper was carrying.

Within a few days, the cribbage games and the beer and the late-night snacks were on again. And the occasional TV show that appealed to them. But it could never be quite the same. Markham was not working now and he probably never would again. And Silver was not in the house.

Piper took to analyzing his part in the affair, usually with his mind fuzzed by drink. "Did I do her a favor or didn't I?" he would say. "I meant to set her free."

"I guess you did."

"Free to do what? Race around and booze and shoot up and God knows what all? She was better off here."

"Not once she knew the score."

"So all I did was chase her out of our lives, yours and mine. And turn her loose among the predators."

They suffered one night when they happened to switch on a talk show from California and there she was, obviously a little high, chattering at a dazzled interviewer. The subject came around, as it always did, to her early years of mysterious confinement. Was it all a publicity stunt?

"No, it was real," Silver said, and the camera closed in on her wild eyes and angry mouth. "He was using me to his own advantage. I never knew what was happening. He lied to me for years while he stole my face."

Soon after that, Piper and Markham flew away for an extended visit in Europe. When they got back, Silver was in the news. Her new escort was a New York avant-garde sculptor named Rivera. Narcotics had been found at a party and only the Christopher money and influence had kept them out of jail.

Markham pointed to a picture of her in a current magazine. "Look," he said. "She's losing it. She's turning hard."

Her sudden death was not much of a surprise to anybody when it happened a year later. The press suggested the overdose might have been intentional. Rivera was interviewed and threw a punch at a reporter who asked if it was true the model had left him all her money.

"I get this terrible feeling she was blaming me all this time," Markham said. "As if she was destroying herself just to show me how unhappy she was."

"Not true," Piper said, although he believed it was exactly what had happened. "You gave her a career. Success. And all that money in the bank. If she couldn't handle it—"

Markham grumbled to himself. "I can't forget what she said on television. He stole my face."

The letter from New York arrived a week later. It was from Rivera and he hadn't much to say. He was fulfilling a promise to the deceased. There was something she wanted Markham to have and Rivera had sworn to send it. It would arrive under separate cover.

A day's delay preceded the arrival of the package. It was a heavy cardboard carton, well sealed and delivered by registered mail. Piper

stood by with the now-habitual glass in his hand while Markham slashed tape, lifted flaps, and dragged out handfuls of excelsior. Then the thing itself in tissue paper. Markham unwrapped it, looked at it, then set it on the desk and left the room. Piper heard him coughing over the kitchen sink.

And he felt a little queasy himself as he looked at the bronze image of Silver Christopher's face. It was cruelly realistic, reproducing every sag and wrinkle and blemish, the ugly face of total dissipation. It was her death mask.

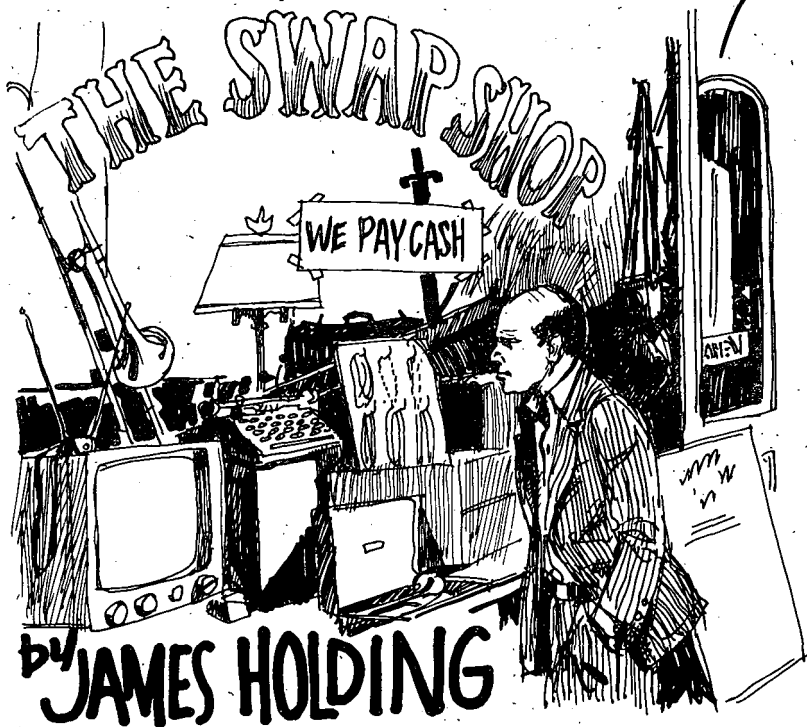


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The place could have been an old-fashioned pawn shop, but it wasn't . . .



The faded gilt lettering over the small store front said The Swap Shop. Pasted to the inside of the dusty window, a sign informed prospective customers: WE PAY CASH. The stock consisted of a hodge-podge of sleazy merchandise, some old, some nearly new, running the gamut from musical instruments to TV sets and costume jewelry to typewriters. Except for the absence of the time-honored three-ball symbol, the place could have been an old-fashioned pawn shop. It was located on

the west side at the edge of town.

Harry Greenwood chose eleven forty-five of a hot humid Tuesday in August to pay his initial visit. As he squirmed out of his parked Pinto and started for The Swap Shop's entrance, the not-unpleasant odor of fresh asphalt reached him from Twelfth Street, where a resurfacing crew was working.

In several ways, Harry Greenwood seemed a curiously contradictory man. His body was short and his bones small, yet despite his meager stature he somehow managed to seem physically impressive. His head, bald except for a fringe of mouse-colored hair at the sides and back, was a little too large to be in harmony with the rest of him. His face was seamed with wrinkles like that of an old man, yet Harry was no more than thirty-five years old, if that. His grey-tinted sunglasses did nothing to conceal the fact that his eyes were unusually sharp and piercing.

He pulled open the door of The Swap Shop and went inside where a beefy middle-aged man, presumably the proprietor, rose from a battered desk and came forward to greet him, leaving a half-eaten sandwich and a Styrofoam coffee cup on the desk top. The storekeeper had blunt features, small blue eyes, and a closed-up expression that hinted at boredom, even defeat.

Greenwood said, "I'm sorry I interrupted your lunch."

"Forget it," the proprietor said easily. "Anything I can do for you?"

"I'm just kind of looking around," Greenwood said.

"Are you interested in something in particular?"

"A color TV set maybe."

"There are a couple over here," said the shopkeeper, leading Greenwood into the store. "That 19-inch Zenith's a buy." He pointed to a set that must have been five years older than the concept of solid-state wiring.

Greenwood cleared his throat. "I don't want to buy. I want to swap."

"Why didn't you say so?" A trace of irritation.

Greenwood looked back at the sign pasted on the window. "Do you mean that? That you'll pay cash?"

"Sure." The proprietor scratched his ear. "What have you got to swap?"

"A Sony, 17-inch color. This year's model. Low mileage."

"That's a good machine. Why are you swapping it?"

"I need the money, if it's any of your business."

The shopkeeper laughed. "Mister, it's *all* of my business. Is the set yours?"

Greenwood stiffened. "Certainly it is. Why?"

"Sometimes they ain't. You got it with you?"

Greenwood shook his head. "I can bring it in tonight, if you stay open."

"Why didn't you bring it now?"

"I wanted to find out what you'd give me for it."

The shopkeeper's smile exposed a gold cap on one of his upper incisors. "And maybe you feel a little bit self-conscious toting a stolen TV set around in broad daylight," he suggested.

Greenwood sighed and lit a cigarette. "That's right. The TV set isn't really mine."

"What a surprise," said the storekeeper. "And what makes you think I buy stolen goods?"

"Hell, the word's out all over the state that you're the best fence around."

"That's a hell of a thing to say about a respectable businessman. I ain't seen you before, have I?"

"No," said Greenwood. "I'm new around here. From Chicago. But I've been here a month or so now, long enough to get a set-up organized. This is the first time I've tried to swap anything."

"So you really do have a TV set for me?"

"I got one, all right. More than one. And other stuff beside TV sets too. But first—" Greenwood held the shopkeeper's eyes "—I want to know what you'll give me for a 17-inch color Sony, new model on a wheeled stand."

"Fifty bucks," said the storekeeper promptly.

"Fifty bucks! Listen, the damn set goes for five hundred and fifty in the store!"

"I know that. So I offer you ten percent, maybe a little less. This ain't Chicago, buddy. And you gotta remember a few things before you start screaming." The storekeeper said this with the weary air of a man who has been through this argument many times before.

"Things like what?" Greenwood asked.

"Like the stuff you're peddling is second hand. As well as being very hot. And like I gotta make a few bucks on an item myself, for God's

sake. And most important, who's got the contacts outside the state to unload the stuff? Plus my shipping costs."

"You think I don't know the facts of life?" Greenwood said. "What I'm trying to tell you is that ten percent is peanuts for the kind of supplier I am. Listen, I can keep you supplied with a steady stream of first-class items—" he cast a disparaging glance around the store "—that will bring you two and three times what you can get for junk like this."

"A steady stream? What's that mean?"

"It means I'll bring you first-class goods in *volume*, that's what it means. If you'll go to twenty percent for me. You don't need to do it for your other customers, understand. Just for me. Because I'll bring you good stuff in big volume."

The storekeeper said, "Give me an example."

"What about fifty electric typewriters in top condition?"

"Fifty? All at once?"

"All at once."

"Give me another example."

"Twenty-five TV sets. Like the one you'll see tonight. Any time you want them."

"What do you do, rob distributors?"

"Sometimes." Greenwood smiled. There wasn't much humor in the smile. "And sometimes high school typing classrooms. And motels. Give me a few weeks to recruit some kids, and I'll bring you *cars* if you can handle them."

"Are you organization?"

"No way."

"You talk like it."

"I left Chicago because of them. I was doing so well they wanted to move in on me. Who needs them? I'm an independent. So I left." Greenwood paused. "Is it a deal? Twenty percent?"

"I'll think it over," the shopkeeper said. "Bring in your TV set tonight. I'll let you know then." He opened the entrance door of The Swap Shop, inviting Greenwood to leave. "Is that your Pinto out there with the Illinois plates?"

"Yeah. What time tonight?"

"Midnight. Drive around back to the storeroom entrance."

"O.K." Greenwood left. The Swap Shop proprietor went back to his desk and finished his lunch. . .

Greenwood was prompt. He parked near the loading door behind The Swap Shop a few minutes before midnight. The service alley was as dark as a cave, no lights showing anywhere. He knuckled the door softly and waited until he heard the latch click. He couldn't see anything at all. He whispered, "You there?"

"Bring it in," came the answer. "I'll show a light."

Greenwood lifted the TV-set out of his Pinto and carried it inside. The proprietor shut the door behind him and locked it before switching on a single low-wattage bulb which dangled on a wire from the ceiling. "Put it down over here," he told Greenwood, "and let's have a look." He gave the set a casual glance. "I'll have to get rid of the motel nameplate. Otherwise it looks all right."

Greenwood said, "Aren't you going to plug it in and see if it works?"

"Naw. I trust you." The shopkeeper's gold tooth glinted. "Come on up front. I'll get your dough."

"There's more room back here than you'd think," said Greenwood, following him through a barnlike room stacked with miscellaneous merchandise. "Maybe you *could* handle a few cars."

"Too risky."

They went through a doorway into a small closetlike room that must have been directly behind the salesroom proper. The storekeeper shut the door, then touched a light switch. Greenwood saw that there was nothing in the room except two chairs, a small plain table, and a squat safe in one corner. "Have a chair," the shopkeeper said. He went to the safe and began to twirl the dial.

Greenwood sat down in a dilapidated ladderback chair beside the table. When the shopkeeper turned from the safe, he had a small sheaf of currency in one hand, a snub-nosed revolver in the other.

Greenwood winced. "What's that for?" He nodded at the gun.

"Protection." The shopkeeper chuckled. "I don't trust everyone the way I do you." He sat down in the other chair, across the table from Greenwood, and placed the gun in his lap. "Here's your money." He counted out fifty dollars in tens.

Greenwood sighed. "Fifty. No deal, then?"

"No deal. I get all I can handle for ten percent in this town." The shopkeeper kept his eyes on Greenwood's face. Greenwood was still wearing his sunglasses.

Greenwood took the fifty dollars, folded it away in his pocket.

"That's it, then," he said flatly. "I'll have to find somebody else. Somebody with more ambition."

"Ambition I got," said the storekeeper. "Plenty of it. My trouble is not enough time."

"Time for what? You're not old."

"I'm about to close up this business. At the end of this month, I'm through."

"You're going to shut up shop?"

"Right."

"You're a fool. I could help you make a fortune here."

"Maybe you could." The storekeeper watched Greenwood's face. "Maybe you will anyway. Even if I shut up shop."

"Run that by me again," said Greenwood.

The shopkeeper took the gun in his hand and leveled it at Greenwood over the edge of the table. "The Swap Shop is a police operation," he said.

Greenwood's mouth fell open a little and for a few seconds he seemed to have trouble breathing. At length he managed to say, "The *police* run this place?"

"You got it. I'm Detective Lane of the city police, robbery detail." He showed Greenwood his badge with his free hand. "And on August thirty-first, five days from now, we're going to blow the whistle on a whole potful of petty thieves and heist artists who have fenced stolen goods here. Including you."

Greenwood's eyes behind the sunglasses narrowed.

"It goes like this," Detective Lane went on. "I submit evidence to the grand jury about some of my patrons here. The grand jury issues suppressed warrants. And on August thirty-first, five days from now, a crew of state, county, and city police will serve the warrants—hit them all at once. Then we'll return all that merchandise you saw in the back room there to its original owners. Those we can locate, anyway."

Greenwood said, "Evidence?"

Lane stood up. "Let me show you something." Keeping his gun trained on Greenwood, he backed to the safe, groped inside it, and came up with a pocket-sized camera and a compact tape recorder. "My partner, Jack Robeson, sits back here at this table and takes pictures of the thieves with this." He tapped the camera. "While I get a taped record of the buys I make out front. Did you notice me scratch my ear

this morning when you were talking to me?"

Greenwood nodded.

"That was a signal to Robeson back here to snap your picture."

Greenwood raised his eyebrows skeptically. "From back here he can take pictures?"

Lane pointed at a panel of glass set into the wall. "Through that," he said. "It's a two-way mirror. Looks like a mirror in the salesroom but clear glass from this side."

"So you have my photograph and a tape of our conversation this morning. Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"That's it, Greenwood. You're a dead pigeon on August thirty-first."

Greenwood ran a hand over his bald head. He was sweating. "You know my name?"

"A license-tag computer check made by the Chicago police at my request this afternoon turned you up in half an hour. You're headed for a long vacation."

Greenwood seemed bewildered. "I don't get it," he said. "I'm usually as sharp as the next guy, but an operation like this must cost a bundle. And I happen to know that the police budget in this two-bit town couldn't run to that kind of money in twenty years!"

Detective Lane said comfortably, "It's cost a lot, sure, but it's also helped us clear up eighty-seven crimes in seven months. Eighty-eight now, with yours. No, we got an angel."

"Who? Somebody with a grudge against thieves?"

Lane's gold tooth showed again. "Would you believe the local service clubs? Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, Elks, Eagles, the whole smear. They've been funding The Swap Shop as their contribution to law and order in this community. Isn't that nice?"

"Wonderful," said Greenwood tightly. "And why are you telling me?"

"So you'll know you're headed straight for the slammer, Greenwood, unless you go for a little proposition I'm going to make you."

Greenwood licked his lips. "Make it," he said.

"O.K. Listen. I'm just a year away from retirement. In one year, I'll be put out to pasture on a lousy little pension that won't even keep me in booze. I've got no savings at all. I've always blown every cent I made. On the other hand, judging from your big talk about Chicago, I figure you've got a nice fat bankroll built up about now, right? Well—"

Lane hesitated and his voice hardened. "All I want from you is a piece of that bankroll to supplement my pension."

Behind his spectacles, Greenwood blinked. There was a long moment of silence. Then Greenwood said, "In return for what?"

"Keeping you out of jail, what else? I'll destroy the negative that has your picture on it. I'll wipe our interview of this morning off the tape. There'll be no evidence against you. None at all. You'll be free to go on supplying some other lucky fence with volume merchandise, as you call it. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Greenwood nodded. "I'm a little shook up all the same. You've got to realize this is a first for me. I've never run into police blackmail before. I've met plenty of cops on the take, sure. But never bare-faced blackmail."

Detective Lane colored and his knuckles turned white on the gun grip. "Let's not call names, Greenwood. Do we deal?"

"What's your price for keeping me out of jail?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

Greenwood pushed back his chair. "How do I know you're not conning me?"

"You don't." The gold tooth peered out at Greenwood. "You'll have to trust me. Is it a deal?"

Greenwood tapped his fingers nervously on the table top. Then he said, "No."

Lane stared incredulously at him. "No?" he echoed. "Are you out of your skull, Greenwood? If you turn me down, you know what comes next, don't you?"

"I suppose you'll have to waste me."

"Right. And you still say no?"

"You couldn't get away with it."

"I couldn't? Look at it this way. I'm a cop. And you're a thief—a thief who tried to rip off the shop here and went for his gun when I caught him at it."

"I haven't got a gun on me, and you know it."

"I've got an extra. Untraceable. You think I couldn't get away with that?"

"Not in a million years. And I'll tell you why. You've made one very big mistake in your figuring. It'll throw the whole story off."

"What mistake?"

"I'm not a thief."

Lane laughed. "If you aren't a thief, what are you, I'd like to know?"

Greenwood said, "I'm the new special investigator working out of the Mayor's office to uncover police corruption in this town. And from the smell in here, I think I've found some." He tossed an identification folder on the table between them.

The policeman glanced at it and his ruddy face went white. It was his turn to have trouble with his breathing. At length he said, "Well, how about that? Now I'll *have* to waste you, little man. The tape will show I thought you were a common thief. And with you gone, who's to prove different?"

"A state trooper named Campbell," said Greenwood. "He has a record of everything we've said here tonight."

Lane's shoulders slumped a little. "You've got a bug in this room?"

Greenwood nodded.

"Where?"

"Under the table."

Lane explored the underside of the table top with his free hand, already convinced that the bug would indeed be there. When his fingers touched it, he drew them back as though he'd burned them. The look he threw at Greenwood was murderous. Automatically, he brought the gun up a fraction.

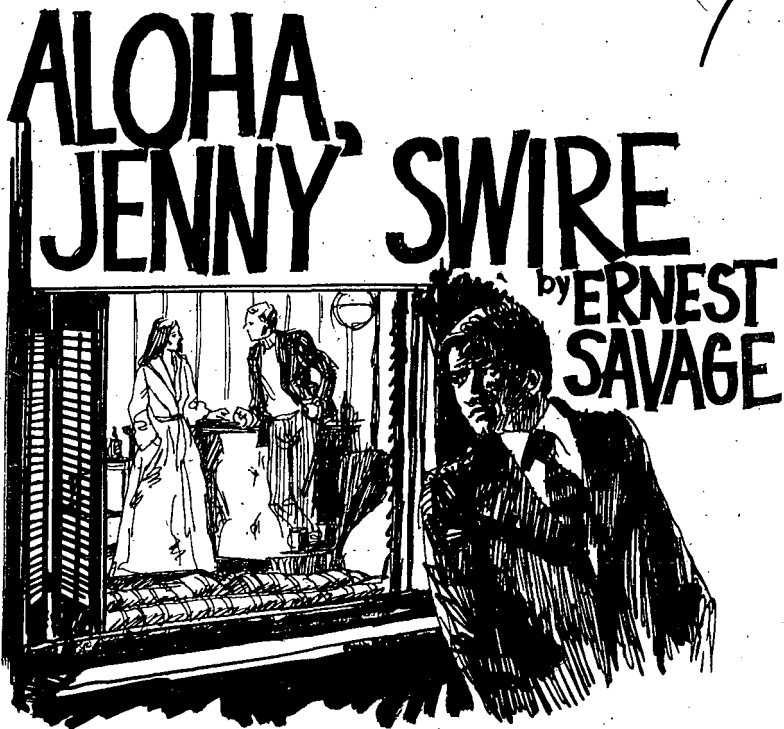
Greenwood recognized that for what it was: a final show of defiance without any will behind it. He said quietly, "A murder charge is the last thing you need on top of everything else, Lane. Why not put the gun down and save us both a lot of grief?"

Lane stared almost vacantly for several long moments at the gun in his fist. Then slowly his fingers uncurled from its butt and he placed it on the table without a word.

Greenwood had a feeling it would be a long time before anyone caught a glimpse of Detective Lane's gold tooth again.

The March issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will be on sale February 16.

She had, for one thing, loved his father more than she loved him . . .



My name is J. P. Franklin—or at least that's what it says on the fly-specked guest register downstairs. I have \$8,700 in cash in my wallet, eight one-thousand-dollar bills, seven one-hundreds, and some change. Thirty days ago I had over a million dollars, but thirty days ago my name was George L. Swire. I had a million dollars, a home, a wife—all that.

Or did I? That's what started it—doubt, the fear that I was losing

them, that they weren't really mine. Oh, the money was mine all right, inherited from my father—stocks, bonds, a lot of solid commercial real estate in Westwood and Santa Monica—no doubt about that since he's been dead for nearly twenty years and I was his sole heir.

Oh, and the boat down at Newport, eighty, ninety thousand bucks' worth of sleek beauty, a gaff-rigged schooner built for high seas and long hauls. Man, how her brightwork glitters in the harbor sun, how she longs to go, a mains'l full of wind. The *Jenny Swire*, she's called, named after my wife of nineteen years. Jenny, still beautiful, but her face fading somehow, as though seen through misty glass. I'll always remember her like that, beautiful and just out of reach, something impenetrable between us.

George L. Swire is at sea now, maybe two to three days from Diamond Head. He left California 22 days ago, aboard the *Sophia M.*, a member of the four-man crew. Captain/Owner Bill McPherson is George L. Swire's friend (sort of) and agent for his considerable insurance needs, about \$20,000 a year in premiums.

George L. Swire, a name I'm tiring of after 43 years.

My Peugeot 604 (the latest "in" car, ladies and gentlemen) is parked ostentatiously at the harbor along with a lot of other cars owned by crew members of the many craft entered in the California-Hawaii race. An honored list of men. My name, George L. Swire, among them. Many aspire to, but few make that list. It takes guts to sail 2,225 miles across the ocean in a small boat—guts I thought I had at first, then prayed I had as Bill and I and the crew practiced for the voyage, and then despaired of ever having as the time to start the race neared.

You must understand something. I love the sea, but I have a bone-deep fear of it, a heart-stopping terror of being out there on a tiny sail-driven chip of wood and brass a thousand miles from anything you can stand still on. The *Jenny Swire* has never been farther away than Catalina Island, four hours on a Sunday afternoon, and sneering at me all the way it seemed, just as her namesake did—both beautiful females, but neither ever having gone anywhere or done anything because I owned them. All of that was in Jenny's eyes as she watched me sweat at the helm, the lee gunwale taking water now and again under a gusting wind. It's inbuilt, that terror, I can't change it, but you can feel the manhood drain out of you in moments like that—and it's a long time coming back, if it ever does.

She flat out didn't believe me when I told her six months ago that I was going to crew on Bill's boat in the Hawaii race. She simply laughed and sort of faded away before my very eyes again—that witch's trick of hers. But she began to change, even take an interest, as I spent more and more time on the boat, practicing navigation and general seamanship, getting the feel of the thing, getting ready for the big run.

