

THE BACK ALLEY WEBZINE

Volume 1, Number 1

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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR SAME AS WHAT? SAMIZDAT!

The Russian word *samizdat* is literally a combination of two other words: *sam*, a term used to refer to oneself, and *izdat*, the word for publishing. So, in essence, *samizdat* means *self-published*.

In reality, this simple concept was actually very threatening to the ruling class following the Russian Revolution in 1917. The so-called samizdat writers produced counter-revolutionary literature, printed it, distributed to their *droogs*, or friends, who in turn reproduced the forbidden screeds and passed them along to others. The result was a large underground publishing and distribution network which bypassed the official, Soviet-sanctioned (and censored) press network.

In referring to *samizdat*, Vladimir Buchovsky said, “I myself create it, edit it, censor it, publish it, distribute it, and may get imprisoned for it.”

What a wonderful boon the Internet would have been for the *samizdat* writers of the 1940s. A system in which ideas can be synthesized and distributed to hundreds of thousands of people in an instant would have been fantastic to imagine – and would have seemed little more of a possibility than, well, flying to the moon.

Jason Epstein, the so-called ‘inventor of the mass-market paperback’, and one of the publishing giants of the 20th Century, saw in the emerging digital technology of the 1990s the sort of potential that would have left the *samizdat* writers drooling. He postulated a world in which published works were no longer stagnant, where they could adapt to changing times, and new versions of stories could be distributed almost instantaneously.

The danger inherent in such a system is obvious to anyone who has read *1984* – revising reality to fit new circumstances is a risky undertaking at best. On the other hand, imagine how nice it might be for some current politicians to be able to go back and change their statements about – say – the invasion and occupation of Iraq after it became obvious that there were no weapons of mass destruction.

One of the true benefits of our brave new media is that it frees us from the tyranny of paper, of web-fed presses, and of distribution networks. For old hippies like me, who engaged in the writing and distribution of ‘underground newspapers’ in the 1960s, the opportunity to publish literature that is immediately accessible to millions of people, free of charge, is almost intoxicating.

That is why Back Alley Press – formerly Back Alley Books – has gone digital. By publishing the finest in new (and classic) hardboiled and noir literature and commentaries, we have the chance to realize our original artistic goals, without the necessity of entering into obligatory contracts with printers, distributors, and booksellers who each step on the product – if only financially – before it ever gets to the reader. By sidestepping the middlemen – and women – we now can connect directly with the reader, the only true arbiter of whether the work is good or bad. This is truly the recapitulation of the ideals of the original *samizdat* writers. As a collaborative group of authors, editors, and web designers, we create it, we edit it, we publish it, we distribute it, and by Gawd we may someday be imprisoned for it.

Or not. We’re sort of hoping for ‘not’.

At Back Alley Press, we are very proud of this new webzine, *The Back Alley*, and of the contributors to this first issue. We have five new stories from a variety of exciting authors, and a classic tale hardboiled progenitor Carroll John Daly. In coming issues, we plan to include historical analysis and critical works from noted aficionados of the hardboiled and noir genres. We look forward to producing this wonderful piece of counter-revolutionary literature each quarter, and we invite you to come along for the ride.

Richard Helms, Editor - *The Back Alley*

LINEUP FOR VOLUME I, NUMBER 1



ERIC SHANE is the pen name of a relatively well-regarded, semi-successful, but otherwise definitely second-tier writer of private eye mysteries and thrillers. He graduated from college in the closing days of the Carter Administration, with a dual major in psychology and Russian Studies. Because of this rare combination, he was immediately recruited by the CIA to become a Sovietologist. He declined, suggesting to the CIA that they check with the FBI, who had a file on him resulting from his career as a minor revolutionary and anti-war activist during the Nixon Administration. He has been nominated several times for major mystery awards. Beyond that, there isn't much very interesting to say about him. Sad, really. This is not his picture. We can't say for certain whose picture it is.



JACK BLUDIS is an accomplished author in many genres. His short story *Munchies* was nominated for the Shamus and Anthony Awards. His book *Shadow of the Dahlia* was also nominated for the Shamus Award. His writing career has spanned four - perhaps five - decades, during which he has been published under myriad names. He has had stories published in anthologies such as *Baltimore Noir* and *Down These Wicked Streets*, and online at *Thrilling Detective*, *3rd Degree*, and elsewhere. He is the author of series featuring Rick Page, Brian Kane and Ken Sligo, all set in post-WWII Los Angeles.



G. MIKI HAYDEN has authored many stories in both the mystery and science fiction genres. She has written four published books: *Pacific Empire*; *By Reason of Insanity*; *Writing the Mystery: A Start-to-Finish Guide for Both Novice and Professional*; and *New Pacific*. *Pacific Empire* won a rave in The *NYTimes*, followed by inclusion on the *Times* Summer Reading list-the summer equivalent of the winter Notables. *Writing the Mystery* was nominated for an Agatha, an Anthony, and a Macavity against Tony Hillerman's memoirs and won one of the three awards-the Macavity. In 2004, Miki was given an Edgar for her short story "*The Maids*".