That was the thing: the closer race time neared, the more one-day and two-day practice runs I took on the *Sophia M.*, the more nearly Jenny believed and the more nearly a wife she became. Some of those days and nights were the best we ever had together and I was prepared to do anything to keep it like that. Anything.

And other people too—friends, fellow-owners at the marina—began to look at me again as though I were there, as though I were somebody. But Bill, I think, knew I wasn't going to make it even before I did. Bill had said from the beginning that I didn't have enough blue-water experience for the Hawaii run; in fact, that he didn't want me aboard, but I had frankly told him he'd either take me or lose my insurance business, knowing damn well he couldn't afford to.

But deep down, I knew it too, that all those sea runs we'd made, all those overnight forays out past Catalina were the final frayed end of my rope, and I could no more have sailed all the way to Hawaii than I could have walked there. And I can't tell you the quality of the relief I felt when I told Bill I couldn't go three days before the start.

He nearly kissed me. And then he nearly killed me when I told him he would still lose my business unless he agreed to *pretend* I was aboard and carry my name on the crew manifest. I'd worked it out beforehand. The other three members of the crew were kids, young men, part of that army of bronzed young dropouts and drifters and delinquents that infest Newport and San Pedro and probably every other deep-water port up and down the coast. Bill's deal with them was basically a room-and-board affair, with his biggest out-of-pocket expense paying their way back to California after the race. One of them, a black-haired young pirate I knew only as Charlie, had told me that he was going on west from Hawaii, that he had no home in California or anywhere else, and before I talked to Bill I talked to him. I offered him \$2,000 in cash, payable in Hawaii, if he'd assume my name and pretend to be George L. Swire for the trip, and he said that for two

grand he'd burn the *Sophia M.* in midocean and swim to shore.

Bill said there was no way to keep it from leaking out—the other two crew members, for instance, what about them? But I had a limited objective: just to keep Jenny from knowing, or at least knowing for sure. It had been going too well for us lately, better than it had ever gone. I couldn't lose that. I would do anything, spend any money, to keep Jenny's growing respect. Maybe he understood that, maybe he didn't, but he had no choice.

I'd known I wasn't going to make it for at least a week before I told Bill. Maybe I'd known from the first, but anyway I'd already acquired a new identity at some considerable cost—a new driver's license and a new birth certificate in the name of James P. Franklin. They're for sale if you know who to ask and have the price.

My plan (as I told Bill) was to drive the Peugeot down to the marina the night before race day, park it in the lot, rent another car in my new identity, drive down to San Diego, stay there for about three weeks, then fly to Hawaii in time to meet the *Sophia M.* when she arrived. Bill didn't expect to win the race, or even come close. He was doing it just to be doing it, a macho thing, and he figured to finish among the tail-enders, so there wouldn't be too much notice when he arrived. It wouldn't be too difficult for me to switch places with Charlie undetected—it would be more risky at this end. But I told Bill to tell anyone who inquired that I was down below, and my name on the official crew manifest would do the job. I'd already had a word with the other two crew members and some money had changed hands with more promised when it was done, but I didn't tell that to Bill because he didn't need to know. All he needed to know was that if he didn't bring it off \$20,000 in annual premiums hung in the balance, and despite the doubt and disdain in his eyes I knew he'd do his best.

And that's the way it went. I took a small chance by watching the *Sophia M.* leave the harbor, but no one saw me. George L. Swire was officially at sea, heading for Hawaii. And ten minutes later, James P. Franklin was on Interstate 5 heading for San Diego.

I stayed in a cheap motel not far from the Mexican border at Tijuana. My rental car was a Dodge Dart and I hadn't driven a car that small and light since I was a teenager, but a funny thing happened: the more I drove it, the better I liked it, and the longer I stayed in that tacky little motel the more it seemed like home. The

manager and I liked each other right off, had a couple of beers together every afternoon, and in no time at all it was Al and Jim. Jim—not once did I fail to respond to that name, not even the first time. It was like being an actor, I guess, and really living the part, but I began to wonder after eighteen days of it which was the role I was playing and which was the real me. I even began to think of myself as Jim Franklin and it worried me, like I was turning schizoid or something.

On the morning of the nineteenth day I told Al I'd be gone overnight, and I went up to L.A. I didn't tell him why I was going because I didn't really know myself. I just sort of wanted to "touch base," I guess, and that afternoon I drove all over Westwood and Santa Monica looking at the stuff I owned, parking across the street from some of the apartment buildings Dad had bought and just looking at them, almost as though I'd never seen them before. It was weird and a little scary, and after dark I drove out Sunset to Cherry Hill, where I live. I thought maybe a look at the house would bring me back into focus, and it did. It was the only thing I owned that I'd bought myself, that Dad hadn't left me. Maybe that was it—that and the fact that Jenny was there, the lights on all over downstairs.

Cherry Hill is a small colony of expensive homes surrounded by a moatlike arroyo. The same road snaking around the hill leads you in and leads you out. It's very private, each house sited on at least an acre of tree-studded ground, no one place visible from another. I parked the Dart alongside the road and sneaked through my own gate like a thief and took up a spot beside the wall that circled the pool. From there I could see the lighted windows of the living room and den, and Jenny moving about inside.

She loved my father more than she loved me!

The thought roared through my mind as though it had waited for that exact moment to be heard. It shocked and thrilled me, both. Ice rushed up my back. I shivered in the warm evening air. It was the simple ugly truth and nothing in me fought it off. Suddenly I wanted to kill her, take that slender elegant neck and—

I'd been apart from her eighteen days—far longer than ever before—and something in me that couldn't grow in her presence had grown, some monstrous thing. I crawled with it, shook with it.

She had been an airline hostess when she met my father on one of his many flights back East. She wanted to be an actress, he was in the

movie business, it's an old story. He gave her a small part and she bombed in it. But he liked her. He took her with us to Aspen for skiing and to Alaska for hunting and fishing. He took her with us on location trips to Rome, Paris, and London. He took her everywhere with us. He was trying to teach me the business, and how to ski, hunt, fish, and sail, but she was the one who seemed to learn.

I itched with it, ached with it.

Dad was a smaller man than I, shorter, less fleshy, a mongoose-quick man, deadily in business and play. Everything he did he did better than most of the people he did it with, most particularly me. I didn't have his knack for things, his speed, his agility, or his hunger. That was it, he hungered for things, to win, to possess. He *had* to beat you.

I was sweating like a man at his own execution. My twitching fingers had become fists, eager to smash at something. I began pacing alongside the pool, as Jenný, it seemed, was pacing in the house. She had on a loose robe, her long dark hair flowing down her back. If she came outside and turned on the pool lights, she would see me and I would just stand there, but she wouldn't come outside, I knew that. She almost never came outside any more, never swam, never skied, never played tennis. She didn't even come down to see me off on the race. It was as though she were waiting for something or someone, a resurrection maybe.

The thing inside me pounded to get out.

When Dad died I thought the shock would kill her, his end was so unexpected. He just dropped dead one bright sunny afternoon. Heart, they said. He was 45. He left her nothing—except me. She wasn't mentioned at all in his will. I got it all. It surprised us both. For three years they'd been so close. And then nothing.

I looked a lot like Dad in those years. I had his eyes and nose and mouth and wasn't as heavy as I am now. Mom was heavy. I got that from her, as well as most everything else that's me, including her fears. Mom killed herself when I was thirteen, eleven years before Dad died. She didn't belong to his world either. I hadn't thought about her for years.

I moved closer to the house. Jenny was in the den now, at the bar, setting up stuff for drinks. It was a little after nine-thirty. She was dressed as though for bed, but not for sleep. Jenny never drank alone. Probably every night since I'd been gone she'd had a visitor. Probably

Art Somers or Jerry McGill. They'd both been after her for a long time, but neither one had enough money to worry me. Just a lot of heavy macho stuff, especially Jerry. Jerry was the tennis pro at our club, a redhead, tall, rangy, and tough-looking. He wanted to marry her. Jenny told me that about six months ago, just before I began working up the Hawaii thing. Cause and effect, probably, although I hadn't thought about that either. I didn't want to lose her, that's all I knew. If I lost her, I thought, I'd lose touch with everything. She was my connection with the past, with Dad. Without her I'd be without roots.

All of that I'd told myself a thousand times, so why now did I want to kill her, my hands twitching again for the feel of that lovely neck? But I knew that I wouldn't, couldn't. Tears filled my eyes, breaking Jenny into prismatic parts. I'm not a killer. I've got no stomach for violence, or even argument. I don't collect the rent from the hundreds and hundreds of tenants who pay me. I have agents do it. I don't fill the vacancies or throw out the deadbeats or argue over repairs. The agents do it. I just get the money. Lots of it.

Which is why, I told myself standing there, I have that prized woman inside. She needs money—lots of it. That's why she married me, and why she stayed with me. That's why Macho McGill had no chance with her outside of a romp now and again. I'd known that all along, for years. Jerry wasn't the first, he was just the latest. I wiped the tears from my face.

Jenny looked at herself in the mirror behind the bar, fussing with her hair. She went over and put a tape in the stereo, then went back to the bar and glanced at her watch impatiently, her fingers rapping out a tattoo on the polished mahogany surface. He was late, whoever he was.

But not by much. It was McGill. I heard the throaty roar of his old Porsche coming up the road, saw the flash of his lights through the trees as he turned into my drive, and I darted back across the pool deck to the protection of the wall. The rage in me was calmer now and I didn't want to be seen. I was supposed to be in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. I'd almost forgotten that.

She let him in the front door, and they crossed the living room to the den, striding fast, as though mad or in a hurry. He was wearing a pale-green turtleneck sweater and a darker-green jacket. I'd never seen

him in anything but green, except on the courts. He looked good in it.

He went directly to the bar and poured himself a drink, talking all the while, his head snapping with the words. She was facing him from the middle of the room, arms akimbo, a fighting stance I knew too well. I felt a voyeur's excitement at the scene and could almost supply the words for their moving lips. He swallowed half his drink, came around the bar, and took her by the shoulders. "Leave him, for God's sake!" he could be saying. "You don't love him, you never have. He's a slob!"

She broke away from his grip, her left arm swinging wide as though to indicate the room, the house. "Can you give me all this?"

He caught her again. "Can he give you what I can give you? Jenny, we're good together, we need each other, you know that. Divorce him! Take what you can get and come with me."

"Where? Some tacky third-floor apartment? I can't live that way."

"You can't live without love, no one can!"

Again she broke loose. "No, it wouldn't work. He'd fight me every inch of the way. You don't know how he is, how tenacious, how possessive. Besides, he's given me no grounds."

McGill sneered, a disdainful right hand rising. "No grounds? Impotence is grounds and always has been. You've told me a thousand—"

I closed my eyes for a moment, and stopped putting words in their mouths; and how it went, what they really said, I'll never know now. Maybe she said, "He's been getting better lately," but I doubt that. Maybe she said, "He's not quite the washout the world thinks," but I doubt that too.

They circled each other in the middle of the room, arguing fiercely. Then finally he caught her roughly in his arms and kissed her, but her back was stiff with resistance. He said something to her that made her push him violently away, but he kept his grip on her arm and began pulling her toward the side door of the room and out of my sight.

I released a long tense sigh and my eyes swept upward to the dark windows of her bedroom over the den. In a moment the lights came on, glowing dimly around the edges of the drawn drapes. I could see nothing now, imagine nothing.

I began to worry about the Dart parked up on the road. Sometime around 10:30 the private patrol would make its first round of the night and automatically note down the number of any strange car on the hill.

I knew I had to leave, even though I felt rooted there—a cuckold's nightmare. I made myself move and had started around the pool toward the gate when I saw McGill reenter the den on the run. He was alone.

I turned and then crept along the edge of the pool closer to the house. McGill was behind the bar. He poured himself a large drink and downed it in a gulp. He looked agitated, pale, the freckles on his face standing out even at that distance. Then he wiped the glass in his hand with a paper towel from beneath the bar. He wiped it very carefully, then the bottles he'd handled, then the edge of the bar, all the way around it. Then he stood in the center of the room and studied it carefully, his eyes sweeping it slowly and looking for an instant, it seemed, into mine. But I didn't budge. I glanced upstairs at Jenny's windows. The lights still glowed dimly, but I knew, I knew—

I couldn't budge. I watched McGill leave the den, cross the living room to the front entry, pause there, and look around again. Then he turned and went out of my sight. A moment later I heard his car start in the parking area out front and leave, easing itself away like a cat.

When I could move, my knees just barely holding me up, I went around back to the mud-room door and let myself in with a key. I went up the back stairs to the central hall and through Jenny's open bedroom door. She was lying on her back alongside her writing desk and she was dead, as I'd known she would be.

I didn't want to touch her, and I didn't need to. There was nothing I could do for her. She had fallen and hit the base of her skull against the corner of the desk. She had fallen because McGill had hit her or pushed her or thrown her.

I don't know why I did what I did next, and I still don't. I went to her dressing room and rifled her jewel box, leaving the junk but taking the good stuff, about \$20,000 worth. Her best pieces were in the bank vault downtown. Then, with a sudden rush of cold sweat, I remembered about fingerprints—as McGill had done—and went back over everything I'd touched. I'd left fresh prints all over the place, and that couldn't be—I was at sea, I hadn't been here for three weeks, and they can tell from a print how old it is.

I looked at her again, feeling less sick now. With death, her beauty had seemed to leave her, as though animation had been her secret.

I rifled her purse of its cash and messed up the room as though a

fight had taken place there. Then I turned off her lights and went down the back stairs, through the kitchen to the den, and opened the wall safe behind the portrait of my father. I'd kept \$10,000 in cash there for years, along with various papers. I took the money and left the papers, then rifled my desk, taking nothing but, being careful of prints, making it look as though thieves had been at work.

When I left through the front door it was 10:20. As I turned onto Sunset after passing through the Cherry Hill gates, I saw the private patrol car slowing to make its turn.

I took the San Diego Freeway south to the Laguna Beach cutoff and went over to the coast. I had a steak in an all-night restaurant on the Coast Highway, and enjoyed it. I like food. I like to prepare it and eat it. I'm a good cook. I make as good a Caesar salad as La Rue makes.

After I ate, I went down to the beach and stood by a large outcropping of rock, looking at the night-dark sea. It was as nearly calm as it ever gets, the tide at ebb. Somewhere out there the *Sophia M.* was plying its way to Hawaii, me aboard. It didn't matter any more that Jenny believed that, but Lord, how it would matter that the police believed it. I had not let myself think too much about that, but a little later I wouldn't think about anything else.

On the radio coming down I'd heard that the leaders in the race were 300 to 400 miles from Diamond Head, two to three days away depending on the wind. The *Sophia M.* hadn't been mentioned, but that didn't surprise me.

I took Jenny's jewels from my pocket one at a time and threw them as far out into the water as I could. Maybe they'd be found someday, maybe not. I don't know why I did it. About 200 yards south of me on the beach some people were clustered around a fire and rock music drifted up to me on the soft night air.

I landed in Honolulu a day and a half later on Sunday afternoon. It was raining, but that isn't unusual in Hawaii. I checked into a fourth-rate hotel off Ala Moana Boulevard, not far from the harbor. I was James P. Franklin, a nobody, and I looked and felt it. I was exhausted from lack of sleep.

The next morning, just after dawn, the lead boat in the race passed Makapou Point. It rounded Diamond Head at noon and tacked up

Mamala Bay. I was watching her through binoculars from Kapiolani Park, just below the Head, and it made me sick for I had no plan, nor a hope of one. Before, it had been a game. If I lost it, well, I would lose face and probably Jenny, but I had had little face left to lose, and little of Jenny either. Now I would lose my life—for had I not framed myself perfectly for murder?

I had thought at first that I could rent a small cruiser, hover off Makapou Point, and intercept the *Sophia M.*, trading places with Charlie at sea, but that would work—if it worked at all—only until Bill learned of Jenny's murder. Then he would have no part of the deception, for he and Charlie and the others all would be accessories to her killing and no money could buy Bill for that role.

I waited.

The boats kept coming in all through the next two days, and then a storm at sea delayed the rest. I began staying in my hotel room, listening to the radio, going out only for meals at a little diner up the street, and for papers. By Wednesday night there'd still been no report of Jenny's death, even in the *Los Angeles Times*; but that was the Tuesday edition, I reminded myself. I couldn't remember when the cleaning people came, whether it was Wednesday or Thursday, or either one. Jenny had been in charge of all that. We had no live-in servants, and only a weekly cleaning service; but maybe, I thought helplessly, they were all on vacation.

But on Thursday there was news—not about Jenny, but about the *Sophia M.* She was lost at sea. She and two other boats had been caught in one of those sudden vicious Pacific storms. A Navy escort vessel had picked up some survivors, so far unidentified, but most had been lost. Navy air and sea rescue units were scouring the area, 150 miles east of the islands. Reports would be issued hourly.

I heard all this over the radio in the diner. It was raining heavily outside and the proprietor and I were alone in the place. I had been talking to him about his food, making suggestions.

I stayed there most of the afternoon and then went back to my room. By eight o'clock that night the survivors had been brought to a hospital on Oahu and their names released. I knew none of them. The *Sophia M.* and the *Sea Scuttler* had gone down at once. Two members of the *Scuttler's* crew had been saved. The third boat had been dismantled and generally torn up. It was being towed to port. By midnight

there was no further news, but the search would go on for days.

I waited. I ate, and I waited. Sunday evening I was in the diner when the Navy announced the end of the search. In all, seven men had been lost. George L. Swire was dead.

The proprietor and I had been talking again. His name was Sam. I hadn't told him mine yet. I did then. I stuck out my hand and said, "My name's Jim Franklin." I liked the sound of it. I always had, but suddenly it seemed more real, final.

We talked a little longer about his place and about food. A little later he offered me a job, and I took it at once. I'd been fishing for it, I realized; I wanted to be a sandwich-and-salad man. I wanted to prepare good food for other people to eat. Maybe I'd wanted to all my life. I wasn't sure about that Sunday night, but I was the next day when I read the story in the Saturday edition of the *Los Angeles Times*.

It was the story of George L. Swire's loss at sea. In an interview with Mrs. George L. Swire about the tragic death of her husband Mrs. Swire—Jenny Swire—said that her heart was broken, that her husband had been a man among men. She said, in response to a question, that the bandage on the back of her head was the result of a fall she'd taken a few days before, but it was nothing as compared to her present grief. She held out the hope that her husband would yet be found; he was not a man to die easily, she had said with tears in her eyes.

I put the paper down. Maybe I'd thought she was dead that night because I'd wanted her dead. But it didn't matter now. I had work to do. The noon crowd would soon be in and Jim Franklin had food to fix, a job to do.

I make a hell of a sandwich and a hell of a salad and I've never felt better in my life.

Aloha.



Is there any love more devoted than puppy love? . . .

THE OTHER HALF

by
**PATRICK
SCAFFETTI**



The day after I turned seventeen I landed a job as busboy/janitor on the midnight-to-eight shift at the Round-the-Clock Restaurant, a small greasy spoon in the middle of the city. Two-fifty an hour and a percentage of the tips wasn't too bad for a high school dropout, but I would have cleared those tables for free just for the thrill of being around Sheila Link.

Sheila was the only waitress who worked the graveyard shift at the

Round-the-Clock, and what I felt for her can't be put in words. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen—twenty-three years old, five-four, and nicely rounded where it counts. She had shoulder-length auburn hair so shiny and bouncy it should have been in a shampoo commercial. Her big brown eyes made my insides do a dance every time she looked in my direction. She had a perfect nose, great skin, sparkling teeth, fantastic lips. I fell for her the instant I spotted her carrying a B-L-T to a customer.

The pay and Sheila were the only good things about working at Round-the-Clock, but I wasn't in any position to be choosy. I'd quit school in the middle of the eleventh grade. I'd been tossing around the idea of becoming a writer and figured there was a lot more to life than could be learned wedged into a carved-up wooden desk. No one put up much of a fuss when I left. The teachers didn't care—their classrooms were overcrowded to begin with. My father had taken off when I was three years old, and all my mother had to say was, "Well, Cliff, it's your life. You ought to know better than anybody else what's best for you." Whether she was right or wrong I still don't know, but I left school and ended up at the Round-the-Clock.

Gus Contini owned the restaurant and by the way he bossed Sheila and me around you'd think he was running some class joint instead of a hole-in-the-wall with six booths and six stools. He did all the cooking at night, and his wife took over for him during the day. When he wasn't frying a hamburger or slapping together a sandwich, Gus liked to shoot the bull with the customers or hustle Sheila and me to work faster.

After a few weeks of cleaning tables, washing floors, and running errands, I got to know a few of the regular customers pretty well. Our shift was never too busy, but we had enough customers to make it worth Gus's while to stay open. A lot of the night owls were derelicts or drifters, but we had our share of regulars too. Most of them worked nights somewhere downtown and stopped in for their coffee breaks.

None of the regulars stayed around for more than half an hour with one exception. We knew him as Joe. He was a tall man, skinny to the point of being bony, but good-looking in a gaunt, pale sort of way. He must have been close to thirty, but he dressed in the latest clothes the teenagers were wearing, and nothing he wore looked cheap. His wavy blond hair was always perfectly styled as though he'd just climbed out of a barber's chair.

Joe came into the Round-the-Clock two or three nights a week, usually well after midnight. He drank cup after cup of black coffee and chain-smoked menthol cigarettes. Most of the time he sat alone in the corner booth, but every hour or so a different woman would wander in, join him for a few minutes of whispered conversation, then hurry back into the night. According to Gus, this had been going on long before I showed up.

Gus was always polite to him, but I knew that he wished Joe would spend his time elsewhere. One morning shortly after Joe left, Gus grumbled that he was nothing but a pimp and the girls who visited him at the restaurant were his hookers. Even though I'd grown up in the city, I was still naive enough to be shocked and a little awed.

But there was one habit of Joe's that set my blood to boiling, and that was the way he stared at Sheila. His eyes traced every square inch of her as though he were looking at some sculpture in a museum. When she refilled his coffee cup, he'd have this half smile on his face that made me want to punch him out on the spot, especially if what Gus claimed was true. Sheila wasn't that kind of girl.

Sheila knew how to handle Joe though. Most of the time she acted as if he wasn't even there. He'd signal for more coffee, and she'd bring it to him without changing her expression or saying a word. She was never outright rude to him, but she sure didn't go out of her way to make him feel welcome even though he often left a two- or three-dollar tip.

One Friday morning Joe showed up shortly after one. The only other customer in the place was a tired drunk hunched over a plate of scrambled eggs. I was washing the tables and Sheila was perched on a stool smoking a cigarette when he walked in and headed for his corner table. Sheila filled a cup with coffee and brought it to him. He gave her his half smile and mumbled something under his breath. Sheila shot him a glance that could kill, then turned and stomped back to her stool.

About ten minutes later Joe rapped the table with his knuckles, which was his way of asking for a refill. Looking bored to death, Sheila carried the pot to his table and poured the coffee. Joe started talking to her, and I was surprised when Sheila stuck around to listen. Joe slid his wallet from his back pocket, took out a bill, and ripped it in half. One half went back into his wallet and the other half he pushed into

Sheila's apron pocket. Then he began writing on a book of matches. Sheila had an indignant look on her face, but she stayed put. A few seconds later, he dropped the matches into her apron pocket and let his half smile grow into a full-fledged leer.

Sheila spun around and stormed back to her stool, looking mad as the devil. Not much longer after that Joe got up and left. The minute he was out the door Sheila came over to the table I was scrubbing. "The nerve of that creep," she said. "Who the hell does he think he is anyway?"

I was a little knocked off balance by Sheila talking to me. Usually she acted as though I was just another stool in the place and paid no attention to me. Every time I tried to start a conversation, she'd only grunt or give me a one-word answer. Now my heart took off at a mile a minute. I was glad Joe had given her something to complain about.

"What happened?" I asked, trying to look both sympathetic and strong.

She whipped the torn bill and the matchbook from her pocket and tossed it on the damp table. I nearly passed out when I saw the half of a hundred-dollar bill. The rip went right across Benjamin Franklin's face.

"That jerk tore the hundred bucks in half and told me to come and see him whenever I wanted the other half. What does he think I am anyway? I told him I'm not like the girls he's always got hanging around him here. I told him I'm a decent working girl." Even with her face blotched with anger she was a knockout.

I picked up the matchbook. The cover had an ad for a school where they trained you to get a high-paying job in electronics. There was a small order form on the inside, and Joe had printed the name of the Demarest Apartment Building and the number 402.

"The crud even gave me his apartment number so I'd know where to go for the other half," sputtered Sheila. "I should've poured the coffee right over his stinking head. It would've served him right."

I felt that I should offer her advice on what to do or at least promise to tear the louse limb from limb, but instead I stood there like a stump, breathing in the smell of her perfume, weak from being so close to her.

"Not that I couldn't use an extra hundred bucks," Sheila went on. "Hell, who couldn't? A single girl doesn't have such a rosy time of it

like some people might think."

She snatched up the torn bill and the matchbook and shoved them back into her apron. "Boy, I'd like to get the other half of that bill," she said. "I wish there was some way I could steal it right out from under his nose." She turned and walked away.

The rest of the night Sheila was her old self again, ignoring me and half-heartedly flirting with the regular customers. I couldn't get over what an idiot I'd been. I'd lost the golden opportunity to show her how much she meant to me. Somehow, I had to make up for my stupidity.

The idea came to me that same morning after work as I walked the mile back to my mother's house. If I could get the other half of that hundred-dollar bill, Sheila would know how much I was willing to risk for her. She'd made it clear that she could use the extra money. I'd get the half back somehow and give it to her with no strings attached, then sort of casually ask for a date. There'd be no way on earth she could turn me down. Before long she'd forget all about the six years she had on me.

It shouldn't be too hard to get the other half of the bill, I told myself. I'd just have to sneak into Joe's apartment when he was asleep and slip it out of his wallet. I knew that pimps could be dangerous, but for Sheila I was willing to take the chance.

I cut over a few blocks to the Demarest Apartments. It was out of my way, but I wanted a look at what I was going to tackle. The Demarest was an old brown building with five stories and a series of fire escapes zigzagging up the side. Joe's apartment number, 402, put him on the fourth floor. Once I found out exactly where 402 was situated, all I'd have to do was sneak up the fire escape to his window and pry it open. No sweat, I thought. The only hard part would be breaking in when Joe was asleep.

I decided to try for the torn bill that night before going to work. If Joe was out or if he wasn't asleep, I'd at least be familiar with the layout of his place for the next time.

I headed home and crawled into bed just as the sun was coming into its own. I had a rough time sleeping. Every time I drifted off, images of Sheila or Joe or the torn bill popped up to nudge me awake. I saw myself shot by Joe or locked up in jail. But there were also scenes of Sheila's joy when I gave her the other half of the bill. In the last

dream, I was alone with Sheila and she was showing me how grateful she was. When I finally got up at two-thirty, that dream stuck in my mind and I was more determined than ever to break into Joe's apartment for the torn bill.

During the afternoon I went over the plan in my head again and again. Everything hinged on Joe being home and asleep. That would be the only way I could get at his wallet. He lived at night, which meant he had to sleep during the day. But when?

Late in the afternoon, I walked back to the Demarest, went up the front steps, and into the dimly lit lobby. No one was in sight. I crossed the shabby brown carpeting to the elevator, punched the 4 button, and rode the creaking box to Joe's floor.

There were five doors spaced along the hallway. 402 was the second door from the left. I took a few seconds to get my bearings, then figured that Joe's apartment looked out over the alley. That would make it a lot easier to sneak up the fire escape without being spotted.

I rode back down to the lobby, went outside, and walked to the back of the building. Joe's window was shut and dark. I considered breaking in right then but squelched the idea. There was too big a chance that someone would see me in the daylight. If things didn't work out that night, I'd risk it the next afternoon.

I returned to the Demarest that night at ten-thirty. Walking alone in the city after dark isn't the smartest thing in the world to do, but I'd been doing it regularly since I was a kid. Still, this was the first time I'd ever done it with a crime of my own in mind and I felt nervous creeping around the moonlit alley.

Joe's window had not changed since the afternoon—it was still closed and dark. I took the screwdriver I'd brought from home out of my pocket and started up the fire escape. It was made of rusted metal, and each step I took clanged in my head like a gong. I ducked down low when I passed the windows on the first three landings, expecting to hear someone cry "Burglar" at any moment, then finally I was on the narrow platform under Joe's window. I looked over the railing into the alley. Trash cans and litter were everywhere. Off to my left the headlights of a car flashed past as it drove past the end of the alley. All of the windows of the facing office building were dark except for one. Through that window I could see a janitor pushing a broom. I prayed he wouldn't look across the alley.

As quietly as I could, I tried to raise Joe's window. It slid up with a soft scraping sound and I almost laughed with relief at my good fortune. When it was open wide enough for me to slip through, I reached in, parted the white curtains, and peered into the living room. It looked expensively furnished and neat except for a pile of clothes scattered near a doorway to the left.

I stuck my leg through the window and in a minute was standing in the apartment. I searched the living room on the off-chance Joe might have left his wallet lying there. No luck. As softly as ice melting, I tiptoed over to the pile of clothes and squinted into the next room.

Joe was lying alone on a double bed. A blanket covered him to his waist, and his hairless chest was bare. His breathing was regular. Every time he exhaled a low rumble came from his throat. On the bedside table was his wallet, a handful of change, and a silver watch.

I held my breath and crept across to the nightstand. When I finally had the leather wallet in my hands, my fingers shook as I spread the bill compartment and felt inside. I thumbed over the thick layer of bills until I touched ragged edges. I pulled at them and three half bills came out. Two were halves of fifties, one was half of a hundred.

Well, at least Sheila rated fifty bucks more than the others, I thought as I replaced the two torn bills and placed the wallet back on the nightstand. I started back toward the door. I could hardly wait to get back to the Round-the-Clock and Sheila. All I had to do was crawl back out the window and I'd be home free.

I was halfway across the living room when a roar of rage shattered the silence. I wheeled around in terror. Joe was standing in the doorway wearing only baggy pajama bottoms. His right arm was raised and a knife glinted in the pale moonlight.

I dashed toward the window just as Joe pounced. He slipped on the carpeting and nearly fell. I had one leg out the window when he grabbed my arm and yanked me back into the apartment. A sharp pain bit into my shoulder and I felt something warm trickle down my back. I shoved him with all my strength and he staggered backwards onto the couch. I dove out the window, but Joe was up in a flash and right behind me, gripping my arm and spinning me around. He backed me up against the fire-escape railing and blocked the steps. His face was twisted as he lunged again with the knife. I jumped to the side and he went over the railing and smashed onto the ground below.

I peered down into the alley. He had fallen near some garbage cans. His left leg stuck out at an angle from his body. I ran down the fire escape as if all hell was chasing me. I didn't stop to examine Joe, but his moans followed me onto the street.

Something moist was clutched in my hand. The half of the hundred-dollar bill. I'd forgotten about it. My shoulder began to throb with pain. I reached back and felt the wound. The cut was not very deep.

I hurried through the dark city, trying to convince myself the world would be better off if Joe died, but I realized that I didn't want that on my conscience. I stopped at the next phone booth I saw, deposited two dimes, and dialed the police. A man's voice answered. "Police Department," Sergeant Fenton speaking.

I drew in a shaky breath and said, "There's a man hurt in the alley behind the Demarest Apartment Building." Then I hung up.

I glanced at my watch. It was eleven-ten. I had just enough time to go home, bandage my shoulder, and change shirts.

Forty minutes later I turned the corner and headed toward the Round-the-Clock. I hoped that Sheila was already there. I was bursting to give her the missing half of her bill.

I was almost to the restaurant when the glass door flew open and Sheila came out, looking beautiful under the neon sign. She looked back and shouted inside, "I don't give a damn who waits tables tonight, Gus—I'm through working for peanuts in this crummy joint!" She let the door slam shut and started down the street toward me.

"Sheila, what happened?" I asked.

"I quit, that's what happened. I've been dumb long enough. I should have left months ago."

"You can't quit now!" I said. "What are you going to do for a living?"

"I'm not worried about that any more. I'll be taken care of."

"What do you mean?"

"If you must know, I'm on my way to meet Joe and get the other half of that hundred bucks. And there's plenty more where that came from."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. My world was flashing TILT.

"And not by doing what you're thinking either. I talked to Joe this afternoon. He told me he's in love with me—that's why he kept coming back to this dump."

"But, Sheila—"

"But nothing. Go soak your head." Sheila stepped around me and headed down the street. I watched her until she turned the corner. I didn't know whether to cry or run after her.

After a minute I dug the half of the hundred-dollar bill out of my pocket, took a long look at it, and let it slip from my fingers. It drifted several feet in the light breeze before twirling to the sidewalk. There it skittered along the pavement like a crab looking for shelter until it disappeared into the litter at the curb.



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Victor Stabile
Vice President and Treasurer

With what dreadful curiosity did he pursue Mr. Brownedene . . .

AN ACT OF KINDNESS



We were alone in a compartment of an old-fashioned coach on a small local train. The tall dark-haired man in the corner seat opposite mine stood up and began to take off his jacket. It wasn't a hot day—in fact it was cold for early autumn, and of course the train was unheated. He said:

"I should advise you to follow my example, sir, and then lie on the seat."

He wrapped the jacket round his head, lay down extended at full length, and mumbled:

"In three minutes from now, there is going to be an accident—the engine and the train will leave the rails, and this carriage will roll down the embankment."

I'm traveling with a lunatic, was my first thought, and he must have divined it, for he said:

"No, sir. I'm not mad, but I happen to be able to see ahead. Please take my advice. I'm not a practical joker either."

His voice was steady and serious, and although I hesitated I too removed my jacket, wrapped my head in it, and stretched out on my seat.

"How soon do you expect—" I began, when he snapped, rather rudely:

"Please shut up and don't unwrap that jacket."

And then it happened.

I heard a shattering crash, and then I was on the floor of the compartment. The carriage reeled. I was whirled round and round, while splinters of glass flew about, and I heard a lot of screaming. Then I lost consciousness.

I don't know how long I was unconscious, but when I came to I was lying in a field. All about me, piled up, was the dismal wreckage of the train and, some little way off, flames were spouting from the oil tanks of the locomotive that had hauled it. The man who had shared my compartment and warned me of the impending disaster was holding a flask to my mouth.

I took a swallow, and nearly choked. He said, with a polite smile, "I always carry a little brandy. Best restorative I know. How are you feeling?"

"Dizzy," I said, and tried to rise, but he restrained me.

"Lie for a bit," he advised. "Best thing for shock. I don't suffer from it myself since I know what to expect."

"The devil you *do*!" I exclaimed. "May I ask how?"

"Not now, not now," he answered impatiently. "Just stay there. I must lend a hand with the others. I'll be back presently."

He walked off, and I watched him helping to free people from shattered carriages. I was too weak and shaken to get up, but presently I managed to kneel, then decided that I'd better stay where I was until I

regained control of my legs. But I didn't regain control. After a long time, or so it seemed, I was lifted onto a stretcher and carried away. But my dark-haired friend stopped the bearers and said:

"You'll be all right—there's nothing broken—but you're in shock."

"Look," I said; "I owe you something—what's your name?"

He took out a note case and handed me a card.

"You'd better forget all about it," he advised.

But I didn't.

I soon recovered. They kept me in hospital for a day, and then I was sent home, feeling a bit shaken but otherwise all right. I wanted to meet that man again, and the card he'd given me had John Browndene engraved on it—no address, only the name of a club. I happened to know the club, and as some very touchy people, mostly connected with the law, belong to it, I won't mention the name. But many of the members have rather strange and unusual hobbies and specialities. I'd been taken to lunch there twice by an old friend who was a barrister. The general impression you got from seeing the members was that they were nearly all elderly and a bit grumpy. They seldom spoke to each other. It is the quietest club I've ever visited.

I decided to write to John Browndene, and three weeks passed before I received his reply. It was coldly formal and distinctly off-putting.

"Dear Sir," it began. "I have your letter, and can assure you that I neither expect nor desire any thanks for the warning that I felt obliged to give you. Normally, I never disclose such matters, and while some people would think that prevision must be an advantage I regard it as an affliction. We will leave it at that, if you please."

But I couldn't. An abnormally courteous man might have respected such an emphatic brushoff, but although I'm not a connoisseur or a collector of mysteries, they nag at me: I must know what happened and why. So I wrote again to Mr. Browndene.

This time a month passed before I heard from him.

"Dear Sir," he wrote. "Naturally I knew that you were persistent, and I am now paying the inevitable price for breaking my own rules of conduct. I dislike writing letters, so perhaps you may find it convenient to lunch with me at my club, on any of the following dates." He gave me a choice of five.

A fortnight later I sat in a quiet corner of the smoking room of his

club, digesting an excellent lunch and waiting for a long silence to end. He had taken control of my curiosity as soon as he'd ordered lunch.

"I'll answer questions later," he said, "but only after we have eaten and I've explained what is probably puzzling you."

He had given me an excellent cigar, but eagerness to hear what he had to say diminished my enjoyment of it. I found the oppressive silence unbearable, and at last I broke it and said:

"I suppose you have what has been called 'second sight.'"

"Nothing of the kind," he snapped. "*That* is a primitive survival, and totally different from my affliction."

"Affliction!" I exclaimed. "Surely it has advantages—"

He interrupted, irritably. "It's a disease," he said. And I remembered a tale I'd read as a boy in an old copy of *The Strand Magazine*, dating from the 1890s, called *A Man with a Malady*, and the cumulative misery it brought to a man who could foresee the future—a tragic, unforgettable tale. James F. Sullivan was the author's name.

"Have you ever heard of a prophet who was a happy man?" he went on. "No, of course you haven't. They nearly always foretell woe and disaster—simply because disasters and misfortunes make a greater impact on the human mind than happy events. You see, they *know*. They have accurate knowledge of what the future holds, and for them the future is already fixed—immovable and inescapable."

"But—"

"Don't interrupt," he said. "I *know* precisely and exactly what is coming. You don't. Men are secretly afraid of what the future may hold: they would be terrified if they really knew for certain what was going to happen."

I was silent, for what he said about a static unalterable future was something I found almost impossible to believe.

"I shall not attempt to convince you," he said. "You will be far more comfortable and better equipped to lead a normal and reasonably contented life if you remain ignorant of what lies before you."

At that I protested: "Even allowing for the disadvantages—and I can see that for a nervous man there might be many—the advantages must be staggering. You could acquire relatively enormous wealth."

He gave me a long cold look.

"I have already done so," he said. "But no amount of wealth can buy peace of mind or hope or confidence or unbroken healing dreamless

sleep at night. Sometimes for a few blessed moments I forget what's going to happen and become a normal man again, but never for long. Occasionally I also forget to keep silent about my powers—as I did when I warned you about that impending train disaster.”

“Surely that means you are able to interfere with preordained events,” I said. “If you warned me, surely you could warn others.”

“Yes, I could,” he agreed, “but I don’t. You see, I *knew* that you and I would both survive that train disaster. If I’d known that you were going to be fatally injured I’d have said nothing. I can’t interfere with or alter the course of events.”

“Then there wasn’t much point in warning me about an accident that was going to happen,” I objected.

He almost smiled, then said:

“I told you that I sometimes revert and become a normal human being.”

There was a long pause before I ventured to say:

“You probably find questions unwelcome, but I *am* a normal human being and am therefore tempted to ask a few. First of all, how far can you see ahead?”

“I prefer not to answer that.”

“But at least you can say whether it’s a long way ahead.”

“It can’t exceed my own lifetime.”

“So you know how long you’re going to live.”

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“Far longer than you—many many years longer than you. But I refuse to be tricked into specific statements about times and events. Now, sir, that’s enough.”

But it wasn’t enough for me. At the risk of being considered ill-mannered, I persisted.

“I suppose that some of the priests who served the Delphic oracle had this gift,” I said.

“Obviously,” he agreed.

“And the great Hebrew prophets.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“But don’t you use it—” I began, then realized I was about to ask a silly question. Clearly he *had* used it to acquire the wealth he’d admitted possessing. I hesitated, then went on.

"You said just now that you don't warn anyone about the future. Don't you even warn your friends of troubles ahead?"

"I have no friends," he replied. "Not now. When you know what people are going to do, what motives impel their actions or make them refrain from action, you end up by despising the trivial and selfish impulses they like to regard as good and sensible reasons. I no longer respect my fellow men. I seek the company of strangers, always with caution but hoping, always hoping, that I shall find some well balanced disinterested mind. And when I do—which is very seldom—I have to cut short the acquaintance, as my infernal gift of prevision enables me to know what will happen in a few years' time and how the new friend will change and be transformed into something that I should find repellent. You, sir, are an acquaintance. Your persistence is responsible for our meeting here today, and I only consented to the meeting because I knew you would insist on it. Also you have a reasonably well balanced mind, though certainly not a disinterested mind. You are profoundly concerned with the future, and even apprehensive about it. You have good reason to be." He stopped abruptly.

I found myself reluctant to ask the obvious question, and as I hesitated he said: "I should not have mentioned your future."

"Well, you've done so now and you might as well go on," I told him. He shook his head and said that he would not be so unkind.

"It is hardly an act of kindness to leave me in doubt," I observed.

I saw him glance at the clock above the mantelpiece.

"Surely you can tell me how long I've got," I persisted.

"I can, and I'm not going to," he answered.

That lunch took place seven weeks ago, and I haven't had a proper night's sleep since. There was something deadly plausible and convincing about John Browndene's account of his gift—or his curse, whatever you care to call it—but I can't take any more suspense. I've had enough. I have found some relief in writing this account, for I am an author by trade. But this is the last thing I shall ever write. I have arranged for a copy to be sent to my lawyers and another to John Browndene, who began all the trouble and might as well know the end of it. Though of course he does know the end of it. So call it what you will. Call it my last story, call it a report, or call it, as the Coroner probably will, a suicide note.

Somebody's eye was on The Sparrow . . .

FLIGHT OF THE SPARROW



He examined the face critically, his appraising eyes taking in every metallic feature. The verdict was damning.

The scratch started a millimeter below Liberty's eye, cut straight down her cheek, sliced across her neck and through her dress, and nicked the top of the 7 in 1799.

No scratch had been mentioned two years earlier in the auction catalogue's description of the U.S. Large Cent—no imperfection of any

kind. "Red uncirculated," the catalogue had said. "Well-struck 1799-over-98 rarity. A superb specimen from the Brasyer Collection."

It was red, a deep uncirculated copper red, evenly colored and perfectly struck. There was no question about that. The aloof Miss Liberty, her bust chastely draped, had never looked better—except for that scratch. The restruck 9 over 8 in the date showed clearly even without the magnifier.

But the coin was spoiled by its flaw: a fatal flaw, an infuriating flaw. It was no bargain-basement coin, no throwaway even in its marred state, but it was not a connoisseur's item either, not a superb specimen. The scratch was deep, narrow, soul-lacerating.

Jago Strand, precise as an assayer in his movements, placed the coin on the top of his portable tabletop desk. His hands moved slowly in soft plastic gloves, surgeon's gloves, as he rubbed a speck of dust off the desk's polished ebony surface. Setting an attached magnifier aside, he snapped off the high-intensity lamp beside it, removed his gloves, and took a long sip of Scotch.

He still had work to do, but it looked as if the work would be anticlimactic. He had hoped for a better night. The 1799-over-98 was the only coin of the seven that really made a difference. A key coin, a true rarity in uncirculated condition, it had been tonight's single target. It was intended to upgrade his U.S. Large Cent collection, to replace his Extremely Fine 9-over-8, a dark-brown cent that had once belonged to a retired Army colonel in East Tennessee. For two years Strand had wanted an uncirculated 9-over-8. Now he had it. But there was no way at all for this damaged Miss Liberty, gorgeous as she once must have been, to replace the colonel's lady—the scratch took care of that.

And because of the scratch, she would be dangerous to sell to a dealer. She was rare enough to be watched for. She was unique, in fact, in her present condition. A marked woman.

Strand knew he could dispose of the coin, but not across the counter. Not in person. He could sell it by mail to H. M. Luker, the discreet shadowy figure with an unlisted phone number and an unadvertised post office box in Cincinnati. But the value of the coin would be heavily discounted.

He could mail it to Luker, no questions asked, no explanations given, and receive a money order for maybe a thousand dollars. He would get his payment by return mail, care of General Delivery—where?—

well, Pittsburgh would be convenient. He gave the idea some thought.

Leaning back in his desk chair at the Lord Hewitt Hotel, Jago Strand stretched his legs and studied the reflection of his face in the mirror. It was an ordinary face, a man-in-the-crowd face, the kind no one remembered. An ideal face for anonymity, it had served him well for most of his life. He was forty-eight, and he had been on the road, solitary and single-minded, for twenty-five years.

"The Sparrow," they called him in police circles, perhaps because he flitted in through windows opened with the aid of a glass-cutter and a suction cup or more likely because once inside a house or apartment he never took more than ten coins, and seldom that many, no matter how large or dazzling the collection. It was his self-imposed limit. The numismatic journals, also struck by his tiny appetite, picked up the nickname "The Sparrow."

He stared hard at his reflected image. His face was round and unsparrowlike. Moon-shaped, with rimless glasses over wide brown eyes, it was a face without distinction—but also without post-office notoriety. It was a face without a printed number, or a distinguishing-marks notation, or a list of federal offenses, or a string of known aliases. It was a face that could and did stay out of trouble.

But it was a face alive with purpose, if anyone had stopped to notice, which fortunately for the success of his enterprises no one did—at least no one who mattered.

Jago Strand, endowed with intelligence but little formal schooling, had always liked charitable gestures and a certain kind of drama. Tonight was a time for both. He took a small Jiffy shipping bag from one of the many compartments in his suitcase and, copying from his notebook, wrote out a name and address on it in a large childish script. The name was Reuben Armitage, and the address was a local one, a few miles from the hotel.

Until two hours ago Reuben Armitage had been the owner of the scratched Large Cent. Armitage had bought it for twenty thousand dollars at the New York auction disposing of the Brasyer estate. Strand pasted a fifty-cent stamp on the shipping bag and printed **FIRST CLASS—SURPRISE!** underneath it. He laid the bag on the hotel's TV set, to be mailed in the morning.

Next he opened a miniature leather wallet holding six other coins he had taken from the Armitage display case. Pulling on his gloves, mov-

ing the magnifier back in place, and snapping on the lamp, he started through his lesser gains.