JOHN LAU has been a screenwriter for over twenty years. His credits include, among other things, *Come Die With Me*, *A Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer Mystery* on CBS and an original thriller on HBO called *Second Skin*. His most recent project is a latter day L.A. detective story called *What I Did For Deidra* that John McNaughton, who did *Wild Things*, *Mad Dog and Glory*, and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* is attached to direct. There is no known picture of him out there, so we are substituting a photo of some guy sticking up a kitten. *Take that, Rita Mae Brown!*



STEPHEN D. ROGERS is so damned accomplished as an author that I'm tempted to just toss the picture up on the screen and let it speak for itself. On the other hand, there may be one or two readers in Borneo who are as yet unaware of his achievements. Over four hundred of his stories and poems have been published in over one hundred publications. He has been nominated six times for the Derringer Award by the membership of the Short Mystery Fiction Society, and has won it once. His hardboiled stories have appeared online in *Shots*, *Thrilling Detective*, *Judas Ezine*, *Plots with Guns*, *Mouth Full of Bullets*, and now in *The Back Alley*. We are pleased as punch to include one of Stephen's stories in our very first issue.



CARROLL JOHN DALY is generally credited with writing the first hardboiled mystery story, *The False Burton Combs*, which we have included in this issue as our Classic Hardboiled Story of the Month. An unlikely crime writer, Daly was a hypochondriac, an agoraphobic, and an overall neurotic. He was described at one point as a small, slim, balding, bespectacled man who wrote some of the toughest prose of his day. Born in 1889 in Yonkers, NY, Daly wasn't published until he was 33, when the editors of Black Mask selected *The False Burton Combs*. This was followed by his Mack 'Three Gun' Terry stories, which foreshadowed his most popular efforts, the Race Williams series, which continued to appear in Black Mask and Dime Detective until the late 1940s. Daly, sad to say, was left in the dust by the authors who succeeded him, such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Frederick Nebel, and he died virtually forgotten in Los Angeles in 1958. It can be truly said, however that without Race Williams, we probably never would have had Mike Hammer, and for that we aficionados of the hardboiled genre owe Carroll John Daly a huge debt.

PAPER WALLS/GLASS HOUSES

by
Eric Shane

Eric Shane is a pseudonym for a noted mystery and thriller author, who has been nominated several times for major mystery awards. This is his first published story under this name.

I was bucks up. A script that had taken me two long weekends to write had been sold to an obscure production company in the San Fernando Valley for an obscene amount of money.

I knew exactly how to celebrate.

I dropped by a liquor store on Figueroa, grabbed a couple of bottles of Cuervo Gold and a bottle of margarita mixer, and headed over to a cheap chain motel on the beach north of Zuma.

As soon as I checked into the room, I dropped the bottles on the dresser, made a quick trip to the ice machine, and settled in for an extended pseudo-Mexican vacation.

I dialed a Spanish language channel on the television, dumped a handful of ice into a twenty-cent hotel glass, filled it halfway up with Cuervo, and the rest of the way with the mixer.

About fifteen seconds later, I did it again.

It took me right at two minutes to go through three glasses. I liked to call this 'laying the base', the way a ski resort puts down ten or twenty inches of powder before freezing the place up for the winter suckers. I had gone from zero to zonked in no time flat, and my only task now consisted of keeping the buzz alive.

I can assure you – at this I was very well-practiced.

I probably could have gone on my bender at home, but my mother had always drilled into me the axiom that you don't shit in your own nest.

I sipped the afternoon away, watched an old John Barrymore movie on TCM, and then a *Magnum PI* episode that was almost – but not quite – the worst piece of writing I had ever encountered. By then it was getting dark outside. I called a local delivery joint to have a pizza sent over.

The pizza wasn't half bad; or maybe I was just incapable of telling the difference anymore. In any case, I snarfed that bad boy down and assembled another drink.

That was pretty much the way the evening went.

I woke around one in the morning. Ten years earlier, I probably would have yanked myself out of bed and rushed to the bathroom to bury my dinner at sea. That was all in the past, though. I had developed a tolerance for the fruit of the *agave* that made me as impervious to its devils as Superman was to bullets. When I awakened, I felt only a dull buzzing ache at the base of my skull. I knew that I could send it packing with just a sip of Jose, but I didn't want to spoil my breakfast.

I was in a corner unit, on the fourth floor. I had splurged for the ocean-view room, even though I had no intention of spending much time staring at the sea. I sometimes liked to crack my window and listen to it, though, and I liked the salt air. It tasted like the rim of a perfectly blended margarita.

I lay in bed, listening to the beating of my forty-year-old heart, and tried to recall a time when I hadn't been cynical or jaded.

I heard a sound behind my headboard. Then came a slam as the door to the room next to mine shut with a thud. I heard locks click and a deadbolt thrown. There was the soft murmuring of voices, quiet at first, and then louder as I began to focus on them.

"Will this do?" he said.

"That's enough. Put it on the dresser," she replied.

"What now?"

"What do you think, lover?"

There was a second of silence.

"I want to turn the lights out," he said.

"On, off. Whatever trips your trigger honey."

I heard a click, and the sliver of light that crept under the connecting door to our rooms disappeared.

"What do I call you?" he asked.

"Make it easy for yourself. Call me whatever you like."

"Can I call you Esther?"

"What the hell kind of name is that?"

"It's what I want to call you."

"Your nickel, man. Lie on the bed. Esther's about to do a number on you."

I heard a rustle of sheets, a creak of worn bed springs. Then, a low moan. An expletive.

“May I touch you there?”

“You bought the whole package, sweetheart. It’s all yours. It’s all good. You like this?”

He moaned again. I heard the box springs protest. I became vaguely aware of my own excitement.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“What do you think it is?”

“I’ve never... I mean, I’ve never worn one before.”

“You start payin’ for it, you better get used to wearin’ one.”

“How do you...”

“Hold on. Let me do it for you. I got a special way of puttin’ it on.”

He moaned again.

“Would you be on top?” he asked.

“Top, bottom, on the floor, in the chair, on the ceiling, it’s all the same to me. Here I come.”

There was a frantic creaking of the springs, and a chorus of groans, gasps, and overtures to the Almighty. It was poignant and brief. Mercifully, I heard the man almost yelp in what sounded like unexpected pleasure, and then I thought I heard a sob.

“You okay, man?” she asked.

“I’m fine. It’s been... a long time.”

“You feel good?”

“Yes.”

“Your Esther, she did you all right?”

“You were fine.”

“I’m so happy to hear it. Tell your friends. Listen, baby, I got to jet...”

“Already?”

“It’s late. You’re the end of my night, sweetness. Momma got to call herself a cab.”

“How much...” he started to ask.

“What?”

“Could you... stay?”

“Oh, hell, man, that’s gonna cost you. I got places to be.”

“I can afford it. It’s been such a long time since I ... slept next to a woman.”

“Shit. You are hard up, you know that?”

“Yes.”

He sounded pitiful in a way I had never heard from anyone but a scolded child.

“How much?”

She told him.

“Yes,” he said. “I can do that.”

“Roll over, sugar.”

I heard the springs creak again. Minutes later, all I heard was snoring.

* * * * *

I awoke at eight with the reflected sunlight from the Pacific streaming in my window like scalpels aimed at my retinas. I pulled the covers over my head, and resolved to sleep for another hour before venturing down to the Denny’s in the lobby for a Grand Slam and a Bloody Mary.

There was a thump next door.

“I left the shower running,” she said.

I realized she really had stayed the entire night.

“Did you use all the shampoo?” he asked.

“I left a little. The little bottle of mouthwash wouldn’t hurt you much either.”

“Bitch.”

“Bastard.”

“I love it when you talk tough.”

I heard him roll off the bed and hit the floor. Seconds later, I heard her on the telephone.

“Hi. Any messages for me?... Yes. Give me the number. I’ll call him from here... How did the kids do? Did Jeffrey give you any trouble going to bed?... Mother, if you let him watch one extra show, he’ll stay up all night... Okay... Yes, we should be home by middle afternoon... Thanks again... Love you too...’Bye.”

I heard a metallic creak as the faucet in the bathroom was shut off, and I heard a man humming.

"I hate hotel soap," he said, moments later.

"Beats bringing your own."

"Did you call your mom?"

"Yes. Jeffrey talked her into letting him stay up until almost midnight to watch a movie on HBO."

"The little con man."

"What time is checkout?"

"Eleven."

"We have time for breakfast? It's a six hour drive back to San Francisco."

"We could stop somewhere on the way."

"No. Let's go ahead and eat here."

"Let me get dressed."

"Wait."

They didn't say anything for a few seconds.

"Damn," he said. "That's good."

"A little reward for playing along last night."

"Did you get turned on?"

"Couldn't you tell? I haven't been that wet since before the baby."

"How would I know? You made me wear that damn..."

"You loved it. Admit it."

"We must do this again. Soon."

"Get dressed. I'm hungry, and we have to get on the road. We promised to take Jeffrey to that new Disney flick tonight."

They didn't say anything else, until I heard the door to the next room open and close.

I thought I heard them giggling on the way down the hall.