The first three, all 1794 Large Cents, were in Very Good to Fine condition, desirable coins but fairly common and easy to sell to a legitimate dealer.

The fourth coin surprised him. A 1795 Large Cent, Lettered Edge, it had looked ordinary in the dim light of the Reuben Armitage library, but now it appeared to be an uncirculated specimen, almost as choice as the 9-over-8—and minus the scratch. Strand examined it minutely, skeptically at first, then appreciatively. Armitage had never displayed or acknowledged ownership of this coin, and Strand wondered why. He whistled softly. No minor item, this.

The last two Large Cents were not worth much: a 1796 "Liberty" Error in Fair condition and a counterfeit Chain Type 1793. He wondered if Armitage had known the 1793 was a phony. He supposed so. The distinguished old judge, a contributor to the Red Book, was regarded as an authority on early Large Cents.

Some collectors, Strand knew, would hold onto a counterfeit coin almost protectively rather than admit their error in buying it. Strand had never understood that attitude and found it strange that a collector of Armitage's stature would display a fake. To him a counterfeit coin was no better than a harlot masquerading as a great lady. A sham and a disgrace, such a coin deserved nothing but the garbage heap. He put it in the hotel's ashtray. Strand never knowingly sold a counterfeit.

Tossing his gloves on the bed, Strand poured himself another shot of Scotch. He was proud of his U.S. Large Cent collection. With three more coins, it would be complete.

He had already finished every set of every higher-denomination coin through the gold Double Eagles.

Only Half Cents remained.

For twenty-five years he had concentrated on assembling these sets, one set at a time. He had never stolen coins outside his current field of focus, no matter how valuable they might be. Barber Dimes, his finest collection, had required nineteen months to complete and had taken him from Seattle to Sarasota.

After twenty-five years he could map out a three- or four-month itinerary with ease. He had crisscrossed the United States dozens of times. He loved the land, loved the open road, loved the shifting scen-

ery. But he knew in his heart that his deepest response to the varied and striking geography would always be, "Kankakee is an 1866 Proof Nickel"; "Butte is an 1854-S Quarter Eagle"; "Santa Barbara is an 1878-CC Trade Dollar"; "Natchez is an 1883-O Eagle."

Of course, the unexpected sometimes occurred, like last week's out-of-the-blue report in *Coin World* of this 9-over-8 Large Cent owned by a collector in Short Hills, then Strand would change his plans to accommodate the opportunity.

It was a lonely existence, about as lonely as life can get. Jago Strand had foregone a home, a wife, a family, and a social life. He had passed up friends and lovers and quarrels and confidences. He was a lone wolf—or, as the police would have it, a lone sparrow. Coins were a mania with him, an obsession. He was a man with a dream, and his dream had nothing to do with traveling, stealing, or selling. It had to do with collecting, with assembling so brilliant an array of United States coins that it would deserve, and would have, its own museum. The Jago Strand Coin Museum, now only a vision, would one day be a reality, a white marble shrine located outside Waco, Texas. It was not so mad a dream either, because he had already bought the land for it, more than forty acres, and had talked to a Texas architect about the best design for a small coin museum.

A pretty fair achievement for anybody, Strand told himself, but a stunning achievement for a seventh-grade dropout whose stepmother had considered him a mental case and whose father, during one of his week-long binges, had broken Jago's jaw with a kick, and followed it up by breaking his heart with a torrent of abuse for Jago's dead mother.

At eighteen Strand left their home in Waco, swearing revenge, vowing to return in triumph. He would show them. He would show everyone, show the whole world.

He took up auto theft in Oklahoma with predictable results. Arrest and conviction: His two years at El Reno Reformatory were brutally unpleasant, but they provided him with all the practical education he needed. He became an avid student of crime. At El Reno he met a chubby young man, Will Holford, whose business was selling illegal handguns and whose hobby was stealing coins. Through Holford's enthusiasm, Strand became interested in coins, studied numismatics in the prison library. He also became interested in avoiding further time behind bars.

He was never arrested again. And he succeeded from the outset in his chosen career. The Strand Collection, every coin of it stolen, was by this time one of the three or four finest in the nation. His only regret was that no one else knew of his hard-won triumph. Recognition would have to come later. It might come posthumously, given the nature of fame and the statute of limitations, but that was all right. Famous artists and writers had struggled, penniless and unknown, through lives different in detail but not really different in kind from his.

Few men built monuments to themselves in their brief lifetimes. Strand, in his own eyes, had already done so. All he needed now were three more Large Cents, eighty-two Half Cents, and a Waco contractor.

He closed and locked his pullman-size suitcase, one half of which contained coins and equipment. The other half held clothes. He combed his thinning grey hair, washed his hands, and took the elevator downstairs.

At a coffee shop off the lobby he ordered a hamburger and coffee. His evening meal never varied. Business seemed slow in the coffee shop. It was half past eleven at night, and two young women, the only other customers, sat a few stools away from Strand, smoking and talking. They paid no attention to him.

A few minutes later a pair of men in cheap business suits sauntered in and sat down across the double counter. Strand studied them without appearing to. He disliked what he saw. One of them, slender and angular, had pointed ears, a closed-lip smirk, and eyes that opened and shut in slow motion. His companion, slightly taller and vastly heavier, wore a black brush moustache and a grey gabardine suit that matched his partner's in bagginess.

Laurel and Hardy, without their bowler hats.

Or maybe Keystone Kops. They had that curious, starchy look of law about them. Which could mean nothing, or everything. Plainclothesmen, like uniformed police officers, do more than their share of sitting around coffee shops, often with nothing on their minds except cheesecake of one kind or another. Whoever they were, Strand would have preferred to see truck drivers or college kids in their place.

If the men in fact carried badges, they acted yawningly indifferent to him, no more excited by his presence than they were by that of the languid waitress or the sugared doughnuts.

When Strand finished his hamburger and coffee, he slipped a clad, worthless quarter under the plate, paid the check at the cashier's counter, and strolled out the door.

Laurel and Hardy followed him with their eyes, one vacuously, the other cheerily.

Back in his room on the fifth floor, it hit him, the jolt sudden and terrifying—hit him like his drunken father's kick on the jaw.

Three coins!

A 1799-over-98 Large Cent that had been a perfect specimen when Reuben Armitage bought it at auction. Now, inexplicably, it was scratched and unmistakable.

A counterfeit 1793 Chain Type Large Cent. A counterfeit that Armitage would have been unlikely to keep, much less display in his library.

An uncirculated 1795 Lettered Edge Cent, a coin that, according to Strand's best information, Armitage had never owned.

No wonder two plainclothesmen were in the coffee shop of the Lord Hewitt Hotel.

For the third time in his twenty-five-year career, Jago Strand had been set up. He was sure of it.

Never mind how it had happened. Never mind that he was still free and unshackled a couple of hours after the theft. The law's delay could be explained in any number of ways—and there was no time now to count the ways. Strand's work called for big gambles. It called for contingency plans, steady nerves, and fast incisive thought.

What use did the pursuers intend to make of the three coins?

The 1793 counterfeit. Was it really no coin at all, but a disguised bug or beeper?

The 1795 Lettered Edge. Was it a unique specimen, planted at high cost, to trap and prosecute him?

And the oddest coin of the seven, the 9-over-8 with a scratch. Why that one? A damaged classic, irreplaceable. The thief would try to sell it, of course, even in its dire state. But to whom? Ah, to H. M. Luker—nobody else. Jago Strand knew that. Did his pursuers know it too? Had the law finally caught up with Jago's shadowy Cincinnati fence?

Strand crossed to the phone on the Formica-walnut desk and dialed O. "This is a credit-card call," he said, and gave a false but acceptable

ten-digit number followed by a letter. Then he said, "I'm calling area code five-one-three," and recited the rest of Luker's unlisted number. To the hotel operator's request for his name and room number he said, "Lloyd Penner, room five-nineteen."

After two rings on the long-distance wire, a low pleasant voice answered. "Yes?"

"Mr. Luker, please."

"This is Mr. Luker speaking."

Strand hung up.

It was not Mr. Luker speaking. Strand knew H. M. Luker's high-pitched tenor as well as he knew the inflated prices in this year's Red Book.

He poured another shot of Scotch and gave the situation some thought. A man needs a certain amount of paranoia to put together a string of six hundred successful coin thefts over a period of twenty-five years. Strand had his share of paranoia, usually under careful control. He knew he might be wrong to expect trickery, there might be no one on his tail, but in his line of work the vaguest hint of trouble had to be considered a sure thing. That was what kept him out of jail. He had to act as if a host of avenging angels from the American Numismatic Society were about to descend on his room. He had to act.

He studied road maps of New Jersey and Pennsylvania, memorizing his route. He pored over airline schedules, laying his plans.

Unlocking his suitcase, he pulled out ten small Jiffy bags and a sheet of postage stamps. He snapped open the compartment of a precious blue box labeled "Large Cents—Strand Collection" and, taking out the one worthy Armitage coin, the 1795 Lettered Edge, he dropped it in the ashtray beside the 1793 counterfeit. No coin, however desirable, was worth his loss of freedom and the possible jeopardy of his dream.

He put fifteen or sixteen Large Cents into each of the Jiffy bags. With a black felt pen he scrawled "Mr. Hugh Garth, %Nicobar Motel, Parkersburg, West Virginia" on each of them and with a red felt pen he wrote FIRST CLASS MAIL at the left of each address. After carefully removing the perforated edges from the postage stamps, one of his minor obsessions, he pasted two one-dollar stamps on each Jiffy bag.

A package drop a few doors down from Strand's room sent the nation's second best collection of U.S. Large Cents on its way out of New Jersey. This meant trusting delivery of the coins to the U.S. mails, but

in Strand's enterprise it was essential to weigh risks. They might be slow and chancy, but they were, in their own way, inviolable.

Back in his room again he opened the shipping bag he had addressed to Reuben Armitage, the first-class surprise containing the 9-over-8. He dumped the other six Armitage coins into the bag with the damaged lady. This bag, holding all seven of the suspicious Armitage coins, he put into a side pocket of his sports jacket.

Under less pressing circumstances, he might have gambled that the counterfeit 1793 was the only plausible carrier of the electronic tracking device he was sure had put Laurel and Hardy on his trail. He was certain no one had seen him in Short Hills and that no one had followed him from the scene of the theft to Morristown.

But there was always the chance of being wrong, and it was too big a chance to take. All seven coins would have to go.

His few clothes shoved hastily into his suitcase, Strand left the hotel by the fire stairs and walked rapidly to his grey Dodge van. He checked the taillights. Sure enough, one of them was broken. The famous comedy team had learned his room number from the beeper, he supposed, checked out his auto license number at the registration desk, and then smashed the taillight to make it easier to tail him if necessary. They had probably also clamped a second beeper on the chassis.

The hotel parking lot was night-misted and silent as Jago Strand pulled out onto the city street and headed for Interstate 287.

Nobody followed him onto the Interstate. Accelerating smoothly, he fixed the speedometer needle on fifty-five. He never risked a speeding ticket unless he had to.

He slanted off at the Route 10 exit, heading west. Traffic was light, and so was the rain, no more than a drizzle. Every mile or so he flicked the windshield wipers on and off to clear the mist.

About fifteen miles down the road he picked up a pair of headlights in his rearview mirror. Persistent headlights. He slowed gradually to forty, then to thirty-five, hoping they would pass. He pulled into a department-store parking lot, drove around it randomly, and pulled back on the road. The headlights stayed with him.

At one of the half dozen traffic circles on Route 10 he made his move. He veered sharply right onto an eastbound road, turned quickly into a McDonald's parking area, circled the building in a coun-

terclockwise sweep, and turned back toward the circle, where he angled onto Route 46, heading further west.

The trailing headlights missed the unexpected left, wheeled past the golden arches, and had to make a screaming U-turn to get back to the circle, falling far behind.

Strand stomped the accelerator to the floor, trying to lose them for good at an intersection two miles ahead, where the map showed four main highways coming together. The road curved and twisted its way west, and beyond the intersection the trailing lights were gone. He breathed a sigh of relief.

The headlights did not reappear. If a beeper was on the car and the comedians had taken a wrong turn, the signals would soon start to become fainter to the pursuers. His escape plan was to stay on 46, but Laurel and Hardy had no way of knowing that. They had to be lucky or they had to correct their mistake quickly.

Four miles west of Hackettstown, two headlights rocketed into view behind him. Seeing them loom up at that speed, Strand knew whose they were. The road was an empty two-laner, the drizzling rain had stopped, and the trailing car came up close, rode the bumper of Strand's van for half a mile, then backed off a little. There was nothing subtle about the pursuit now.

Strand ignored the speed limit and pushed the Dodge to full throttle. Eighty miles an hour. Eighty-five. The rusted but dependable van would never qualify at Daytona, but it gave the driver everything it had. Strand expected the trailing car to try to jam him off the road, or worse, that one of the pair might start shooting.

Nothing happened. Just pursuit. The two vehicles roared through a number of small towns, raced along the Pequest River, and blazed through two traffic lights in a place called Buttzville. One of the lights was green, the other red. Strand's accelerator pedal mashed the floor, but the two headlights hung in, gleaming in his rearview mirror like a pair of satanic yellow eyes.

One good thing: he was sure the pursuers had no local police help. Despite their appearance, they were not ordinary lawmen. They could not summon help. They were either private eyes or thieves themselves. No matter. Like Strand, they were on their own. Otherwise the chase would have been over at Hackettstown, maybe sooner.

Strand allowed himself a tinge of optimism.

The road widened to four lanes, as the road map had shown it would. With the speedometer needle hovering between eighty-five and ninety, he fleetingly saw BELVIDERE and a left-turn arrow. It came too late to make the turn safely, but there was no choice. He jerked the wheel left at the last urgent moment. The van, never noted for its stability, swayed around a concrete island on two wheels, screeching, skidding. It straightened out and barreled toward the Delaware River.

Laurel and Hardy careened wildly after him.

No other traffic was in sight on the narrow concrete road.

Four years ago, during a lazy week on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, Strand had prepared for an emergency like this. He had bought a box of eight-penny finishing nails, filed down their heads, and welded them together by threes into huge spiked jacks. Three dozen lay in a long bottom-hinged wooden box behind the rear axle. A cable ran to a lever near the driver's seat.

Strand yanked the lever and the jacks dropped.

First he heard a sprinkling sound like the patter of rain on a tin roof, then a chilling squeal of brakes. He saw the headlights in back of him lurch crazily, fall away, and flicker into the woods at the right side of the road.

He did not hear a crash but knew there must have been one. The comics had earned two flat tires at least, maybe three. Maybe four.

Nobody followed him through the old town of Belvidere, whose prim frame houses hugged the road, their occupants long since asleep. No one trailed him across the narrow bridge to Pennsylvania.

On the other side of the river, in the shadow of a darkened hotel, he stopped and reconnoitered, a task that took him less than thirty seconds. He made a sharp right turn onto an asphalt drive sloping down toward the river. The driveway led to a house trailer parked about two hundred yards away. There was no sign of life in or around the trailer.

He braked the van near the water and got out. Crickets chirped in the night air. The rolling waters of the Delaware slapped softly against the bridge's concrete supports. A thin new moon hung in the sky and the surface of the river shone as black as a rat snake.

He walked to the river's edge, took the Jiffy bag from the pocket of his jacket, and, with no more hesitation than a foot soldier hurling a grenade, tossed the seven Armitage coins into the inky waters of the

Delaware. Then, alert and watchful, he climbed back into the driver's seat and drove for three miles before he found the spot he wanted.

First he saw just a broad, overgrown driveway. Next, against the night sky, he saw where the driveway led. It led through a copse of trees to the hulking cinderblock shell of a burned-out building.

This was the place. He pulled into the rutted driveway, bounced a few hundred feet to a concealed parking spot behind the cinderblock ruin. He doused the lights and killed the engine.

He stuffed his now useless Lloyd Penner wallet, containing a driver's license, car registration, and credit cards, into the glove compartment. Lloyd Penner was about to disappear. The van would have to stay behind, but its owner and driver would dissolve without a trace.

Jago Strand, ready for almost any disaster, carried a back-up identity in his suitcase, complete in all details. This new set of licenses, papers, and credit cards was made out in the name of Hugh Garth of Alexandria, Virginia. Mr. Garth was a new creation, an imaginary architect who was fortunate enough to own a current and legal set of Virginia license plates for his red Kawasaki motorcycle. Strand kept the motorcycle covered with canvas and mounted upright in the back of the van.

Like any less well-to-do transient, Strand carried his personal belongings in one suitcase. His forty-nine sets of U.S. coins were stored more than a thousand miles away in a safe-deposit box in Houston under his own name. The incomplete Large Cent collection was on its way by first-class mail to a motel in Parkersburg. The rest—his custom numismatic apparatus, his safe-deposit key, his coins for sale, his modest wardrobe—were in the suitcase.

Leaving the driver's seat of the Dodge for the last time, he closed the door quietly and walked to the rear of the vehicle. To his puzzlement, the rear door was unlocked. Could he have forgotten? No use speculating now. On the floor of the van, as far to the left as it would go, he had installed a motorcycle carrier. Tie-downs held the Kawasaki securely in place.

He hauled his makeshift loading ramp, a 2x10 pine board, into place. He pulled the canvas off the Kawasaki, unhooked the tie-downs, and wheeled the cycle to the ground. Carrying the weathered board to an inside wall of the cinderblock shell, he dropped it beside a rusted doorless white refrigerator.

He used the tie-downs to fasten his suitcase to the seat of the cycle. It was a tight fit for driver and luggage, but the trip was less than thirty miles.

About five minutes after the Dodge van had disappeared behind the abandoned building, Strand's red Kawasaki street bike emerged. Jago Strand, suitcase, and motorcycle bore left onto the asphalt and leaned resolutely into the darkness, pointing toward Easton and escape.

After half an hour the A-B-E Airport—serving Allentown, Bethlehem, and Easton—came into view. It was a bright modern facility with a two-level roadway system for arrivals and departures that skirted Airport Road, just off truck-clogged Route 22.

Jago Strand, chilled from his wind-whipped jaunt, aimed down Airport Road, plucked a parking check from the automatic ticket dispenser, parked the Kawasaki near a flight of concrete steps leading to the departure level, unhooked his suitcase, and carried it to the Allegheny ticket counter.

It was three A.M. Except for a sleeping businessman sprawled in a molded plastic chair, the waiting room was deserted. Even the Allegheny agent, a frail young man with hornrimmed glasses, seemed somnolent.

"A ticket on the seven o'clock flight to Parkersburg," Strand said, pushing his suitcase onto the baggage scale.

"Certainly, sir," the agent said, frowning and beginning to press buttons. "You realize, of course, that Flight 281 leaves at seven tomorrow evening, not this morning."

"A night flight?" Strand asked incredulously. "That's sixteen hours from now!"

"That's right."

"Well," he said, feigning annoyance. "I may as well buy the ticket. Can you check my bag?"

"Certainly. A one-way ticket?"

"One way." Strand shoved an Air Travel card across the counter. It was made out to Hugh Garth of Alexandria, Virginia. Garth's address was that of a telephone-answering company that also provided a mail-forwarding service. Mr. Garth, like Lloyd Penner before him, intended to pay his bills.

With the ticket and baggage-claim check in his pocket, he phoned

for a single-room reservation at the Nicobar Motel in Parkersburg, then he took the escalator down to the arrival level.

As a matter of policy he would not risk flying. He knew that it was statistically safe, but he also knew that the aircraft was out of his personal control. He wanted to be in command of every aspect of his life.

The airport's choice of rental cars proved to be Hertz, Avis, National, and Dollar-Rent-a-Car. Opting for Number Two, he rented a station wagon. He gave his destination, falsely, as Cleveland—a further precaution. He could always claim that a sudden press of business had diverted him from Cleveland to Parkersburg.

He drove to the parking lot, intending to stow the Kawasaki in the back of the rented car. Only temporarily, though. The motorcycle would soon be rusting at the bottom of a nearby river in case it had been spotted by someone.

His headlights picked up the gleaming red cycle and he pulled up beside it. The lot was well lighted but desolate. No loitering here, he thought. In about twelve hours he would be in Parkersburg, a new man.

As he stepped out of the station wagon, he heard the scraping movement behind him of shoe leather on asphalt. Whirling around, he found himself face to face with the narrow-eyed fat man of the comedy team who had emerged from behind a black sedan, aiming a 9mm Beretta at him, a silencer decorating its barrel.

"Freeze," Hardy said, his double chin quivering.

Strand froze.

"Easy now. Toss your wallet on the ground in front of you."

Strand obeyed.

"Your plane ticket in the same place."

Strand tossed down the envelope. "Where's Laurel?" he asked grimly, without thinking.

"Where's who?"

"Your partner."

"Hospital in Hackettstown. His tires hit some carpet tacks outside Belvidere."

"His tires? Where were you?"

Hardy scowled. "Two guys, two cars, Strand. That's simple arithmetic. When you skipped the Lord Hewitt before we hit your room, my partner tailed you. I stayed behind for a while to search the room. I

found the edges of some postage stamps in your wastebasket and checked the mail drops at the hotel, with a little high-priced help from the night clerk. We uncovered some packages headed for the Nicobar Motel in Parkersburg. I'm letting them travel. I don't rob the U.S. mails."

Tears of anger began forming in Jago Strand's eyes. It had all been so carefully planned.

Hardy went on. "My guess is that your airline ticket says Parkersburg too. And your ID stuff must say Hugh Garth." He leaned over and, puffing from the exertion, picked up Strand's wallet and the Allegheny envelope. "How'm I doing?"

Strand said nothing.

"We've been after you for about two years now. I guess when we pick up your baggage in Parkersburg we'll put our hands on a very big coin collection. Warm?"

Strand cursed himself for not carrying a weapon. He hated guns on principle and had never supposed he would need one, but a man can have too much caution. There was no way he could argue with that quiet-talking Beretta. Frustration clogged his speech. "How—?" he choked.

"How did I find you?" the fat man asked cheerfully. "CB radio contact with my partner. A little horse sense. A little luck. A beeper on the Kawasaki. No big deal."

"You're—federal?"

The big man chuckled. "Hey, you're not much on faces, are you, Strand? I mean, sure, I've put on a few pounds, but—"

"*Will Holford!*"

"You got it, Jago. Your old coin-collecting pal from reformatory days. I figured you for The Sparrow way back in the sixties when I was doing time at Lewisburg. I mean, you were always crazy as a hoot owl. But it took a while to catch you. You're pretty tricky. I needed to find myself a partner who knew a few things I didn't know."

"Laurel," Strand said in a tired whisper.

"Who's this Laurel you're talking about? The guy whose car you busted up back there is a crony of yours. H. M. Luker from Cincy—who's also a friend of the famous Reuben Armitage. Why, Hal Luker and me's got a collection of coins that'll put the Smithsonian's to shame. Just wait'll we add your junk to it!"

So this was the way it was going to end: Jago Strand, after twenty-five years on the road, a connoisseur with a coin collection that rivaled the greatest, standing helpless and bereft at the edge of a rain-glazed parking lot, his coin museum no more than a mirage, his life a nomadic waste, his possessions reduced to a bugged Kawasaki and a shiny blue business suit. He started to sob.

"Shut up," Holford said.