I lay back in bed and thought for a while about how strange people can be.

"So they were playing a game!" my agent said, as he looked up from the manuscript.

"Yeah," I told him. "You see, this couple likes to take it on the road once in a while, and pretend like they aren't married. He picks her up in a bar, they go to a motel, she plays the pro and he pretends to be this helpless Sad Sack. Somehow, it gets their rocks off."

“Recharges their marriage.”

“Beats wife-swapping, I guess.”

“You’ve never met my wife,” he said. “This is great. Not like your usual stuff. Don’t get me wrong, you’re a fine writer, but this is special. I think I can peddle it to one of the glossies.”

“No shit?”

“What could it hurt to try? I don’t suppose you have any more of this arty shit bouncing around inside that head of yours?”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

He sold the story to a major magazine, for more money per word than I’d seen outside of screenplays in my entire life.

I started hanging at the Zuma Beach motel more often. My liver took a beating, but the stories that floated through the wall behind my bed kept me from complaining.

Somehow, despite the fact that I was – more or less – the poster boy for wasted life, I discovered that the motel room next to mine was a sort of Pathos Central. It was like a Harry Chapin song come to life, each night more heart-wrenching than the last, and I sat in bed with my laptop and took down every word.

There was the guy who checked in, climbed on the telephone, and racked up a week’s pay calling phone sex lines while he abused himself into a lather, and then spent the rest of the night whimpering and telling some absent specter how ashamed he was and how he would never do it again.

I sold that one to *The Cimarron Review*, and bought myself a used Miata with the proceeds.

Then there was the threesome who visited the room once every several weeks – two guys and a woman. I figured out after a while that the guys were the couple, and the woman their guest. Apparently it was a concession they’d made to satisfy one of the guys’ occasional butch curiosity. He would test the bed springs with the woman, while the other guy would sit in a chair across the room and direct, like he was shooting a movie. For all I knew, maybe he was.

My agent passed that story along to *Mandate*, and I got my house painted.

One night a group of bikers rented the room, and ran a cocaine supermarket throughout the evening. Every ten minutes or so I'd hear a knock at the door, another guy ready to hand over a slice of his soul to get his weekend load on. Around two in the morning, they had to deal with a dissatisfied customer, and the whole scene nearly erupted in gunfire, while I cringed on the floor behind my bed waiting for the bullets to fly.

In my story, they actually shifted up into the heavy metal rock and roll, automatic weapons and everything, and *High Times* lapped it up like mother's milk.

All in all, my occasional lost weekend in the corner unit off Zuma had turned into something of a cash cow. My agent thought I was the second coming of Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck rolled into one. I found myself actually drinking less and listening more.

I was nominated for a couple of the lesser-known literary prizes.

Life was good.

I was sitting on the motel bed, nursing a Cuervo and limeade, watching an old Bogie flick on the tube, when I heard the rasp of a key in the lock of the room next door through the air space at the bottom of the connecting door.

The hallway door to the next room opened forcefully enough to bang against the wall. It made me jump a little.

"I hate you!" a woman shouted. I could hear her heels click on the tile near the door, and then the sound disappeared as she hit the carpet. She had a Spanish accent.

"Not so loud," a man said. "You'll wake the whole place."

"I don't care," she said. I could hear the pout in her voice. "You insulted me."

"How?"

"You talked about your wife."

I already had the laptop warmed up and ready to transcribe. This was going to be good.

"I just mentioned her. That's all."

"You should never talk about that beetch when you are with me."

"I'm sorry. I was thoughtless. What can I do to make it up to you?"

“Come here.”

I thought I heard the comforter yanked forcefully from the bed. Then I heard a long, slow zipper. I figured that was the woman, or else the man was seventeen feet tall.

“Oh... my... God,” the man said.

“You weell make it up to me,” she said. “You weell be better than you have ever been.”

I think he said something at that point, but the words were muffled by flesh. After a few seconds, the woman began to whimper a little, and then came the moans.

“Oh baby oh baby oh baby oh baby, just like that,” she said between gasps. He said something, but I couldn’t catch it. I left a space for something clever on my screen, and kept typing.

“Stop!” she commanded.

“What?”

“You are always in too much of a hurry. You need to take your time.”

“All right.”

“Roll over.”

This woman loved to take the reins. She was commanding the guy like she was a drill sergeant.

“Oh,” he said, some surprise in his voice. “You’ve... never done that before.”

“A special treat for you, my love.”

It went on like that for a while, and then came the rhythmic thumping of the headboard against the drywall, which I could feel all the way into my room.

“Oh, *jess!*” she started to wail. “Jus’ like that. *Ahchi, ahchi, AHCHI, AHCHI!*”

Now, I’m no Spanish scholar, despite the fact that it’s slowly becoming the official language of Southern California, so I’d never heard the word *ahchi* before. For all I knew, there was no such word, and she was just imitating an enraptured chihuahua. There was no mistaking the context, though.