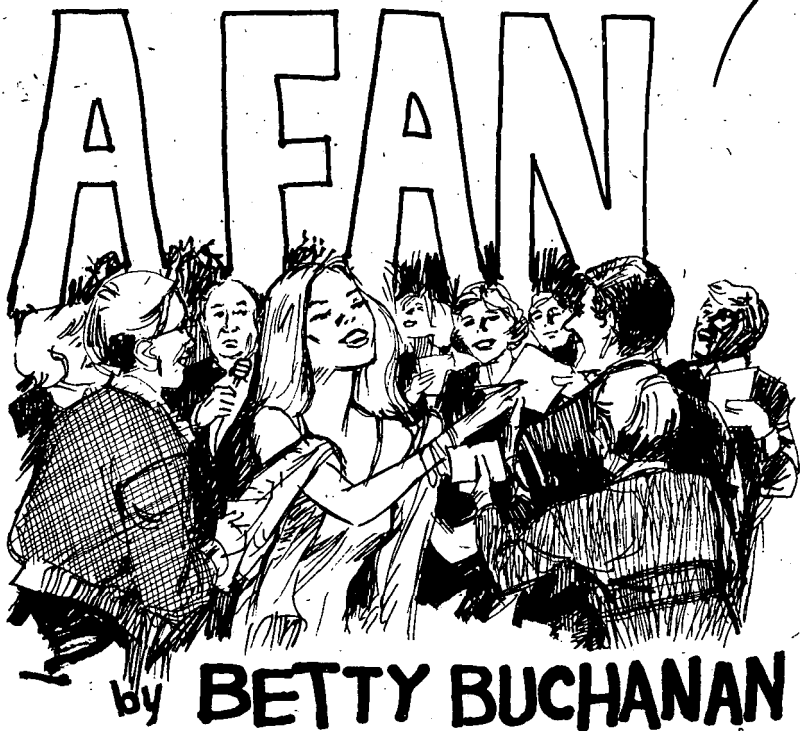
But Strand was not listening. All his life he had avoided risks, played it safe. It had always worked. But now— It was too much. Luker and Holford were not collectors, they were parasites. Thieves. Opportunists. *Comédians*. His self-control taking flight, he lunged blindly for the gun.

He never reached it.

There was a muffled slam, a gasp, and Jago Strand, a stricken sparrow, collapsed in a little heap beside the red motorcycle.



All about Julie Bower, and her most devoted fan . . .



Julie Bower got her first fan letter the week after the opening broadcast of *The Lucky Lawrences*, the television series in which she appeared as the youngest member of an improbable Midwestern family. It said: "I think you are the best one on the program and I hope you always stay on it. I saw you on the Enforcer tire commercials and on the mayonnaise commercials and I saw you in the three shows at the Playa Players and I loved you right away. I want to be your friend."

Please send me your picture. A Fan."

The return address on the envelope was General Delivery, Ocean Park, California. Someone in the mailroom or the production office had scrawled the word "pix" across the front. Julie saved the letter for a long time because A Fan, if the facts in the letter were true, had seen every performance that Julie had ever made. Even her friends had never seen the mayonnaise commercials she had made five years before when she'd been sixteen. As the least noticed of *The Lucky Lawrences*, Julie received the smallest amount of fan mail. She read every letter and saved them all for a year. Then she threw them away. But she kept that first one for several years.

She had studied singing ever since she could afford the lessons, and after two seasons on the show her coach suggested that it was time for her to make a professional appearance. He arranged for her to appear at a Sunset Boulevard nightclub for a week. It was a small nightclub, but Julie was, at that time, a small star. It rained the February night she was scheduled to debut. It *would*, she thought. But she was certain that most of the cast of the Lawrences and their friends would show up so that the place would be decently filled. She drove alone from her apartment to the La Brea end of Sunset Boulevard and parked in the dreary lot between a gas station and the club.

As she left the parking lot, holding her costume high above the puddles, the drizzle formed beads on the plastic dress cover. The lights of the gas station were bright, but a deep shadow fell beyond their radius. She was startled by a sudden movement near the dark wall of the club, but when she looked directly at the spot there was nothing there. Well, parking lots were spooky after nightfall, she reflected. Or maybe it was nerves, though she had not been aware of them before. She suspected that she was a good, possibly a very good, singer, and she enjoyed the tension of pre-performance.

In the glass frame at the door was a large picture of her with **TO-NIGHT!** painted above it. Underneath it said *Liza Lawrence* of **THE LUCKY LAWRENCES**. A bedraggled figure in a sodden coat with wet, stringy hair stood gazing at the picture. She stared as Julie paused at the door. Julie smiled and said, "Hello. Better get out of the rain, you'll catch cold." The woman continued to stare and did not react.

The club was filled with friends and coworkers, and Julie's night was a success. The network publicity man had managed to corral the pop

music critics from *Variety* and *Reporter*, the *Times* and the *Herald*, and they stayed afterwards when the club had closed, to have a drink with her. They spoke of her jazz feeling, her warm sound, her intelligent phrasing, and her projection. And the press agent had added, "They don't expect someone who looks like you to sound like *that*. You have that happy, girl-next-door look." It was all wonderful.

As she drifted out into the parking lot with the last few friends, she had the feeling that someone was watching her. She looked back at the building and at the other cars, but no one was there.

The sensation of being watched pursued her through the week. She hated to cross the big studio parking lot after a late rehearsal and she formed the habit of glancing about her at the slightest movement. She began to look in the back seat of her car before getting into it. Of course, there was a guard at the gate but the lot was so very big.

The cast of the show took part in a celebrity tennis tournament on behalf of a charity, and several of the fan clubs attended. Afterwards, a woman approached Julie and thanked her for sending an autographed picture and asked if she might take a photo of her. Julie posed with her racquet held as if to return a low ball, and then another girl joined the first, then another. Then several young men. Most of them had cameras and all had autograph books. Soon a small crowd was around her. She signed and posed and smiled and said, "Thank you," and "You're very nice to say that." For the first time she wondered if she was becoming more than just an interchangeable young television blonde. Later she discovered that the small white chiffon scarf that she wore with her tennis dress was gone. And when she took the dress off she found that the small tab at the back of the neck that held the scarf in place had been sliced cleanly through as if it had been sliced with a razor blade. She had felt nothing, not even a pull. Well, she thought nervously, that's a *real* fan.

Soon her fan mail increased to the point where it had to be sent to a service for handling, and she seldom bothered to read any of it. But the real breakthrough came that fall when one of the critics who had heard her sing arranged for her to read for a part in a film for which the producers really wanted a name star. The story contained one song that made a plot point and, after several weeks of indecision, the producers decided to hire Julie, whose voice and looks were perfect for

the role and who did, after all, have a name of sorts from television. "I like her," one of the producers decided, "she has a *friendly* face."

The film made Julie a star. Now she had very little time for a life outside the studios. The fan mail poured in, but she had no time to read it. She won an award as the most promising newcomer of the year and accepted the statuette on a live (or what is called "live-on-tape") television show. Backstage, the photographers, trade reporters, and press agents gathered in the usual confusion. A face smiled broadly at the edge of the crowd. It seemed familiar. Julie waved. "Hello," she called, "how've you been?" Who was it? It could be a fan—sometimes they managed to get through security with the photographers. A hand appeared above the crowd, waving something white, and then disappeared. Later Julie realized that it had been waving a white chiffon scarf.

Julie attended the Academy Awards that year and was surprised at the roar that went up when the Master of Ceremonies outside on the promenade called her name. The fans reached out from the barricades and repeated her name. "Julie! Julie Bower! Look over here, Julie!" They snapped her picture with tiny flashing cameras and yelled when she waved to them. She left the young actor who was escorting her and went over to the barriers.

Hundreds of hands reached out to her. She reached back into a wall of excitement, touching the hands. For an instant she saw a familiar face, or thought she did. Then the crowd surged forward and the security guards rushed over to hold them back. As she reached the entrance to the theater she felt something on the back of her hand and saw blood running down her arm from a cut on her shoulder. She grabbed a handkerchief from her escort and wrapped it tightly around the wound. He helped her to the emergency room backstage where a doctor and nurse were in attendance. The doctor washed and bandaged the cut and called one of the policemen on guard. "It was made by a razor blade," the doctor told him.

"I didn't feel it happen," Julie said, half in shock.

The policeman said, "It could have been any one out of thousands of them. Next time stay away from the fans."

The fans!

I know who did it, Julie thought. I've seen her before, the one who

was, there tonight. Who is she? What does she want? Julie shuddered. How horrible it would be to be a really big star who got caught in crushes of people and had to be rescued.

The next day she asked to have her fan mail sent to her. She spent hours going through the hundreds of letters until she found what she was looking for. Return address: General Delivery, Hollywood Station. Return address: General Delivery, Burbank. Typed letters on plain white paper with no signature. There was one letter every week for months. How many must there have been over the past few years?

She began to read.

"Dear Julie: You haven't answered my letters. I want to be your friend. I called the studio, but they won't let me talk to you. What's wrong? No one loves you like I do. I'm lonely. Please answer this. A Fan." A note was scrawled on the envelope, "Answered with form."

The next one read: "Dear Julie: I know the secretary answered my letter the last time and signed your name. She is keeping my letters from you. She reads them and throws them away because she is jealous. You must answer. You are my only friend. I must be with you. They cannot hide you from me."

Another read: "Dear Julie: I have written hundreds of letters to you for years now *and you have not answered*. You always smile and say hello when I speak to you, so I know you are my friend. I keep your scarf and the other things with me every minute. I take them to bed with me. I am coming to see you soon."

The other things? Julie had missed a few things from the car—a script, a hair brush . . . She felt cold with fear.

Julie gave the letters to the police and was assured that there were certain persons who were known to them who were continually under surveillance for such activities. Julie's fan was probably one of them. They told the mail service to send Julie's letters directly to them from then on.

Julie stopped going to most of the press parties and openings that were part of her job and part of her social life. At the few she attended, her eyes swept the passersby and the clusters of people near her. Sometimes she thought, There she is! But she was never sure—the fans had all started to look the same and she was afraid to meet their eyes. She moved from her West Hollywood apartment to a larger one in Brentwood. She had been saving to buy a house, but now she

was afraid to be so isolated and vulnerable. Houses had windows, yards, porches, and patios—she wouldn't be safe. The Brentwood apartment complex had locks on every door, a buzzer system, and a man stationed in an office off the lobby.

A week after she moved in, she found in her mailbox an envelope with an uncanceled stamp addressed to her two hours before the mailman was due. There was no return address. She opened it and read:

"Dear Julie: Now you know how I feel about us being friends. Nothing will keep us apart. I have been with you from the beginning when I knew you would be famous and would need a friend. I will be with you at the end. I am coming soon to get you so that we can be together. A Fan. P.S. I have loved you since I saw you in the Enforcer tire commercial."

Then Julie remembered the first fan letter she had ever received, the one she had saved. It had been years ago. Had the woman always been there? Was she always in the audience? And just at the edge of her vision in the parking lots? And in the crowds at premieres? A Fan. Where, in heaven's name, was she at this very minute?

Julie's body was found in her car, parked at the side of a lonely stretch of Sepulveda Boulevard halfway between the studio and her apartment. She'd rehearsed late and on the way home had stopped at a drugstore to pick up a prescription for sleeping pills, dropped off a script with a friend in Sherman Oaks, and then gone to one of Hollywood's huge supermarkets to pick up some groceries. She had probably forgotten to lock her car while on at least one of these errands for there was evidence that whoever had stabbed her to death had hidden in the back seat.

Julie's obituary announced that services would be held in a small Westwood church. Fans gathered in the early afternoon and stood outside, some of them crying. Her films had been happy ones and her friendly, girl-next-door quality had made her special to them. But the services did not take place at the scheduled time and Julie's friends and fans were told to disperse, that there had been a change of plans.

"But it isn't here!" the funeral director told the studio publicity man who had driven over from the church.

"It was supposed to be at the chapel at one-thirty," the press agent insisted.

"I told you on the phone!" the funeral director said. "It left here this morning. Here's the record."

"That doesn't prove a thing. What's going on? Where is she?"

The attendant who had been on duty all night and whose name appeared on the record page was summoned from his home. "Yes," he said, "the deceased was picked up in a private ambulance early this morning. The woman who came for the body was in a very distressed emotional state."

"Who was she?"

"Her sister from El Centro," the man said. "She said she had made arrangements for a private service."

"Julie was from San Diego," the press agent managed to say. "She had no family."

The woman sat on the comfortable couch in her little house on a street of little houses that all looked the same. She chatted happily, recalling all the wonderful times they'd been through together. "I always knew we'd be happy," she said. "I always knew I could have you for my very own."

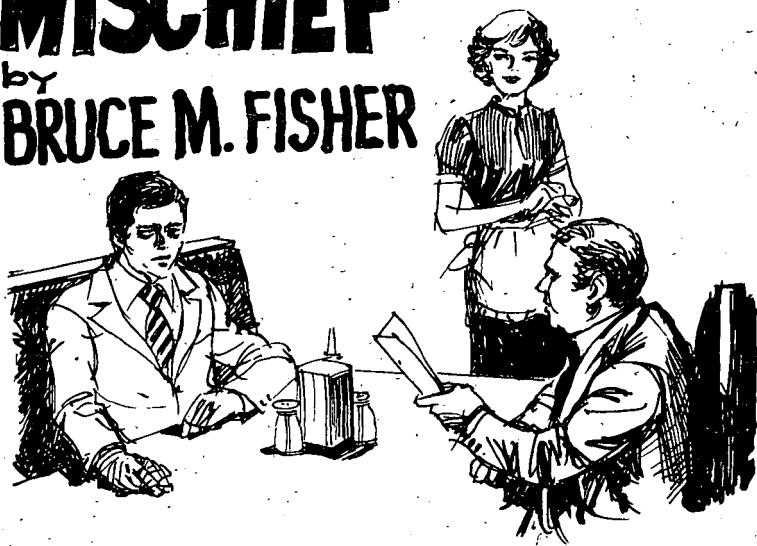
Julie, propped opposite her on the couch, stared vacantly back at the woman who signed herself A Fan.



Oh, what a tangled web we weave . . .

AFFINITY FOR MISCHIEF

by
BRUCE M. FISHER



The pudgy well-dressed man in the fur hat stopped suddenly, his grey eyes squinting against the wintry sun. Could this be Tom Burden, rakish Tom Burden, shambling along the icy sidewalk with that dejected air, hatless, his brown suit rumpled like a tramp's, his rugged face marked by a recent beating?

He waited until the shabby figure came alongside, then thrust out a vigorous hand. "Tom!" he exclaimed jovially.

It was unexpected. Burden, with a gasp and a backward leap, slipped on the ice and sprawled in the heaped snow at the curb.

"Tom, it's me, Johnny Brake," Brake said, giving him a hand up. "You remember me."

Burden peered from a pair of well-blackened eyes. "No, I don't."

"You don't!" Brake brushed snow from Burden's back. "Well," he admitted, "it was some time ago and a man can't be expected to remember every face he sees but the almost identical hands we once held, aces over kings, should help you remember. You took the pot, I recall, with a seven of hearts over my six of clubs. A meaning there, what? But you look down in the gills. Are things going badly at the gaming table?"

Burden extended his right hand, showing two fingers held straight with Popsicle sticks and gauze. "I can't play now—can't shuffle. What did you say your name was?"

"Johnny Brake. Come on, old friend. You need a pick-me-up."

Burden hesitated, then licked split lips in anticipation. "I sure do."

"Perhaps a cup of coffee? Or a bowl of chicken soup? You don't look well and that's a fact."

"Chicken soup!" Burden exploded. "Are you making fun of me, mister?"

The other man smiled. "Not in the least. Though the misfortunes of others sometimes tickle the humor despite our sympathies. How about a feed of fresh scallops with a wedge of lemon and all the trimmings?"

"Why?" Burden demanded.

Brake spread fat gloved hands. "Because I'm curious. Gentle natures like mine are often avid for violent detail. What do you say?"

"I could do with a bite," Burden acknowledged cautiously.

"Then come on. There's a good restaurant around the corner."

"Watch it!" Burden yelped as Brake took his arm. "For God's sake, go easy!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know. The arm too, eh? What in the world happened to you?"

"None of your damn business."

"You got hit by a car?"

"No."

"A truck then? Or was it a gang of hoodlums beat you up? I bet you gave them their money's worth." He shortened his step to accommo-

date Burden's limping progress. At the corner they came upon a hydraulic scoop loading a truck with snow from the curb.

Burden made a convulsive movement, gasped, and bent painfully. He chose a hard chunk of snow and hurled it with left-handed fury at the scoop. It struck the Plexiglas window of the cab. The operator grinned and waved. Burden cursed. "I hate snow."

"So do I," Brake said. "But I don't take it out on men who are getting rid of it."

"They're all one breed," Burden snarled. "Idiots. Vicious, smirking idiots. I'd drown the lot of them in their own slush."

"Tut-tut." Brake held open the restaurant door. It was midmorning, and the place was practically empty. They took a booth toward the back.

The waitress had good teeth, a pliable figure, and copper hair. Though Brake ordered, she gazed steadily at Burden. He gave her a baleful look. She smiled and left with a lissome stride, her perfume lingering pleasantly.

Burden smoothed his tangled black mop. "Women!" he jeered. "Think they can wiggle a curve, gleam the eye, and have you flopping around at their feet like a drunken mule. The lying, selfish, double-crossing nether side of humanity!"

Brake protested. "They have their good qualities. And she seems a nice girl."

"Nice! Did you see how she looked at me?"

"She was probably wondering who beat you up."

"Wrong. It was a look of lust. She wants me."

Brake laughed. "At first glance, Tom? Nonsense!"

"Is it?" Burden took a sip of water. "What do you see in my face?" he demanded bluntly.

"Well, besides the black eyes and split lips, your nose looks broken and there's a dark bruise—"

"I don't mean that. I mean the expression."

"Forlorn and cynical. Lost."

"I don't mean that either. It's something else. Maybe men don't see it, only women. And the worst part is, they know I'm vulnerable."

"Vulnerable? You just said you hated women."

"No, I didn't. But I don't love them either. Maybe that's what gets them. I mean, if you don't show interest they're piqued. Or maybe

it's—" He paused, shifting his bandaged fingers on the table. "Is there a look of animalism in my face?"

"You look human enough to me."

"Well, maybe they see my need and know they can take advantage of it."

"Your need?"

"It's more than a physical need," Burden explained. "It's more than love. It's a kind of affinity gone out of control. When I went to school, I fell in love with a different girl every week. I *needed* to be in love."

"Yours must have been pleasant schooling."

"It was wretched. I didn't find an honest soul in the lot. The very first girl, a slinky little flat-faced weasel, took advantage of my weakness by trading her ten-cent ruler for my two-dollar pen. That's when I learned to watch their eyes."

"Their eyes?"

"You bet! Women are better liars than men. When a man lies, there's a kind of secret challenge in putting one over. But a woman tells it like truth. Only her eyes give her away. When you find them soft and tender and fixed on a point two inches in front of your nose, you know she's lying. At least I do, every time."

Brake toyed with his napkin. "Now I get it. Your 'affinity' drew you to the wrong girl and her boyfriend beat you up."

His companion flushed. "In a clear field, nobody beats up Tom Burden—not without regret. No, it was a married woman."

"What was her husband? A truck driver or something?"

"He was a businessman."

"Ah, one of those big rugged guys who keeps fit by working out in the gym?"

Burden quivered, his half buried eyes glinting. "No, he was a lot like you," he growled, and added viciously, "a short, white, fat, forty-year-old slug, his wife called him."

Brake winced at the comparison but let it pass. "A married woman. Well, you asked for it."

"They're the worst kind," Burden said, "because they've usually got something extra in mind. This one did. Arson, for one thing."

"Arson!" Brake's pale eyebrows shot up and he leaned quickly across the table. "How did you ever get mixed up with a woman like that?"

"Just by trying to mind my own business. I was in Gresham's, buy-

ing a new deck of cards, when I felt this woman looking at me. I knew it was a woman and *how* she was looking before I even turned around. I should have run right out of the shop. But it was like a switch turned on, full current. A minute later, we were walking down the street together."

"To the nearest bar?"

"Coffee shop. Her suggestion. I wanted a drink myself."

"Good-looking?"

"You bet. Green slanty eyes, curly black hair, a figure you wouldn't believe." Burden shrugged his left shoulder. "I guess I told her more than I should have over coffee."

"You saw her that night, I bet."

"And every second week from then on."

"Why every second week?"

"Because her husband worked nights every second week. He had this factory where they made a new kind of window sashes, and him and his foreman took turns, not wanting to take chances until the business ran itself. I can't say I blame him for that, but I wouldn't leave a woman like that alone nights."

"Hot stuff?"

"She put on a mighty good act," Burden admitted. "Her name was Lissa."

Their orders came. The waitress fussed with their dishes, brought their coffee, and marched away.

"A habit I deplore in restaurants," Brake observed, pushing his cup aside. "Coffee should come immediately after the meal to give that fine feeling of completion and to heighten the flavor of your cigarette. By the way, she hardly glanced at you this time."

"I know," Burden retorted. "Right now, she's wondering how to make the first move. What did you say your name was?"

"Johnny Brake. You got amnesia too?"

"I wouldn't be surprised." Burden speared a scallop and raised it awkwardly with his left hand. "Where were we?"

"You were helping this woman cheat on her husband."

"Well, it was about a month later that the arson bit came up. She wanted me to burn his factory."

"Because she wanted him home nights?"

"Not much. According to her, I was the best thing that ever hap-

pened to her. Of course, she was only twenty-three and didn't have a complete score. No, it was the factory insurance money she wanted to get her mitts on—and she'd have managed it somehow—so her and me could go away together and live in fine style."

"Did you?"

"I tried. But arson isn't my line and I heaved the gasoline onto a heap of aluminum frames by mistake. They'd never have put it out if I'd hit the paint shop like she wanted."

"I bet she was mad."

"If she was, she didn't let on. She said I tried and that was something. Then, a bit later, she asked me to kill him."

"To kill him!" Brake gasped. "Just like that?"

"Heck, no. If you knew that woman, you'd understand how she could plant an idea so sneakily that you thought it was your own. I was the one who brought it up. She seemed horrified. Honestly, I thought I'd overstepped it then. But it was her idea from the start—I know that now."

"Why did she want him killed? Why not a divorce and a good settlement out of him?"

"Because she might not have got them. But he was heavily insured too and that appealed to her. She said the more she thought about it, the more she thought I was right. Living out there in the country, she had plenty of time to think."

Brake frowned. "You'd think the country conducive to gentle pursuits."

"She hated it," Burden said. "A lonely road with few neighbors, though she had a car and credit cards to buy anything she wanted. A fine house too. She should have gone in for gardening instead of scheming like that all the time."

"Maybe she didn't have a green thumb."

"She had a red one. She thought up plans by the dozens and I took them apart, explaining to her why they wouldn't work. She came up with a foolproof way of doing him in and I chipped that to pieces too because when she mentioned us going away together with the loot I saw that look in her eye, soft and tender and detached from reality, and I knew she was lying, that she planned to skip out with the money alone."

"You seem to have a thing about eyes."

"It's never failed me yet. When a smiling woman seems to look you in the eye but doesn't, just watch out."

"So you wouldn't murder for her?"

Burden forked down a heap of coleslaw. "I only wanted to get away from her. The trouble was, I couldn't make the break."

"But you did at last?"