Moments later, the man made a sort of choking noise, chuffed a few times, summoned a couple of deities, and then the room went silent save for a brief period of heavy breathing.

I finished typing, and waited to see if there would be a second act.

They revved up again just after sunrise. It was quicker this time, and only slightly less noisy. Afterward, the man coughed a few times, the way I've seen smokers do after trying to take up jogging, and I heard him pad across the room to the bathroom.

I heard the rasp of the shower faucets, metal on rusted metal. A couple of minutes later, the water shut off.

"You should have left it running," she complained.

He didn't answer. Instead, I heard the faucets turned again, and the water began to beat against the empty shower stall.

Then she was in the shower, humming some obscure Tejano tune I'd heard on the radio, somewhere along the line, but couldn't identify.

She turned off the water, and seconds later returned to the room.

"Bobby," she said, a coquettish lilt in her voice.

"Yes," he said.

"Do you remember what we talked about yesterday?"

"Sure. How could I forget it?"

"When do you thin' you might do it?"

"I don't know. I have to think this out very carefully. We're not talking about boosting an apple from the local grocery here. This is a major crime."

My fingers stopped cold on the keyboard.

I'd heard criminal activity in the next room several times, of course – the biker dealers, for instance, and one weekend when a sports book set up shop there.

This seemed different, though.

She pressed on.

"Did you know that there are places in Mexico where you can leeve like a king for only ten thousand a year?"

"I've heard."

"You can have a house as beeg as a mansion. On the beach. Weeth servants."

"Yes."

"How much do you thin' the insurance would pay?"

I felt a chill run down my back.

“It’s a quarter-million dollar policy,” he said. “With double indemnity, a half million. The house is paid for. I could sell it for another three-quarter million. I’d get the 401k proceeds, of course. That’s in her will.”

I nearly choked. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“How much ees thees 401k?”

“When she quit working she had maybe another half million in it. All in all, I’d say the estate would be somewhere in the range of two million, once the entire kit and caboodle is liquidated.”

“Wha’ is thees ‘keet and caboodle’?”

“It’s a saying. Once I sell everything off. It would be a lot of money.”

“Woul’ they not suspect you?”

“I’m sure they would. They always suspect the husband first. That’s why we would have to be so incredibly careful. It would have to look exactly like an accident.”

As quietly as possible, I rolled off the bed and slipped into my clothes. All the while, I tried to figure out what I should do next.

In retrospect, I guess I should have called the police. What would I tell them, though? I had no idea who the couple next door was. I’d never actually heard them use the word *murder*, but it wasn’t hard to read their intent from the conversation.

I glanced at my laptop, still sitting on top of the bed.

I had a transcript of their conversation, from the moment they walked into the motel room. That had to be useful for something.

“I’m hungry,” the woman said. “I want breakfast.”

“Me, too,” the man said. “Get dressed. We’ll take my bag down to the car, and get a bite. Then I have to get you home. I’m due at work at nine-thirty.”

I pulled together my belongings, and prepared to leave. Just as I had everything packed, I heard the hallway door in the next room open and slam shut.

I rushed over to my door and peered through the fisheye peephole. Too late. All I could see was their backs as they headed down the hall away from me. He was tall, maybe a little over six feet. She was lithe and athletic. Her hair was ebony and tousled, and fell halfway down her back.

They disappeared from the peephole.

I tried to figure out how to get a better look.

Then I remembered that there was only a single parking lot for the motel, and the side window of my corner room had a great view of it.

I crossed the motel room and gently pulled the drapes away from one edge of the window. After a couple of minutes, I saw the couple cross the shell and asphalt lot to a silver Toyota Avalon. The man opened the trunk lid, and dropped a cloth overnight bag inside. After closing the lid, he took the woman's hand and they turned toward the Denny's next to the motel.

I quickly wrote down the license number of the Avalon.

While they ate in the Denny's, I loaded my Miata, and sat in the lot waiting for them to finish. My own stomach rumbled loudly, but I didn't dare run across to the convenience store to grab a quick bite, for fear they'd leave before I could get back to my car. Besides, how would it look if some crazy-eyed guy cut a record hundred yard dash across the street just as they were pulling out of the lot? The idea here, I reminded myself as my stomach twisted into a half-hitch, was *not* to be noticed.

After a half hour, they walked back to the Avalon. As they pulled out of the lot, I backed from my parking space and fell in behind them. I stayed pretty close for the first mile or so, and then slowly dropped back, allowing four or five other cars to fall in between us.

They drove south on the PCH, until they reached Santa Monica. The man pulled into a side street near Venice Beach, and then into a driveway attached to a squat, pink, slightly disheveled bungalow.

I stopped half a block back, practically out of sight behind a stand of palm trees, and waited. The woman stepped out of the car. She blew a kiss to the man, and then walked across the postage stamp yard to the front door. After she was inside the house, the Avalon backed slowly from the driveway, reversed, and drove directly toward me!

I turned off the Miata, and dove across the front seat. The gearshift lever pressed into my abdomen like a dull knife.

I heard the Avalon cruise by, and a slight chirp from the tires as it rounded the next corner.

I knew enough about the neighborhood to realize that he had to either get back on the PCH, or turn right somewhere on down the road, unless he planned to drive right into the ocean. So, I restarted the Miata and drove past the woman's house. I jotted down the address and the name on the mailbox – *Flores*

– before turning left at the next cross street and heading out toward Pico. I stopped at the light on Pico just in time to see the Avalon cross the intersection.

It seemed an eternity before the light changed, allowing me to turn right and follow him. As I had before, I kept enough distance between us to remain effectively invisible in the typical heavy Los Angeles morning traffic, but stayed close enough to keep him from disappearing himself.

After several miles, he turned left, and pulled into a parking garage near LaBrea. I circled the block once or twice, and then also entered the garage.

It took me a few minutes to find the Avalon. I drove up another level, found a compact car space, and parked the Miata. Then I hiked back down the incline to the Avalon.

It had been parked in a section of reserved spaces, designated as belonging to Squire Insurance. Since they were reserved, I played a hunch and walked around to the front of the car, to the concrete stop block designed to keep the car from rolling straight into the wall of the parking deck.

Sure enough, the stop block had been stenciled with the owner's name. Robert Dickman.

Considering what I had overheard the night before, I found the name somehow amusing. I would never use it in my story, though. Nobody would believe it.

I returned to the Miata and considered my next move. I had Bobby's name, and half of his female co-conspirator's name – *Flores*.

I needed more information, though, if only to flesh out the parts of the story I didn't know. I was already outlining a new screenplay in my mind, and envisioning a huge sale to Warner Brothers or Paramount, maybe even Columbia Tri-Star.

Oh, and a trip to the police.

I didn't want to forget that detail.

It was a little after nine-thirty. Dickman probably would be holed up in his office for a few hours. I decided to drive back to Venice and dig up a little bit more information on the girl.

Fifteen minutes later, I pulled to the curb about two houses down, and surveyed her house. The neighborhood was quiet. Most of the residents were either at work or at school. I quickly looked around, and noted that a Chevy truck parked two houses down from Ms. Flores' house, and across the street, had

the rear tail light knocked out, and what looked like baseball bat dents in the rear quarter panel. An idea occurred to me.

I rooted around behind the passenger seat until I found a clipboard. I checked my glove compartment, and located some car rental forms that looked properly official. After placing them on the clipboard, I put a pencil behind my ear and pulled the Miata into the driveway of the Flores house.

The woman from the motel answered the doorbell on the first ring. She opened the front door, but left the iron-barred screen locked.

“*Jess?*” she asked, as she looked me over from head to toe and back.

“Are you Ms. Flores?” I asked.

“I am. Who are you?”

I dug back for a fake name from one of my stories.

I borrowed a name of one of my short story characters, and flashed her a quick look at the clipboard. “I’m an adjustor with Fidelity Mutual Insurance. We’ve received a claim from your neighbor up the street...” I gestured toward the damaged Chevy truck, “...alleging that someone damaged his property in the last couple of days. I’m just following up with some routine site assessment. I was wondering whether I could ask you a couple of questions.”

“I di’n’ do nothin’ to hees truck,” she protested.

“I’m sure you didn’t. I’m sorry if I gave you that impression. I just need some information about the neighborhood. Are you aware of any problems with vandalism in the area? Teenaged kids, maybe, out for a few kicks?”

“We have teenagers here. Some are okay. Others get into trouble.”

“It’s the troublemakers I’m interested in, ma’am... or is it *miss?*”

“*Ms.*,” she replied “Angel - that is, Angelina - Flores.”

I made a note on the forms attached to the clipboard.

“And these troublemaking teenagers?”

“We have gangs in Venice Beach,” she said, her voice clipped. “Eet is not healthy to talk about them to strangers. I would imagine tha’ Mr. Cantinas, he peess them off. Tha’s why they mess up his truck.”

“I see. I... I don’t suppose you would recall exactly when Mr. Cantinas’ truck was damaged?”

She waved a hand in front of her face. “No. I am sorry, but I have no idea when tha’ might have happened.”

“He claims it was vandalized three nights ago. Were you around that evening, Ms. Flores?”

“Wha’ is this?” she said, suddenly irritated. “Do you accuse me of damaging Cantinas’ truck?”

“No,” I protested.