Burden indicated his bruises, his broken fingers. "Her husband did it for me. You remember that awful snowstorm we had a week ago? Remember how god-awful cold it turned afterward? Hell's bells! You'd think a guy like that, with a good business and a fine old country house, would have a snowblower or somebody hired to keep his driveway clean, but he didn't. There was only a car-length shoveled out at the road and a footpath shoveled to the house. The rest was drifted four feet deep. Naturally, I parked in that cleared spot, backed in in case I had to get away quickly."

"Weren't you scared he'd see your tire tracks in the snow?"

"Oh, I was sharp enough for that. Before backing in, I smoothed out his tracks so he'd think mine were his. We had the same kind of tires."

"That was prudent of you. Weren't the scallops delicious?"

"They were. Anyway, I parked there Tuesday night and everything went fine. My car was getting hard to start in cold weather so I left it idling, just ticking over, during the six hours I spent with her. You don't mind the price of a little gas when there's a woman like Lissa waiting."

The waitress brought their apple pie and ice cream with two fresh cups of coffee. When she left, Burden continued, "I did the same on Wednesday night, leaving at four the next morning in case he decided to come home a couple of hours early. I didn't notice anything wrong until I tried to start the engine—it was that dark, just starlight on the snow."

"Hold it," Brake said. "I thought you left your motor running."

Burden smiled bitterly. "I did. But sometime in the night the damned snowplow went through again." His voice rose. "There was no earthly reason for it. The road was plenty wide for what little traffic it carried. But no, that stupid clown had to go through again!"

"Probably for the overtime," Brake said.

"Yes, but did he have to heap snow right over the hood? It melted with the heat and stopped the engine cold. With the ignition on, the

battery had run down some. I got a shovel from the garage and shoveled like a fool. Then I went at the engine, tightening cables, drying the distributor cap, and so on, hoping I'd still get away in time. But it was still dark when he came home.

"Like I said, he was only a short fat little man, but when he saw my car where his car ought to be a roar came out of his throat like you never heard. He looked like a black bear against the shine of his headlights, and he attacked like one."

Burden mopped his forehead. "You've got to remember that I was nearly frozen and stiff with the cold and fighting on the defensive. And he was like a crazy man. No sense making excuses though. I had it coming and I got it, tooth and nail, fists, feet, and head-butt too. I remember slipping down beside my car, out for a couple of minutes. Then I heard Lissa screaming in the house.

"I thought he was killing her. I hoped he was. I got into my car and wrapped myself in a blanket to keep from freezing. I fell asleep and woke up shivering, swinging and swaying behind a tow truck I hadn't ordered. There was no charge for it either, so I guess the little guy wasn't a bad sort after all."

"Did he kill her?"

"I thought he had until she came to see me two days later. I was still in bed. There wasn't a mark on her."

"What did she say about it?" Brake asked curiously.

"Well, it was funny. She bent and kissed me on the forehead, and she said, 'Tom, I thank you. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you. You saved my marriage. I thought Jack was a ninny but he's all man. A truly marvelous man. We were foolish, but he's forgiven us. He loves me, and I love *him* now. I'll love him to the end of my days.' And she kissed me on the forehead again."

Brake finished his pie and drank his coffee leisurely. It was all he wanted to know: that Melissa's affair with Tom Burden was truly over, that she had learned her lesson and would be faithful to him from now on.

He was rather proud of the way he had beaten the younger and stronger man into his present hapless condition and he felt no shame for his guile.

He had never played poker with this stranger. Nor had he given Burden his right name. "Johnny Brake" was free and easy for his pur-

pose. John Crimmins, austere and dignified, would not have done at all.

"But if I were her husband," Burden said, picking morosely at the crumbs on his plate, "I'd keep my eyes open. When a woman says things like that, innocent and smiling, with that detached look in her eyes, you know she's lying. Lissa is only biding her time."

John Crimmins smiled. After Melissa's weeping contrition and avowal of love, they had come to a complete and mutual understanding. Her madness—and who could doubt that loneliness was not responsible?—had passed.

The waitress came with the check and placed it before him. Then, turning to Burden, she murmured, "I get off at three this afternoon," and fled.

Burden looked into John Crimmins's face and shrugged.

A clammy awareness as of knives poised in dark alleys numbed Crimmins's skin. Burden knew women better than he ever would. He read, by some seemingly intuitive means, the working of their minds. He read it in their eyes.

He, John Crimmins, would remember all Burden had said about eyes. He would watch Melissa's eyes. If, in the midst of some seemingly guileless proposal, he found them focused on a point two inches short of his nose—

Well, a man who could, with utter anonymity, force an employee of the Department of Highways into widening a snowplowed road and provoke him into plugging a certain driveway full in the small cold wintry hours—such a man could easily and safely dispose of a dangerous wife.

Yes, he thought vengefully when he and Burden parted at the restaurant door, to put the blame in its proper place, to salve his tarnished honor, he had but to use the credit card, matchbook, and other unfamiliar items he had lately discovered about the house somewhere judiciously near the body, if it came to that.

He strode on purposefully, determined to guard his sometimes explosive temper and to make no mistake through unwarranted haste or suspicion.

Limping in the opposite direction, Tom Burden chuckled. Did that fat little window-sasher think to fool him with his "old friend" greeting and his offer of a free meal? What a tale he'd spun! Melissa, bless her

lonesome soul, had mentioned a fire at the factory and he had carried on from there, filling his host's hungry ears to the murderous full! Nothing would give him greater pleasure than the breakup of that marriage. Nobody beat up Tom Burden, not without regret.

And Jeanne, coming in as if on cue before he left the restaurant, shyly attempting to win him back! That was the crowning point, the seal of conviction upon the lie-garnished account he'd spun.

As any fool knew, the eyes didn't mean a thing. He had met women who could lie as bold as brass.

But in Melissa's case they did. Recently compromised and eager to regain her husband's affection, she would find herself hampered by guilt and unable to meet his eyes.

Sooner or later, her smiling hesitancy would coincide with a nasty temper occasioned by pressure of business and a few evening drinks too many. Then the sparks would fly.

It was only a matter of time.

Really, it was too rich for words!

Tom Burden began to whistle merrily, and was soon hobbling gaily to the tune.



It's always a mistake to assume that a man has no friends . . .

AFTERMATH

by
**STEPHEN
WASYLYK**



Joining the seemingly endless snake-chain of early-morning commuter traffic, Hoke Beckett drove into the city to the round building that housed police headquarters, rode the elevator to the fourth floor, pushed his way through the swinging double doors marked Homicide, and walked between the neatly arranged desks to the corner office with the name **CAPTAIN G. NOVAK** lettered on the glass door. He tapped discreetly.

The tall slender man inside smiled and beckoned. He stood up, trim in his well-tailored suit, his face sharply planed. Age had tightened the skin over his facial bones and sanded the dark wavy hair with grey but otherwise he hadn't changed much in the ten years since Beckett had worked for him.

He held out his hand. "We don't get together often enough, Hoke. I hope this is a personal call and not business."

"It's business," said Beckett quietly. "Gandy Hargrave is dead."

Novak dropped Beckett's hand and turned away to stare out of the office window. Beckett regarded the slim back with sympathy. Novak and Gandy Hargrave had been friends for well over thirty years.

Novak turned. "How?"

"It isn't easy to tell."

"Not much easier to listen," said Novak wryly. "Sit down and tell me."

"Have you been in touch with Gandy recently?"

Novak waggled his hand slightly. "Off and on. Why? Was he up to something?"

"I drove in for two reasons," said Beckett. "One is that I didn't want to tell you on the phone. The other is to check on Gandy's activities during the last three weeks. He was shot and killed by a man named Jongleur who says Gandy gained entrance to his house by claiming he was a police officer. Once inside, Gandy pulled a gun and held him up. Jongleur's servant, a man named Sebastian, tried to jump Gandy and was shot and killed, but it gave Jongleur time to pull a gun from his desk and nail Gandy."

Novak's eyes hardened. "Do you believe that?"

"Can you give me a reason for a man like Jongleur who has been in the country only a short time to lie about it? The same M.O. has been used successfully four times in the last three weeks in homes in the Barren Hill section. The description given by all the victims could fit Gandy."

"Gandy was no thief."

"You've always been a little blind to Gandy's deficiencies," said Beckett gently. "Gandy was never much of a success as a private detective and there never was a time when he didn't need money. He couldn't have survived at all without your throwing business his way and fighting for him every time he got into trouble. He would have lost his

license a long time ago if it hadn't been for you."

Novak shook his head. "Gandy liked to think of himself as an opportunist. He'd go along with a shady deal if he thought it was a smart thing to do and he always felt rules and regulations were made for the other guy. But pushing a gun in your face and taking your money wasn't his style. Tell me more about the man who shot him."

"He says he's a French writer in this country to do research. The house was loaned to him a few weeks ago by an American acquaintance who's vacationing in the Orient."

"Where would he get the gun? He couldn't have brought it with him."

"The gun is registered to the owner of the house."

"Furnished house complete with weapon," said Novak drily. "I hope you intend to handle this personally. I want to help."

"That's exactly what I had in mind. He was your friend and an acquaintance of mine; neither of us want his name on the wrong side of the ledger if he didn't deserve it." Beckett smiled. "When I was a detective and you were the lieutenant in the Northern Liberties Division ten years ago, the clout was yours. It still is. A captain of detectives in a big city can get faster action than a detective-lieutenant of a suburban county. You can check out Jongleur with the French authorities far more easily than I can."

"It will still take time," said Novak. "But while I was at a law-enforcement conference in Paris last year I spent some time drinking with an inspector from the Sûreté. I'm sure he'll be happy to help."

Beckett glanced at his watch and pointed at Novak's phone. "Since it's almost three in the afternoon there why don't you call him now?" He flipped through his notebook, found the page he wanted, and handed the open book to Novak. "Here's the man's full name and address and everything else we know about him and his servant."

Novak punched open the telephone index on his desk and began to dial.

Beckett turned to the glass partition and looked out over the squad-room. The men moved without hurry; the over-all impression one of discipline and orderliness. Novak would run an efficient operation, he thought. He always did.

A great deal of what Beckett knew had been learned during the three years he had spent with Novak in Northern Liberties, before he

had taken the job in Meridian County because his wife had wanted a big yard with grass and trees for the kids to play in. His wife was dead now and there had never been any children and he had long ago sold the house with the big yard and the grass and the trees, but Beckett had no regrets about the move. He preferred the open country and rolling hills of Meridian to the asphalt and concrete of the city.

He heard the phone drop into the cradle.

"The inspector says it will take only a few hours," said Novak. "I told him I'll call him at home between three and four this afternoon—between nine and ten his time."

"In the meantime, the big question is, if Gandy didn't go to that house to rip it off why did he go there?"

"I have no idea," said Novak.

"I have Gandy's keys. We could check out his office and apartment and ask around. Someone might know something."

"Don't be too hopeful," said Novak. "Gandy was a loner. He never let anyone know where he was going or what he was up to. I used to tell him that someone could dump him in the river and no one would know he was gone for at least a month. Let's try his apartment first. We may get lucky and find he was living with a woman again. With Gandy, they came and went."

The apartment was on the fourth floor of a high rise on the edge of the city, one of those efficiencies that are a stopover for a single person who is on the way up or on the way down. There wasn't much to look at or go over. Gandy lived with an almost Spartan simplicity. The neighbors across the hall and on either side knew nothing of him.

Gandy's office was on the seventh floor of a building where the hallways were lined with marble, the ceilings high, the doors dark metal with frosted windows. It consisted of a small anteroom with a tired sofa upholstered in tan plastic and an inner office just large enough for a pair of filing cabinets, a desk, an armchair, and a couple of chairs covered with the same tan plastic as the sofa. The window looked out onto the airshaft.

Beckett fingered through a few pieces of mail under a glass paperweight on the desk. They were all bills, some slightly overdue.

"Gandy was about your age, wasn't he?" Beckett asked Novak.

"Two years younger. Why?"

"Unless he had a safe-deposit box somewhere filled with money, he went through life without accumulating much of anything."

"That was Gandy," said Novak. "I'll check the files while you go through the desk."

Five minutes later, Novak slammed the last file drawer closed and said, "Did you find anything?"

"Nothing," said Beckett, "except that he was down to his last inch of Scotch." He spun the chair to get up and his foot hit the wastebasket. He peered inside. Envelopes from the mail on the desk were in the bottom. He fished them out and matched them with the correspondence on the desk. One was left over, a smooth-finish white, No. 10 business size with a handwritten address and no indication of who had sent it. It was postmarked at the city post office two nights before.

Whatever had been in it was missing. He handed it over to Novak.

Novak picked it up and examined the handwritten address. "You notice the seven?" he asked.

"Some schools teach kids to put a bar through the seven so it won't be confused with a one."

"True," said Novak, "but it's far more common in Europe."

"You mean France."

"I don't mean anything except I'd like to see the stationery Jongleur uses."

"It wouldn't prove much if it's the same," said Beckett. "You can buy that type of envelope by the pack in almost any kind of store, including supermarkets." He took it from Novak and slipped it into his pocket. "On the other hand, I've yet to see the man who could hold the flap of an envelope open while he licked it without leaving prints. I'll have the lab see what it can find."

Novak looked thoughtful. "If there was something from Jongleur in that envelope and that was why Gandy went there, he probably took it with him. Did you go through his pockets?"

"Aside from the usual things you'd expect and about fifty dollars in his wallet, all he had was a thousand dollars in new twenties that Jongleur says he received when he cashed traveler's checks at the bank yesterday morning."

"Planting fresh new money on a body is an old trick to make identification easy when claiming robbery," said Novak. "Let's stop at the bank on the way to the lab."

Beckett drove out to the expressway, left it, picked up the four-lane highway that ran close to Meridian, then left that for the smaller road that ran through town.

Beside him, Novak sat staring ahead. Beckett expected nothing more. Novak had always been reserved about his personal life, seldom mentioning his wife or children or his associations outside the department.

The bank manager, a stocky man with a pleasant manner, was very cooperative. Since the amount had been large, the teller had checked with him and he remembered Jongleur well. Yes, the man had specifically requested new money.

Leaving the bank, Beckett and Novak headed toward the Municipal Building. As they passed a small stationery shop, Novak suddenly stopped. "Come on," he said.

Beckett followed him inside. Like most stores, this one was partially a self-service operation. Novak found a stationery display and searched until he found what he wanted. Picking up a packet of white No. 10 envelopes wrapped in cellophane he turned it over in his hands. "Come on," he said again.

The clerk was a young woman with short blonde hair who looked at Beckett's badge with only mild interest.

Novak held up the packet of envelopes. "Do you sell many of these?"

"Yes," she said, "but not as many as the smaller ones."

"Do you remember if a man with a French accent bought a packet recently?"

She frowned a little. "I can't say. So many people come and go I don't really *talk* to very many. I take their money, make change, bag whatever they bought, and they're gone."

Novak tapped the cash register. "Do you remember anyone who might have had difficulty with money? Anyone who questioned the change or anything like that?"

She brightened. "Yes! Last week. A man about your height. He seemed a little confused. The envelopes are ninety-five cents. He gave me a dollar. I asked for two cents more because of the sales tax and had quite a time making him understand why I wanted more money."

"Did he have a French accent?"

"Well, he didn't exactly talk the way we do."

Novak bought the envelopes and he and Beckett walked out. They turned down a narrow brick sidewalk alongside the Municipal Building and went through a side entrance and down a half flight of steps. The lab was tucked away in a corner of the basement at the end of a long corridor with steam pipes and valves overhead, some of which leaked and stained the once-white walls.

"They ought to spend a little tax money for paint," said Novak.

"No politician will spend money unless it will get him votes," said Beckett. "How many voters do you think walk down this corridor?"

Novak smiled for the first time that morning.

In the lab, Beckett told a heavy spectacled man named Nicholson who was new to the job to check for prints on the envelope from Gandy's office and run a comparison on it and the packet he had bought. "Not just the paper," he said. "Analyze the glue and examine the die cut edges. Sometimes one of the dies they use acquires a little nick and it will show up on thousands before it's corrected. Look for anything that will indicate that they came from the same batch."

They stopped for lunch and were waiting for the waitress to take their order, sipping the drinks she had already brought, when Beckett said, "I never asked because it was none of my business, but you always acted as though you owed Gandy."

Novak shrugged. "It wasn't a secret. You know that Gandy and I flew fighters out of England together during the Second World War. He put his life on the line for me once. You don't forget a thing like that."

"It's hard to imagine Gandy as a pilot."

"He was one of the best. Most of us had to learn—it came to him naturally."

"He should have stayed with it."

Novak smiled. "Too many rules and regulations for him." The smile faded. "Life itself had too many rules and regulations for Gandy. He had to be free, which was why he preferred to live alone and work alone, and also why he always had trouble. Society doesn't treat a man who won't conform too kindly. Gandy could have ended up on the other side of the law but, maverick that he was, he would never set out to hurt anyone deliberately." He gulped his drink and set the glass down hard. "Which is why, whether we prove differently or not, I'll

never believe he'd use a gun to get money."

"Relax," said Beckett quietly. "We have a long way to go."

Back at the office, they found a message for Beckett to call the lab.

Nicholson's voice on the phone was pleased. "I don't know if it's good news or bad, but the single envelope matches those you brought me. It was from the same lot, probably from a previously sold packet."

"Did you find any prints?"

"Two inside the flap but too blurred to be of any value."

"Sit tight until you hear from me," said Beckett.

He hung up and told Novak what Nicholson had said.

"It's a step anyway," said Novak. "Let's see what my inspector friend has to tell us."

Beckett left him in the office and picked up one of the squadroom phones. "Get me Colessi," he said.

In a few minutes a young voice picked up. "You wanted me, Lieutenant?"

"Those holdups I asked you to check out again. Anything new?"

"Two of the people were out. I had to go back several times before I found them in, so I just finished. None of them added anything to what they already told us. The man flashed an I.D. folder. They didn't examine it carefully and when they let him in he pulled a gun, cleaned them out, and tied them up. By the time they managed to free themselves he was long gone."

"I know we've been through this before but I'd like to be certain. He didn't disturb anything, touch anything, go through the house looking for something valuable he could pocket?"

"No," said Colessi. "He was polite and didn't say much. One woman did mention that he spoke a bit funny."

"Funny?"

"Very formal. An educated man, she called him."

"I see," said Beckett. "Did you check that impression out with the others?"

There was a long pause. "No," said Colessi, "I didn't."

"While you're worrying whether that answer just shot down your within-grade salary increase, you might also ask yourself why a man would take the time, trouble, and risk to enter a house, hold up the occupant or occupants, and then be content to walk out with only the

immediately available cash, especially when those people are all well-to-do and their homes all contain easily fenced items such as jewelry."

"I'll give it some thought," said Colessi.

"Don't bother," said Beckett wearily. "I already know the answer."

Novak beckoned from the office. Beckett went in and closed the door.

"Claude Jongleur," said Novak. "Born in a little village in Picardy. He was twenty when he escaped to England before the Nazi takeover in 1940. He joined the Free French, went back into France later as an OSS agent, and remained there until the country was liberated. After the war he became a journalist and eventually a writer with some small success. The only thing on his police record is an assault complaint about ten years old filed by a German citizen who had been the Wehrmacht lieutenant in charge of the district where Jongleur's fiancée and her father lived. Jongleur accused the officer of killing them in late spring of 1944. Nothing could be proved one way or the other and eventually the charges were dropped. The man with Jongleur, Sebastian, was sort of a secretary-nurse, educated in Switzerland."

"Why does he need a nurse?"

Novak stared at him. "You met the man. Didn't you notice? He was caught by a mine explosion during the war. Both of his legs are artificial."

"I never saw him walk," said Beckett. "He sat behind a desk the entire time I talked to him. Strange. But the bank manager mentioned nothing about it."

"I think the bank manager saw a man who called himself Jongleur. Sebastian evidently ran all the errands, as he did when he bought the envelopes. No, I think we can assume that Jongleur sent Gandy a note asking him to come to the house, probably offering him an assignment. Gandy wouldn't have turned down an opportunity to make some money. But then what happened?"

"I think Gandy was set up," said Beckett. "Sebastian could have acted the part of the holdup man in the previous incidents. All they wanted to do was establish a pattern so that when Gandy was killed we would look no further. Sebastian and Gandy had the same physical characteristics—broad shoulders, thick neck, square face—close enough to confuse most witnesses anyway. The plan might have worked but two things went wrong. They underrated Gandy and he took Sebastian

with him. And they assumed because of his life-style that Gandy had no friends—a bad assumption to make about anyone at any time. But—” he rubbed his forehead “—why did Jongleur want to kill him?”

Novak paced the office for a few moments, then leaned against the wall. “All we have is the envelope and a few assumptions. We don’t have a case yet, and working between two countries it will take time to make one. In the meantime, Jongleur could disappear because we have nothing to hold him on that a good lawyer couldn’t blast apart. Let’s gamble a little. If we confront him with what we know, Jongleur can’t be certain we have no proof because he probably isn’t sure of what constitutes evidence in this country. Let’s go out there and lay it all out and see what happens.”

Beckett considered. Gandy had killed Sebastian and had died with a gun in his hand. It would be difficult to convince a jury Jongleur wasn’t justified in shooting him. They had no idea of Jongleur’s motive and they might never know. The odds were that Jongleur would fly back to France and they could do nothing about it. But if nothing else, Beckett wanted the satisfaction of letting Jongleur know he hadn’t fooled everyone.

“Let’s go,” he said.

The house was big, two stories of ivy-covered stone that projected an image of solidity and wealth.

They left the car on the driveway before the front door and Novak rang the bell.

After a time they heard a halting walk and the door swung open. Jongleur stood there, a slender man with long dark hair, a thin face that showed the effects of time, and shadowed eyes that indicated suffering. He supported himself with a pair of arm crutches.

“Ah,” he said. “You have returned. I am sorry to have kept you waiting.” He lifted a crutch apologetically. “As you can see, I miss Sebastian. Please come in.” His voice was low and soft and his accent slight.

He led them into the study and settled behind the big desk.

“Please be seated,” he said. “I hope you have come to tell me I may take Sebastian’s body home to France.”

“Well, no,” said Beckett. “I’m afraid not. You can, of course, make arrangements in a day or two to ship the body, but you can’t leave.”

Jongleur sat straight and rigid. “I do not understand.”

Beckett put an edge to his voice, "We believe the story you told was a fabrication designed to conceal the deliberate murder of Gandy Hargrave."

"That is preposterous! The man was a thief!"

"No," said Novak. "He was many things but he wasn't a thief."

Beckett answered the question in Jongleur's eyes. "Captain Novak is with the city police. He was a very close friend of Hargrave, so it was not unusual for Hargrave to keep him informed."

The expression in Jongleur's eyes could have been surprise or shock.

"We also found an envelope in Hargrave's office which we've traced to the stationery store in Meridian," said Beckett. "The young woman can identify Sebastian as the man who bought a similar packet. As for the handwritten address, I'm certain you're aware that an expert—" He deliberately let the sentence hang.

The silence was broken only by the soft ticking of the impressive clock in the foyer.

"You understand that you're not required to say anything," Beckett told Jongleur. "You may notify your embassy and arrange for an attorney to defend you."

Jongleur sighed and the lines in his face eased as though he had become free of a heavy burden. "Perhaps it is best. It was not my intention to conceal the truth to evade punishment." He smiled wryly. "A decent man cannot kill someone without payment being exacted in some manner. I wanted only to protect Sebastian because I did not wish him punished as an accomplice, but the man Gandy was more courageous and skilled than I had anticipated. He killed Sebastian before I could kill *him*, so it does not matter now."

He straightened in the chair, his voice firm. "Hargrave deserved to die. He murdered my fiancée and her father. I swore I would have revenge. It has taken a long time to find the man because I am not wealthy. Always there was something that interfered with my plans and the years went by." He shrugged. "Now it is done as I said it would."

"When did these murders take place?" asked Novak tightly. Beckett glanced at him. Novak's face had gone white.

"During the war, of course," said Jongleur. "Everyone said it was the Nazis but when I found the Wehrmacht lieutenant, I could see in his eyes he was telling the truth when he said they had not done it. He said it was the Underground, but why should *they* kill them? It was

with difficulty that I had the bodies disinterred and examined and the doctor found they had been killed with bullets from a Colt Army .45. At first that seemed ridiculous because there were no Americans in France then. But then—" he rubbed the side of his face with one hand "—I searched the records and found that there had been a downed American pilot captured in the vicinity at that exact time, and it was known that American pilots carried that type of weapon. It took me a long time to locate that pilot, but I did. It was Hargrave."

There was only the solemn ticking of the clock. Beckett's skin crawled. Then Novak pushed himself to his feet.

"You're mad," he said, his voice a whisper.

The emotion on Novak's usually imperturbable face froze Beckett.

"You've carried this thing with you all these years and while I can't understand it I can't condemn you for it. But I can condemn you for setting yourself up as executioner on the basis of some obscure record without taking the time to be sure you were right."

Jongleur shook his head. "I checked the records carefully."

"Listen to me," said Novak. "Gandy Hargrave and I flew together. I know Gandy went down one morning and was captured that afternoon. He went near no farmhouse. He couldn't have killed anyone."

Jongleur's voice held an edge of uncertainty. "You cannot know—"

"I know because I knew the people involved," snapped Novak. "Gandy wasn't the only pilot shot down that day. He and another man happened to land in the same field and they hid together in a large patch of forest. German patrols surrounded it and began working their way through. Seeing they would be taken prisoner, Gandy marched out into those guns with his hands up, hoping that the patrols didn't know there were *two* men there and that they'd stop searching if they found him. He was right. The patrols withdrew.

"The other pilot began running. He was crossing a farmyard when a man came out of the house, saw him, and motioned him inside. There was a girl. She didn't like what the man had done and they argued. The man sat the pilot at the table and fed him. The pilot was very tired and the warmth of the room and the wine put him to sleep. Later, loud voices woke him. The girl had taken his gun and she and the man were arguing. He knew enough French to understand that the girl wanted to turn him in. He tried to take the gun from her. It went off. The old man fell. The girl screamed, picked up the carving knife from

the table, and attacked the pilot. In self-defense, he shot her. Then he ran. He was miles away when he made contact with the Underground. A month later he was back in England, where he reported the whole story at a debriefing session. It should exist somewhere in the records you say you searched."

"You lie!" Jongleur snarled.

Novak's voice was hard. "You should have listened to the German officer. The pilot heard enough to know the girl was his mistress."

Jongleur seemed to deflate suddenly. He looked up, his dark eyes exposing a thin scream bottled somewhere inside. Fumbling blindly in his shirt pocket, he withdrew a small envelope and, his hands trembling, he shook a small white pill into his palm. "For my illness," he said. He filled a glass of water from a carafe on the desk.

Beckett suddenly realized what he was doing.

"*Stop him!*" he yelled at Novak and launched himself at Jongleur.

They were still coming at him when Jongleur swallowed the pill. "*Je regrette,*" he said. Then he stiffened suddenly, his face drawn, and Beckett caught him as he collapsed.

It was dark by the time he drove Novak back to the city, and it wasn't until the night lights of the tall buildings hung like spangles on a curtain ahead that he asked, "You were the other pilot?"

Novak shook his head. "The man was from another squadron. I know the story because he came to see me afterward. Gandy had asked him to come see me if he made it back because he wanted me to know it was all right."

"What was all right?"

Novak sat silent for a few moments. "It was my fault Gandy was shot down. I made a stupid mistake and Gandy saved me from being killed or spending the rest of the war in a prison camp by doing what he did."

"Good Lord," said Beckett. "And because of it you carried Gandy on your back for almost thirty-five years. You're as bad as Jongleur, holding onto something you should have shed a long time ago. He came a long way to learn the truth."

"I think he knew it all along," said Novak. "He was just afraid to believe it. That's why he felt he had to kill Gandy."

"No," said Beckett. "That was why he carried that pill."

There are memories that bless and burn . . .

DELAHANTY STREET

by

DOROTHY
BENJAMIN



“Mummy, I wish I’d known my grandmother,” my ten-year-old daughter muses. Her vivacity can’t long be restrained and her green eyes glow with animation.

“I want to be a dancer, like her.”

“Me too!” echo my two younger daughters. My girls are all graced with vivid red hair and creamy complexions, a legacy from their maternal grandmother. My own hair is more gold than red.

From his chair my husband surveys us with an indulgent smile. He delights in the tableau of the glamorous suburban matron surrounded by her lovely daughters. Given his strong convictions of fealty to family, I wonder how he would react to my life on Delahanty Street, of which he knows nothing.

To questions of the past I have woven fairy tales of a golden childhood, enunciating a single truth only—that my beautiful, red-haired mother died when I was twelve.

I never knew my father. My mother once told me she'd married a sailor who was lost at sea, but when I searched her effects after she died I found no marriage certificate much less a letter or scrap of paper from which I could trace my background. I never even knew whether Fossie was my mother's name or my father's.

Having no recollection or knowledge of my first few years, I date my life from the winter that we came to Delahanty Street—when I was four and my mother twenty-one.

I remember Delahanty Street as being an interminable long block of dreary tenements with high stoops, each entrance door painted an institutional green. Most of the families on our block were on the dole. My mother and I lived in a single room one flight up in which we cooked, ate, and slept. Like all tenement rooms, ours was cold and drafty in winter, hot and airless in the summer.

The street teemed with activity. Pushcarts vied for space with wagons, motorized and horse-drawn. The air rang with the cries of hawkers and squabbling children. Hardly a day passed without the sight of a paddy wagon or a fire truck clanging its way down the street.

The first game the neighborhood kids invited me to play was one in which I had to find the only door in our block showing red. Egged on, I ran up and down the high stoops until I began to cry from the pain in my legs.

"You dummy!" hooted eight-year-old Francis Carty, instigator of the game, pointing out that it was the door of *my* building that showed a trace of red under the doorknob where covering coats of paint had worn away. My wails of frustration brought my mother running.

"Please play nice with my Angie," she appealed to the kids in her sweet, childish voice. The kids stared at her in awe.

My mother always drew attention. She pinned up her shock of red

hair nightly so that, brushed out, it cascaded in waves over her shoulders. She blackened the pale lashes fringing her lustrous green eyes, making her eyes appear enormous. Her lips were a splash of vivid color.

She fussed over me too, calling me her doll. Long after I should have been, she dressed me in little-girl dresses.

For a while my mother went looking for work, leaving me in the care of Mrs. Eisenstein, a kindly ailing widow who lived downstairs and was the only woman on Delahanty Street to ever befriend my mother. It was the tail end of the Depression and jobs were still scarce. Many nights we went to bed hungry, but every so often my mother would come home bubbling with the news she had found a job and we would have a feast.

Sadly, the jobs never lasted. Trouble followed my mother—through the machinations of a jealous clerk, a too flirtatious customer, or the boss's wife. Finally, she gave up looking.

With World War II, there began a parade of servicemen to our room. My mother had told me she was teaching dancing and I'd believed her because she loved to dance, but I believed her long after it ceased to be true.

When she had a night-time "client," I'd huddle on the hallway stairs waiting for him to leave. It wasn't just childhood innocence that protected me from absorbing full knowledge of my mother—I reinforced that innocence by encasing myself in an armor that barbs and innuendoes couldn't pierce.

One night, when I was eight and Francis Carty was twelve, he came after me in the hall, jeering: "Dummy, whaddaya think your mother's doin' up there with the soldier, huh?"

He began tugging at my dress and I screamed, "Leave me alone!"

Mrs. Eisenstein opened her door, peered into the shadowed gloom a fifteen-watt bulb could not dispel, and called in her accented English, "Angie? Is that you?"

Francis swaggered down the stairs. "Who wantsa know?"

"Go home, Francis," Mrs. Eisenstein said. "You bother Angie again, I call the police."

"Yah!" Francis snarled, and spat at her as he went out the door. It was the neighborhood code that short of murder you didn't sic the police onto a neighbor.

Somewhere between ten and eleven my protective armor thinned. I'd been proud of my mother's beauty and the way she dressed—in bright frilly dresses instead of the faded, drab housedresses the other women on Delahanty Street wore—but I began wishing she wasn't quite so different. I noticed that Mrs. Pearlman, Mrs. Eisenstein's daughter who visited her regularly, dressed plain yet looked attractive.

The neighbor women were growing critical of my mother's looks too. When she appeared, their husbands would be galvanized into attention. But I'll say this for my mother—no man from the street ever made it up to her room.

Coming home from school one day in the spring, Francis, with members of his gang, barred my way. I tried to sidestep them, but Francis, hopping about exaggeratedly, was right there blocking me. "Your mother's a *hoor*," he said, grinning maliciously.

I'd never heard the word before and didn't know what it meant, but I recognized a taunt when I heard one and this one was against my mother. I sailed into him, fists flying, but I was no match for him. Weeping, I limped home, my face scratched, my knees skinned, my dress torn.

"Angie!" My mother grabbed me. "What did those boys do to you?"

"Nothing. It was just a fight." I pulled away from her resentfully. I wanted to know what *hoor* meant, but knew it was better not to ask.

The week I turned eleven, in the summer of 1944, was hot—too hot even for the boys' favorite game of darting between pushcarts and wagons, daring each other to filch something. So we sat on the stoops in whatever shade we could find, waiting for the ice wagon to show, anticipating the ice chips we'd snatch.

One steamy day as we waited, my mother had the ice card in the window, as did nearly every family on the street. When the iceman had slung the block of ice over the rubber sheeting on his back and entered our building, the kids crowded around the wagon. He took so long coming back out that they forgot to keep on the lookout for him, and all of a sudden he was outside, roaring: "Gettahell away from there!" The kids scattered like dust on the wind.

The iceman, a brawny, darkly handsome man, eyed me. "Hey, Goldy. You belong to her?" A black curl fell over his forehead as he gestured with his head toward the second-floor window. I nodded. I could see the black hair covering his bare arms. He gave off a heavy

smell of sweat.

He gestured with his head again. "C'mere." I followed him to the wagon. Sweeping a large block of ice clean, he chipped away at it with a giant pick and handed me a generous hunk.

Suddenly I didn't want any ice. I didn't know why, only that, parched as I was, I didn't want it. As he whistled for his horse to move on, I opened my hands and let it fall into the gutter.

From time to time one of my mother's visitors would comment on my looks and she would quickly shoo me out into the hall. I had begun developing early and at eleven I must have looked ridiculous in the little-girl dresses she bought me. There was a good deal of drinking going on—most of the servicemen brought a bottle or two with them when they came. But I never saw my mother drink in the daytime until after a certain Army sergeant started coming around.

The sergeant must have been regular Army because he was older, than the other G.I.'s and he had a tough, hardbitten face. Once he arrived unexpectedly and, finding a young sailor in the room, threw him bodily down the stairs. My mother began looking harried and grim and developed a nervous cough. When she knew the sergeant was coming she'd act jumpy and push me out of the room early.

One evening he sauntered in while I was still there. He looked me up and down and pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. "Well," he said softly, "have we got ourselves a beauty here."

"Get out, Angie," my mother said.

I giggled nervously. "Why can't I stay?" With the sergeant's gaze on me I felt emboldened, yet fearful.

"Sure, kid." He winked at me. "Let's send her out there and you stay with me. How'd you like that?"

"Go!" My mother's hand swept toward my face.

She had never slapped me before. With a cry I ran from the room and huddled on the stairs, seething with resentment. Torn by a bombardment of impulses I didn't understand, I vowed never to forgive her.

Then, slowly, I became aware of loud quarreling voices. There was an outcry from my mother, a thud against the wall, an oath from the sergeant. Then came the sound of sharp smacks of hand against flesh, furniture pushed over and thrown. Something crashed through the

window and landed on the pavement below.

A man opened the downstairs door and shouted, "Hey! What the hell's going on up there?" I could see people gathering on the sidewalk.

The sergeant's voice penetrated the thin walls, his tone threatening. I heard a bottle smash followed by the sound of a body falling heavily, then complete silence.

The door to our room slowly opened and my mother stepped out, moving like a sleepwalker. Blood seeped down the side of her battered face. The wail of a siren could be heard coming closer.

As if it were painful for her to speak through her swollen lips, she said thickly, "Roof—don't tell police." I turned my back on her.

She was halfway up the third-floor stairway when the downstairs door opened and two policemen came through. They took the stairs by twos and threes and one of the two whistled sharply when he entered our room.

"This soldier's fought his last battle," he said and the other answered grimly, "But he sure won't get the Purple Heart for it."

They came out onto the landing and stood uncertainly for a moment before pounding up the stairs to the roof. In a few minutes they were back, supporting my mother between them. "Angie!" she wailed, her voice like that of a lost child.

I gripped the bannister, making myself as small as I could as she passed me. Before the downstairs door closed behind them she mumbled something to Mrs. Eisenstein, who answered, "Don't worry, Mrs. Fossie. I'll look after Angie."

Mrs. Eisenstein's daughter brought her mother fowl every Thursday for Mrs. Eisenstein's Friday evening sabbath meal. I seldom felt like eating and Mrs. Eisenstein would coax me to have some soup. She baked all sorts of good things to tempt me with, but I couldn't eat. She took good care of me although she suffered from high blood pressure and her feet and legs swelled badly.

"Mama, you're doing too much," her daughter scolded. "I want you to come home with me and see a doctor." Mrs. Eisenstein protested that she couldn't leave me.

"Hasn't Angie any relatives?"

"No—nobody."

"Then we'll have to get in touch with the authorities," her daughter said firmly. "They'll take charge of her."

"After I promised Angie's mama?" Mrs. Eisenstein clasped her hands in distress.

Her daughter sighed. "All right, Mama. Angie will come home with us."

Mrs. Pearlman's husband, an attorney, cleared it with the authorities for me to stay with them and I left Delahanty Street on a raw wintry day in 1945, not knowing I would never return.

Having been exposed only to Delahanty Street and its immediate neighborhood, I was overwhelmed by the Pearlmans' lovely suburban home with its grounds trimmed by lush trees and shrubbery. I'd grown up in a concrete jungle, and it was as if I had been transported into another world.

I shared a room with the Pearlmans' two young daughters so that Mrs. Eisenstein could have a room for herself. The doctor said her heart was affected and she must have rest and quiet. I would go into Mrs. Eisenstein's room and stand beside her bed, silently imploring her not to die. She was my only friend. What would I do without her?

I sensed that Mrs. Pearlman didn't really want me there, that she blamed me for her mother's illness, although she never once slighted me. When she outfitted Judy and Lisa with new spring clothes for Passover, she bought them for me too—and I was grateful to discard my babyish dresses.

At the ritual *seder* service conducted by Mr. Pearlman on the first two nights of the Passover, a dish was passed around while the family recited a list of ten plagues, pouring off a drop of wine for each. Mr. Pearlman read a verse:

"Though the plagues afflicting the Egyptians were brought about by their own evil, we do not take pleasure in their suffering and defeat."

That was an alien philosophy for anyone bred in the code of Delahanty Street and as a product of Delahanty Street I brought mistrust of the unknown with me. The Pearlmans treated me kindly, but I felt like an outsider. I didn't belong with them. I was a stranger to their ways. Set down in the midst of plenty, I longed for the less that was a known quantity, the familiarity of Delahanty Street.

And my mother was part of that world though I tried not to think

about her and wouldn't let myself admit that I missed her. I held her responsible for my predicament.

In May of that year came V-E Day, and two months later my twelfth birthday. Mrs. Pearlman baked a cake and carried it to the table aglow with lighted candles. It was the first birthday cake I'd ever had.

At the girls' urging I made a wish—I shut my eyes and wished hard that my mother would be released from prison—then blew out the candles. The girls clapped their hands and assured me my wish would come true.

In August V-J Day was declared. Mrs. Eisenstein, who had lost her only son in the early months of the war, wept when she learned the war was over at last. A few days later Mrs. Pearlman told me my mother was ill and brought me to the prison hospital to see her. I didn't know then that the reason I was allowed to visit her was because she was dying.

Everything about the prison ward was grey—the walls, the beds, the grim-faced nurses, my mother most of all. At first we couldn't find her. Her bed was in the corner opposite a door and several beds angled from the adjoining wall blocked her from our view.

When I caught sight of her, I felt shocked by her pallor. Gone were the creamy complexion and the lustrous green of her eyes. And she had been shorn of her beautiful red hair. I stood stricken.

She stared at me vacantly at first, then slowly recognition came into her eyes. "Angie?" she said weakly.

She held out her arms to me but I hung back, caught up in the memory of our last day together, reliving the moment when she slapped me, hearing again the intensity in her voice as she ordered me out. And suddenly I understood, as I hadn't before, that my mother had been trying to protect me in the only way she knew.

"Mama!" I cried, flinging myself into her arms, "Mama, I'm sorry."

"It's all right, Angie. Don't cry." She touched my face. "Let me look at you. Ah, you're so pretty." Her hand lingered over my hair. "How is Mrs. Eisenstein?"

"She's sick, Mama. She stays in bed all the time. The doctor says it's her heart."

"Oh," my mother sighed. Her eyes fluttered shut.

I pressed her arm, afraid she was falling asleep. "Mama, I want to go

home. When can we go home?" I wanted us to be together as we used to be, at home on Delahanty Street. We belonged together.

My mother opened her eyes and lay gazing at a distant point beyond me. "Maybe soon."

The matron approached. "Your time is up. You'll have to leave."

My mother drew me close. "Be a good girl, Angie," she whispered. "Grow up—*nice*."

In the doorway I turned to wave. Standing on tiptoes, I craned my neck to see over the intervening beds and glimpsed my mother's answering wave as with supreme effort she raised herself.

We stood on opposite sides of a great divide—I, in the sunlight, on the threshold of life; my mother at only twenty-nine on the twilight side, the dark curtain of night already enclosing her.

I wanted to run back and tell her I loved her, that I would always love her and had always loved her, but the matron was coming toward us scowling and Mrs. Pearlman drew me away.

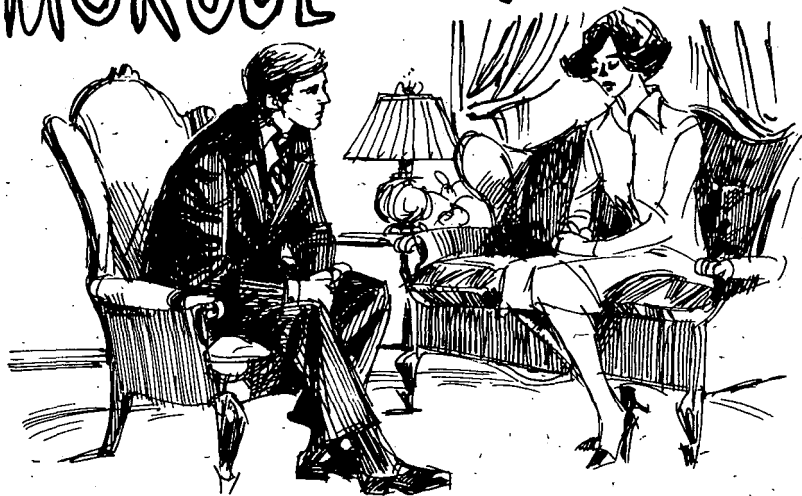
I never got the chance to tell my mother how much I loved her. Three days later she died. And only in memory—my secret, silent memory—have I ever returned to Delahanty Street.

Over and over, grieving, I huddle on those hallway stairs while the policemen come out of the room where the Army sergeant lies dead, and as they ponder in which direction to proceed I point the way to the roof.



The odds, Nudger told her, were better with the F.B.I. . . .

THE MAN IN THE MORGUE by JOHN LUTZ



It was a big house, with enough gables, dormers, and cupolas to resemble a maniac's chessboard. I smoothly braked and curbed my beige Volkswagen beetle in the semicircular driveway, conscious of the car's faded paint and character-forming dents in contrast to the symmetrically bricked and shrubbed entranceway to the house. The engine turned over a few times after I'd killed the ignition.

I half expected a butler to answer my ring. Instead, a large cop in a

sweat-stained blue uniform opened the door and stared at me. He was about fifty with shrewd grey eyes, a shaggy grey moustache that turned down at the corners, a bulging stomach that dictated he shop in the big men's department.

"Mr. Aloysius Nudger to see Mrs. Emily Stein," I told him.

"If you had a hat and a coat," he said, "I could take them for you and hang them up." He stepped back so I could enter. "She's expecting you, Nudger. I'm Chief Gladstone, Marlville Police."

I followed him down a tile-floored hall into a large room furnished in dainty French provincial. The carpet was the same deep pearl color as the grip of the revolver in Gladstone's leather hip holster, and ceiling-to-floor powder-blue drapes were opened to admit soft light through white sheer curtains. The walls were papered in light gold patterned in darker gold fleurs-de-lis. It struck me as the sort of place where it might be difficult to read the menu.

Emily Stein rose from a fragile-looking sofa and smiled a strained smile at me. She was more beautiful now than twenty years ago when her name was Emily Colter and she was still single and chasing a modeling career. I couldn't understand how she'd failed to catch that career. She was tall and slender but curvaceous, and she had angular faintly oriental cheekbones and oversized compassionate blue eyes. I'd been in love with her once, back in Plainton, Missouri. But that was over twenty years ago, and she'd considered us only good friends even then. She had phoned me at my office yesterday and said she'd found herself in trouble, would I drive out and talk with her about it. I said, yes, what were friends for?

"Thank you for coming, Alo," she said, simply. There were circles of worry beneath her large eyes. "This is Chief Fred Gladstone of the Marlville Police Department."

I nodded and we all sat down politely, Gladstone and I on silkily upholstered, breakable-looking matching chairs that were too well bred to creak.

"Chief Gladstone agreed it might be a good idea to call you in on this," Emily said, "when I told him we were old friends and you're a private detective in the city."

When I glanced over at Gladstone's gone-to-fat craggy features, my impression was that he hadn't had much choice.

"Larry's been kidnapped," Emily said.

I waited while she paused for what they call in drama circles "a beat." Emily had always been stagy in an appealing way. Larry Stein was the man she married five years ago, a wealthy importer of leather goods, dark-haired, handsome, still in his thirties. I'd been at the wedding.

"Or do you use the term 'kidnapped' for a grown man?" Emily asked.

"You do," I told her. "When was Larry kidnapped?"

"Yesterday at three P.M., by the statue of Admiral Farragut in the park."

"Was there a ransom demand?"

"Even before the kidnapping," Gladstone cut in.

"Three days ago," Emily said, "Larry got a letter in the mail here at home. It was to the point and unsigned. If he didn't deliver five thousand dollars to the sender at three yesterday afternoon near the Farragut statue, I would be killed."