“Because, it sound very much like you thin’ I had somethin’ to do weeth thees.”

“Not at all,” I said, trying to calm her. The neighborhood looked deserted, but who knew how many secluded denizens might be roused if she pitched a nutty right here on her front stoop? “I’m sorry for disturbing you. I just needed to get some information about the neighborhood. Please have a nice day.”

I stepped backward a couple of paces, and then turned to walk back to my car.

I got back to the parking deck around eleven. I parked the Miata, this time one level *down* from Dickman’s Avalon, and thought through my next move.

An idea came to mind. It was so transparently elegant that it almost shocked me.

I pulled a sheet of my screen credits from my briefcase, and slipped them onto the clipboard. Then I walked into the building attached to the parking garage, and checked the directory until I found Squires Insurance, on the fifth floor.

When I got off the elevator, I found myself in the middle of a cube farm maybe sixty feet square. A woman sat at a desk just off the elevator alcove. The triangle block on her desk announcer her as Shirley Hicks, Administrative Assistant. I smiled at her, and walked up to her desk.

I told her her my name.

“I’m looking for Robert Dickman,” I said.

“Is he expecting you?”

“My secretary was supposed to phone ahead to make an appointment. I’m on something of a deadline, you see.

She checked her appointment book.

“I don’t see you here,” she said.

“Could you check with Mr. Dickman, see if he’ll talk with me? I only really need a few moments.”

She regarded me the way some people look at the stuff they dredge out of their pools, but she picked up the phone and dialed three digits. After talking with the person on the other end, she racked the receiver.

“Mr. Dickman will be up in a minute or two. Please have a seat.”

I was almost too nervous to sit. At just that moment I could have used a stiff belt of my buddy Jose C. I was about to come face-to-face with a man I suspected of plotting to kill his wife. That kind of thing tends to put the old ticker into overdrive.

Presently, a tall, dark man with an aquiline nose and thin lips emerged from the cube farm. He saw me sitting in the waiting area. I quickly stood and introduced myself.

“I’m a screenwriter,” I told him. “I write scripts for movies and television. I’m sorry for arriving unannounced. I thought my secretary had called ahead to set an appointment.”

Dickman shook my hand, but seemed puzzled.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand. What is it I can do for you?”

“I’m writing a screenplay. It includes some plot factors revolving around the insurance industry. I don’t know a thing about insurance, except that it eats a huge hole in my paycheck every month. I was hoping you could answer some questions for me.”

“I don’t know. How did you find my name?”

“My agent,” I said, quickly. “I told him about my screenplay, and he asked a friend for the name of someone in the insurance industry who could give it just that spark of realism. The friend came up with you.”

“And this friend is...”

“Damned if I know. My agent talked with him. I can find out if you want. My agent is on a vacation to Cabo, though. Very out of touch, if you catch my drift.”

I winked at him, as if including him on a ribald secret.

To my relief, he seemed to buy it.

“Well, I suppose I can give you a few minutes. Why don’t you step back to my desk?”

I followed him through the maze of cubicles to a glassed-in office overlooking the boulevard outside. In the distance, I could make out the central city office spires through the bluish smoggy haze.

He asked me to have a seat.

"Have I seen any of your pictures?" he asked.

I pulled the sheet of credits from the clipboard and handed it to him. He looked it over.

"I've seen a couple of these," he said. "I liked this one, *Run To Sunlight*."

"I'm particularly fond of that one myself," I told him. "It paid off my house. Again, I'm sorry to barge in. I'll only take a few moments of your time. What I need is information on life insurance."

"Life insurance," he echoed.

I noted the picture on his desk. It was the image of a pretty woman in her late thirties. She was California blonde, with bright blue eyes and a fetching smile. She looked like the kind of woman whose father gave her a nose job for her sweet sixteen birthday present.

"Your wife?" I asked, pointing to the picture.

"Yes," he said, a bit uncomfortably.

"She's lovely. She looks a little familiar. She doesn't work in the film business, does she?"

"She did, at one time. She quit when we got married. Life insurance, you say?"

"Yes. This screenplay I'm writing turns on the concept of double indemnity. You know, like the old movie."

Dickman seemed noticeably uncomfortable.

"Double indemnity," he repeated, not a question.

"What I need to know is how the term applies in the modern world. In the movie written by Billy Wilder and Raymond Chandler back in the forties, the idea was that a life insurance policy pays double if the insured dies in an accident. I was wondering whether this is still the case."

"Well," Dickman said. "I can't speak to the arrangements in the industry before I was even born. However, if you're talking about modern insurance policy, then I'd say that double indemnity works more or less the way you've described it. It has to be written into the policy as a condition of insurance, though."

"So, some policies don't provide for double indemnity?"

"No, not specifically. There are a number of conditions that have to be met in order for the policy to be doubled. For instance, the insured's death usually has to occur prior to a specific age."