Gladstone stood up from his chair, moved to a secretary near the window, and handed me a white envelope. "It's already been checked for prints," he said. "Nothing there. Postmarked locally, widely sold cheap typing paper, typed on a Royal electric portable."

The folded note inside the envelope was as Emily had described—short, direct, neat, and grammatically correct. I asked her, "Did Larry follow these instructions?"

Emily nodded. "And he told me to call you if anything happened to him. He thinks a lot of you professionally."

I found it odd that he'd think of me at all, since I'd only met him twice. But then I'm sure he knew, in that instinctive way husbands have, that I greatly admired Emily.

"Larry knew something wasn't right about it, even as a straight extortion demand," Emily went on. "He said the amount of money they demanded was too small and what they really might want was an opportunity to grab him with enough money on him for them to be able to hold out while they waited for a huge ransom."

"It turns out Larry was right," Gladstone said. "Emily got this in this morning's mail." He handed me another envelope, identical to the first—same paper, same typing—but this time with a demand for \$100,000. Otherwise dead Larry. The kidnappers ended the note by assuring Emily they'd stay in touch.

I looked at the postmark. Yesterday's date, time 11:00 A.M., local. "Right," Gladstone said, following my thoughts. "Mailed before Larry was snatched. So it was planned, not spontaneous."

"How about the F.B.I.?" I said.

Emily shook her head no, her lips a firm, thin line.

"She refused," Gladstone told me. "She wants you instead."

I sat back in my chair, digesting what I'd learned. It gave me a stomach ache. Extortion, kidnapping, threatened murder, a ransom demand from someone or some group that seemed to know what moves to make. I didn't have the nerves for my profession. Automatically, I reached into my shirt pocket, peeled back some tinfoil, and popped a thin white antacid tablet into my mouth.

"Call the F.B.I., Emily," I said. "The odds are better that way."

"Larry told me not to do that. He said it would be a sure way to get him killed. The F.B.I. has a file on him. In the sixties he was what you might call a student radical—nothing serious, but his photograph was taken with the wrong people and he was in the wrong spot when a building burned down. It's all behind him, but they might not believe that."

From student radical to Larry the capitalist.

"What now?" Emily asked in a lost voice.

"We wait for instructions and take it from there. It wouldn't be a bad idea to get a recorder on the phone in case they decide to stop using the mail."

"That's been taken care of," Gladstone said.

"Can you get the hundred thousand?" I asked Emily.

"I can." No hesitation.

"Do you have any idea who might be doing this? Sometimes a kidnapping is a personal matter."

"No one I can think of." Outside a jay started a shrill chatter on the patio. The strident notes seemed to set Emily more on edge. "Larry never told me much about his business; he knows people I don't know. But he was—is—the type who never made enemies."

"Except for the F.B.I.," I said, rising from my fragile chair. The sheer curtains were parted slightly, and beyond the brick patio I could see a tilled garden about twelve by nine feet, lined with cabbage, lettuce, and staked tomato plants. Near the center of the garden were two rows of young tomato vines that would mature toward the end of

summer and keep the Steins in tomatoes all season long. The garden was neglected now and needed weeding. Still, it was a garden. I smiled. Plainton, Missouri. A part of Emily would always remain a country girl.

"Maybe somebody ought to stay here with you nights," Gladstone said.

"No," Emily said, "I'll be fine. The house is equipped with dead bolt locks and has a burglar-alarm system. And I have Bruno."

I raised my eyebrows. "Bruno?"

Emily got up and walked to the door at the other end of the room. When she opened the door, a huge black and tan German shepherd ambled in and sat, his white teeth glinting against his black lips and lolling pink tongue. Bruno was a factor.

Before I left, I gave Emily and Gladstone each one of my printed cards with my home and office phone numbers. I told Emily to try to keep occupied and worry as little as possible. Hollow advice but my best under the circumstances.

The Volkswagen's oil-starved engine beat like a busy machine shop as I drove past Marlville's exclusive shopping area of boutiques, service stations bordered by artificial green grass and shrubbery that would fool you at a thousand feet, and a red-brick and yellow-plastic McDonald's harboring half a dozen scraggly teenagers with nothing better to do on a sunny June day in swank suburbia.

I turned onto the cloverleaf and headed east toward the city, glad to be away from all that manicured spaciousness.

From a phone booth on Davis Avenue, I checked with my answering service. No one had called, and I didn't feel like returning to my desolate office to reread my mail.

My apartment was also a lonely place, but the loneliness was in me, wherever I went. I phoned a colleague at police headquarters who had an F.B.I. connection and promised to get me information on Larry Stein in a hurry and call back. Then I took a quick shower, leaving the bathroom door open so I could hear the phone.

It rang while I was toweling myself dry.

Larry Stein had been a member of a short-lived left-wing student organization called LIFT, Leftist Insurgents For Tomorrow. He had attended some demonstrations that turned violent and had been photo-

graphed near the R.O.T.C. building at Washington University when it burned down. He was never formally charged with arson, and someone else eventually was convicted of the crime. This was in 1966. Who cared now? Probably no one.

I cooked up some hamburger steaks and stewed tomatoes and sat down with it and a glass of beer to watch a ball game on television.

At a few minutes after five, the jangle of the phone woke me from a sound sleep in front of the TV.

"Nudger?"

"I think."

"Chief Gladstone. I got a call from the city police. Larry Stein is at the morgue."

I could think of nothing to say. I wasn't sure myself how I was taking the news.

"Refuse collectors found his body this afternoon in a big cardboard box behind a restaurant. He was shot to death. How about going down and making the I.D.?"

"Does Emily know?"

"Not yet."

"I'll tell her," I said. "I'll let you know when I get done at the morgue."

I replaced the receiver and stood for a moment, despising myself. I knew that hidden in my compassion for Emily was a secret joyous voice reminding me that she was a widow now, she was free.

But when I got to the morgue and old Eagan slid Drawer #16 out on its metal casters, I found that I wasn't looking at Larry Stein. This man had been close to Stein's height and weight, and his hair was dark brown if not black, but his face was broader than Stein's, and slightly pockmarked.

Whoever he was, he'd been shot five times in the chest.

When I phoned police headquarters and told them it wasn't Stein, they told me to come down. I took an antacid tablet and went.

Lieutenant Jack Keough, an old friend from when I was on the force, talked to me. He's a few years older than I am, with candid brown eyes and an often-broken nose that wasn't Roman to begin with. His office is so barren and battered that even after the morgue it was depressing.

"We sent the prints to Washington," Keough said, "so we should know soon who we've got chilled." Then he dumped the contents of a large brown envelope onto his desk. He didn't have to tell me it was what was found in the pockets of the corpse. An expensive kidskin wallet—Larry Stein's wallet with all his identification, credit cards, driver's license, photographs of Emily, and a few worn business cards. There were two tens and a five in the bill compartment. Besides the wallet, there were a leather key case, a black pocket comb, and some loose change. While I was sorting through it, I told Keough about the kidnap case.

"Now it's in our ball park too," Keough said. "We can help you."

"I wish there were a way," I told him. "You'd better phone Chief Gladstone and let him know about this. Maybe he can put a name on the dead man."

"We're never that lucky," Keough said.

Armed with some head shots of the corpse, I drove the next morning to Marlville to talk to Emily. As I was about to turn into the semicircular driveway, I saw a dark blue Pontiac sedan turning out of the other end of the drive onto the street.

When Emily answered my knock, I could see that she was badly shaken. I wished I'd had the presence of mind to jot down the license number of the Pontiac.

"Have you found out anything?" she asked, opening the door wide.

"I'm not sure," I told her, stepping inside. Bruno ambled over and licked my hand. "I'm afraid I have to show you some unpleasant photographs, Emily."

She backed a step, supported herself with exaggerated casualness on a low table. "Not . . ."

"Not Larry," I said quickly. "A man was killed, and Larry's identification was in his pockets. We need to know who that man was."

"Killed . . . how?"

"Shot to death." I removed the photographs from the envelope and showed them to her.

She seemed relieved to find herself staring at a peaceful composed face. "I don't know him," she said. "At least, not that I can recall."

I followed her into the living room, where she sat bent and exhausted on the sofa.

"Do you know someone who drives a blue Pontiac?" I asked. She used a graceful hand to brush her hair back from her face. "No, I don't think so. Why?"

"I thought I saw one pulling away from the house as I drove up."

Emily shrugged. "He must have been turning around. We're the end house; they do that all the time."

But she had said "he," and there had been a man driving the car.

That night I began keeping watch on the Stein house. And learned nothing. At midnight, when all the lights in the house had gone out, I went home.

The next morning I learned from Keough that the man in the morgue was still unidentified. His fingerprints weren't in the master files, which meant that he had never been in the armed forces or acquired a police record. His good behavior had earned him five bullets—according to Keough, thirty-eight-caliber bullets, probably fired from a Colt automatic.

I watched the Stein house most of the next day and that evening until Emily went to bed at 11:45. Again nothing. Maybe Emily had been telling the truth; maybe the car I'd seen had only been using the driveway to turn around.

But on the way home I saw the blue Pontiac in the McDonald's lot in Marlville. Of course I'd only caught a glimpse of the car at Emily's and couldn't be positive this was the same one, but after writing down the license number I parked in a spot near the rear of the lot where I could watch it.

McDonald's was closing. After a while some of the parking-lot lights winked out and the swarms of insects that had been circling them disappeared.

A man walked from the red and yellow building, munching a hamburger as he strode toward the Pontiac. He seemed to be in his thirties, medium-height, and muscular rather than stocky—a lean-waisted weightlifter's build. He was wearing dark slacks and a blue short-sleeved sport shirt open at the collar. I couldn't see his face clearly.

When the Pontiac pulled from the lot, I popped an antacid tablet into my mouth and followed.

It took him about two minutes to reach Emily's house. As I sat parked up the street, watching, he knocked on the front door. Lights

came on, the door opened, and he entered. Twenty minutes later he came back outside, got into the Pontiac, and drove away. I stayed with him.

He drove toward the city, getting off the highway at Vine and turning south on Twentieth. Ten minutes later, he made a right onto Belt Street and parked in front of a six-story brick apartment building just this side of being condemned. We were in one of those neighborhoods on the edge of a genuine slum. As I watched, he entered the building and a while later a light came on in one of the fourth-floor windows.

I climbed stiffly out of the Volkswagen, crossed the street, and entered the vestibule of the building. There was a dim overhead light-bulb and a row of tarnished metal mailboxes. Two of the names on the fourth-floor boxes were women's. 4-D was listed as B. Darris, 4-B as Charles L. Coil.

After copying all the names and the address, I walked back to the Volkswagen, waited until the light had gone out in the fourth-floor window, then drove home weary for bed.

Ten o'clock. I got up slowly, sat for a while on the edge of the mattress, then made my way into the bathroom and under a cool shower. Ten minutes later I turned on the burner beneath the coffee before returning to the bedroom to dress. After a breakfast of grapefruit juice, poached eggs, and black coffee I was sufficiently awake to ask myself what it had all meant last night.

Emily was seeing the man in the Pontiac and wanted it kept secret. Was he one of the kidnappers? Anyone unconnected with the case? A clandestine lover?

The telephone rang and I carried my coffee into the other room to answer. It was Keough. They had an identification on the body in the morgue—Harold Vinceno, 122 Edison Avenue. He'd been reported missing by his wife three days ago and his general description fit that of the dead man. Mrs. Vinceno had made the positive identification this morning.

I asked Keough to get me an owner from Records on the blue Pontiac's plate numbers, then asked him to find out what he could about the car's owner. When he asked me why, I told him it was nothing solid, just a hunch I was following.

By the time I'd finished my coffee and examined the mail, drops of

rain were pecking at the window. Keough might not call back for hours. I went to the closet and put on a lightweight waterproof jacket, then I left to visit Mrs. Vinceno.

Edison Avenue was near the west edge of the city, medium-priced neat tract houses, on small lots with trimmed lawns that were being watered by the steady pattering rain. The Vinceno house was a white-frame ranch with empty flower boxes beneath the front windows.

Mrs. Vinceno answered the door on the third ring. She was a small haggard woman, probably pretty in ordinary circumstances, with large dark eyes that were red from crying.

"My name's Nudger, Mrs. Vinceno. I'm a detective. I know it's an awkward time, but I need to talk to you about your husband."

She nodded without expression and stepped back.

We sat at opposite ends of the sofa. But for a new-looking console TV, everything in the small living room was slightly worn.

"I'm sure the police have asked you, Mrs. Vinceno, but do you have any idea what happened to your husband?"

She shook her head no. "When I saw Harold I was—surprised," she said in a husky voice. "Not because he was dead, but because he'd been shot."

I waited.

"Harold left here three days ago with the intention of committing suicide, Mr. Nudger. We hadn't been getting along. We had money problems—personal problems. He left here in one of his rages, saying he would end everything for himself."

I watched her battle the trembling of her hands to light a cigarette.

"Then he called here the next morning and told me our money problems were solved. He said he'd stumbled across a deal that couldn't miss and he'd let me know more about it when the time came. I begged him to come home, but he wouldn't.

"I didn't take his talk about money seriously. Harold was kind of incoherent on the phone, and he was always stumbling into rainbows without pots of gold at the end of them." She bowed her head and her disarranged black hair fell down to hide her face.

It didn't boost my self-esteem to keep at her, but I did. "Did your husband ever mention Larry Stein, the man whose identification was on him?" She shook her head no. "How about B. Darris? Charles L.

Coil?" No and no. Her shoulders began to quake.

Driving to my office, I tried to draw some conclusions and only came up with more questions. Was Vincenzo one of the kidnappers? Had he actually intended to commit suicide, or had he been playing for his wife's pity? Had he known Emily? The man in the Pontiac? The only person involved in the case I could be sure Vincenzo had crossed paths with alive or dead was Larry Stein.

My office is on the second floor of a Victorian apartment building that was converted into oddly shaped bay-windowed offices when the neighborhood declined. It has a certain ornate charm and the exterminator comes every six months.

I was informed by my answering service that Lieutenant Keough had called and left a number where he could be reached. When I dialed the number, Keough came to the phone and told me that the blue Pontiac was registered to William Darris, thirty-four years old, of 6534 Belt Street, apartment 4-D. Darris had a record—B and E, Planton, Missouri, August third of '69, placed on probation; armed robbery, Union, Missouri, May seventh of '71, convicted and served three years. There were also a raft of moving traffic violations and a minor drug charge.

"You're from Planton," Keough said. "Do you know this Darris?"

The name in conjunction with Planton had already opened a door in my memory. "I know of the Darris family. There were two boys in their early teens when I left. They'd be in their thirties now."

"What connection might they have with Vincenzo?" Keough asked.

"I don't know yet. I saw Darris leaving the Stein home late last night. And he was there before, but Emily Stein denied it."

"That's all?"

"All I have."

Keough sighed. "It could mean anything. Maybe we ought to talk to Darris."

"I wouldn't now. If he's mixed up in the kidnapping, we might be putting Stein's life in danger. I think the thing to do is watch him."

"All right," Keough said. "We put somebody on Darris. What are you going to be doing?"

"I'm going to Planton."

I didn't tell him what I was going to do before I left for Planton.

When Darris was gone from his apartment, along with his tail, I entered the building on Belt Street and climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. Ignoring my fluttering stomach, I used my Visa card to slip the lock so I could enter apartment 4-D.

The tiny apartment was a mess, the bed unmade, rumpled Levis and a pair of dirty socks in one corner, hot stale air. I knew the places to look and how to look, and I worked hard at looking to stifle my fear.

Within ten minutes I found it, a sealed white envelope taped to the outside of the back panel of a kitchen cabinet drawer. I took it into the bathroom and ran hot water into the basin until steam rose. Then I held the envelope over the rising steam until the glue had softened enough for me to pry the flap open. Inside was five thousand dollars.

Resealing the envelope with the money inside, I replaced it on the back of the cabinet drawer, then, after making sure everything was in the same disorder in which I'd found it, I left.

Plainton existed in reality much as it did in my memory—white frame houses, small shopping area, unhurried pedestrians. I'd taken a flight to Saint Louis and connected with an Ozark Airlines flight to Jefferson City, where I'd rented an air-conditioned Pinto for the drive to Plainton. Now I was driving along the streets where I'd spent my childhood and adolescence, before my family moved to Kansas City.

I parked in one of the angled slots near the sloping lawn that led up to the city hall, fed coins to an ancient parking meter, and left the car in the shade of a huge cottonwood tree.

Benny Shaver was the man I wanted to talk to. We'd been good friends in high school, and now he owned a restaurant on Alternate Route 3, Plainton's main street.

Benny had taken out a liquor license in the twelve years since I'd been through town, and now the sign atop the low brick building read SHAVER'S PUB AND RESTAURANT.

The air conditioner was on high in Shaver's. There was a counter with upholstered stools and a number of tables, each with a red-checked tablecloth and an artificial rose in a tall glass vase. The pub had been added on. There was a door near the counter over which the word PUB was lettered, along with what might have been Benny's family crest. The crest wasn't crossed pitchforks against a field of guernseys; it was crossed swords over a shield engraved with some-

thing in Latin, maybe the hours. I walked into the pub and saw a man and a blonde woman in one of the booths, and behind the bar where it wasn't so dim stood Benny. Less hair and more jowl, but Benny.

I walked to the bar, sat on a stool, and called for a draft beer. Benny sauntered over and set a frosty mug on a red coaster, then squinted at me. I noticed that the scar on his forehead from the auto-accident we'd had as teenagers was less vivid now.

"God's great acorns, it's Nudger!"

We both laughed and shook hands and Benny reached a beefy arm over the bar and slapped my right shoulder so it hurt. "Twelve years," I told him.

"It is at that," he said, and looked momentarily frightened by the press of time.

After three beers' worth of reminiscence I said, "I need some information on William Darris."

"Is he in trouble?" Benny asked.

"Possibly."

"I haven't seen Billy in about two years. I don't miss him, Alo."

"Why not?"

"He came in here a lot and couldn't drink like he thought he could. This was after he got out of prison and thought he was rougher than he was. I had to break up a couple of fights he got into, mostly over women."

"Married women?"

"Some. Billy claimed he was trying to make up for time lost in prison. I never saw him, though, after he took up with the Colter girl."

"Who?"

"You remember Emily Colter. She was a looker, moved away a long time ago to become a model or something. Well, she was back in town a few years ago to visit her cousin, and she kinda fell in with Billy. About a month after she left town, he left too, claimed he got a job in the East. I wished him luck and hoped he'd stay wherever he was going. He was always in trouble and prison made him worse."

I didn't think Benny could guess how much worse. After declining lunch and saying goodbye, I left town.

I was splashing cold water on my face in the office the next morning

when the phone rang. It was Keough.

"Emily Stein got the ransom-delivery instructions in the mail," he said. "They want the hundred thousand tonight."

"I'll bet," I said. My stomach came alive and wielded claws.

"The tail on Darris hasn't brought us much," Keough went on. "He's been getting together with an ex-con named Louis Enwood, extortion and armed robbery. We put a tail on Enwood too."

"Have they been near a mailbox or post office?"

"Nope. I don't think they're it, Nudger."

"Are you going to be in your office all morning?"

"Most of it."

"I'll phone you back later," I said.

I combed my hair, rinsed my mouth with cold water, opened a fresh roll of antacid tablets, and left the office to see Emily Stein.

She was home. Her Mercedes convertible was parked near the garage at the side of the house where I'd seen it before. I walked around to the rear of the house, then returned to the front porch and rang the doorbell. A sprinkler on the wide front lawn was flinging a revolving fan of water with a staccato hissing sound. Bruno was lying in the shade near the corner of the house, staring at me like the good watch dog he was.

When she opened the door, Emily smiled at me. She was wearing a pale-pink dress. Her smile lost its luminescence when she saw my face.

"You heard about the ransom instructions," she said. "I was just on my way to draw the money from the Marlville Bank."

"Why don't you write him a check and give it to him next time he comes by the house?" I suggested.

She stepped back into the cool entry hall, and it was as if she'd stepped across time and aged twenty years.

"You, Darris, and his friend Enwood are in it together," I said.

She turned and walked into the big room with the French furniture and powder-blue drapes. I followed her.

"You called me into it to make it look like an authentic kidnapping and give you an even better excuse not to call in the F.B.I. After all, you didn't have anything to fear if it went right. And at that point you thought everything had gone right."

She sat on the sofa and swayed slightly. The drapes were open, and a pitiless slanted light fell on her.

"You typed and mailed the notes to yourself," I told her, "even the last ransom note. Larry Stein cared about you enough to set out for a lonely meeting with only five thousand dollars when he was sure the extortionists would want something more. Only Larry was smart, and an angle-shooter. Somewhere along the line he ran into Harold Vinceno, contemplating suicide, maybe pumping up his courage over a few drinks. Larry talked Vinceno into delivering the five thousand, maybe offering to pay him a thousand for the job, and they exchanged identification in case the extortionists would check. And Darris and Enwood, who'd never seen your husband close-up, were not only interested in the money but in killing Larry."

"Billy made me do it," Emily murmured.

"No," I said. "He and Enwood wouldn't have killed Larry just for the five thousand dollars. When a married man is murdered, the wife is always at least initially suspected. You needed a cover, like a phony kidnapping scheme complete with notes, ransom money, and a bumbling gumshoe who wasn't much of a threat. Only the hundred thousand wasn't ransom money, it was the final payment to Darris for killing Larry. You probably never really loved Larry Stein, and half his money as he saw fit to dole it out to you wasn't enough." I watched her close her eyes, felt my own eyes brim as tears tracked down her makeup. "When did Larry come back?"

"Yesterday," she said, her eyes still clenched shut, "when he read in the papers about Vinceno being identified by his wife. That's the only time anything about the case got in the papers. Until then, Larry wanted to stay dead to the kidnappers. He was afraid for me."

"And you were afraid of Darris," I said, "afraid he'd think you double-crossed him and he'd want revenge. Darris found out the same way Larry did that he'd killed Vinceno—the wrong man. That's why Darris came here to see you, to demand the hundred thousand, to continue with the original plan."

"I was afraid of him," Emily admitted, opening her eyes. "That's why I wanted you—nearly. I should have known you'd figure it out. You were always smart, you always saw things differently. This hundred thousand, Alo, it's only a fraction of what's left . . ."

"There was only one way you'd be able to mail that final note to yourself," I told her, "and only one more thing I have to know for sure before I phone Chief Gladstone."

She knew what I meant and something buckled inside her. But she had enough strength to stand and walk with me through the house and out the back door into the yard. She waited while I went into the garage and got a disturbingly handy shovel.

Despite everything, I found myself still admiring her. She had masterminded everything, from seducing Darris to hiring me on the recommendation of my noted lack of success. And but for Vincenzo's impersonation of her husband, it all would have worked. In this or in any other world, I would never find another Emily.

She was leaning on me like a lover and sobbing as we walked to the dark churned earth of the now meticulously weeded garden, to where the freshly planted tomato vines were flourishing in the hot sun.

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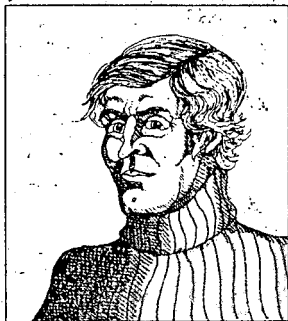
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