"Is that age always standard?"

“Not exactly.”

“Is it likely that someone over the age of, say, forty might be eligible for double indemnity?”

“Well, as the age of the insured increases, the availability of a double payment decreases. You see, the purpose of double indemnity is to compensate a younger family, in the case of accidental death, for the income that might have been earned in the working life of the deceased.”

“I see. What other conditions are there?”

“In most cases, death must result from bodily injury that is related solely to external, violent, and accidental means, with no other contributing cause. Death must occur within a specified period after the injury.”

“Okay,” I said, writing furiously on the legal pad I’d attached to the clipboard. “So, being killed during – say – a robbery wouldn’t meet the criteria.”

“Not exactly. The policy would stipulate the conditions. If the policy includes murder as a qualifying condition, then double indemnity would apply.”

“Terrific,” I said, without looking up from the pad. “You have no idea how helpful this is. Everything you’ve told me fits in with my plot. This couldn’t be better.”

“Would you mind if I asked you what your story is about?”

“My screenplay,” I corrected. “Basically, it’s a murder-for-pay plot. It’s about a man who’s having an affair with a manipulative, controlling woman. She convinces him that if they arrange for his wife to have an accident, they can run away together on the proceeds from her insurance. The hook is that the insurance will pay double, because she dies during a robbery. What do you think?”

Dickman was clearly distressed. His neck had reddened, to match his ears. If I could have taken his blood pressure at that moment, he probably would have set some kind of Guinness record.

“It... seems somewhat... far-fetched,” he stammered. “Of course, I don’t see a lot of movies these days. Perhaps... perhaps because of the insurance angle I can see problems that the average viewer would miss.”

“Such as?”

He waved his hand, dismissively.

“Oh, think nothing of it. Technical details, really. They would probably just bog down the movie. It sounds as if you have a very good beginning there. I

wish you the very best with it. Now, if you will excuse me, I do have a pressing meeting.”

I thanked him for his time, and told him I could find my own way out.

I made my way back to the parking deck, to the Miata, and waited. After several minutes, I heard a tortured squeal of tires on concrete, and smiled as Dickman’s Toyota Avalon rushed past me toward the exit of the deck.

Again careful to keep a safe distance, I followed him back to Venice Beach. As I had suspected, he drove directly to Angelina Flores’ house, and skidded to a halt in her driveway. He jumped from the car and ran to her front door. Apparently he had called her on his cell phone, because she opened the front door before he got to it. He hustled inside.

Minutes later, they both left the house and climbed into the Avalon.

I followed them back toward the city. They stopped at a restaurant and went inside. I could see them through the window. First Dickman talked animatedly, waving his hands about and gesticulating wildly. After a few moments, Angelina mimicked him. Whatever they were discussing, I had a feeling that it wasn’t about sports, and that it didn’t spell any good tidings for the soon-to-be late Mrs. Dickman.

On one hand, I felt as if I should do something. Call the cops, maybe.

I realized that I still didn’t have much to offer them. Eavesdropped conversations in a motel room? Clandestine meetings in a restaurant? A nervous reaction when I presented Dickman with a scenario close to the one I suspect him of plotting against his own wife? He was right. It did seem a little far-fetched.

On the other hand, I thought, what if they were planning at just that second to escalate their plans? What if they decided that the time was ripe, and that Mrs. Dickman needed to die before the sun set over the Pacific?

I’m callous, calculating, and cynical, but I didn’t think I could live with myself if I sat on this story for the sake of a boffo screenplay, and allowed an innocent woman to be murdered for money.

I opened my laptop and latched onto a wireless network from the coffee house next to the restaurant. I pulled up a website that listed addresses and telephone numbers, and asked it to search for Robert Dickman in the L.A. area.

I was in luck. There was only one listing. Even better, it wasn’t too far away, in the Hollywood Hills. I was familiar with the area. Everyone in the film

business is. It was the kind of place where houses jut out from hillsides and you can run across a wild coyote just sitting in a driveway watching the cars go by.

I jotted the address on my clipboard, and headed off across the city toward that big old white sign in the sky.

Robert Dickman lived in a Spanish styled bungalow situated on the edge of a hill, with the deck cantilevered over a deep canyon. It was just a matter of time before an earthquake or a mudslide sent his home sledding down the hillside. From the looks of the place, though, it had survived forty or fifty years of Southern California weather and disasters.

I parked a short distance up the hill, hiked down to Dickman's circular drive, and walked up to the front door. Seconds after I rang the bell, a speaker next to the jamb crackled.

"Can I help you?" a woman's voice said.

"Are you Mrs. Dickman?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Your husband is Robert Dickman, who works at Squire Insurance?"

There was a pause.

"Oh, my God. What's happened?"

"Please, I'm sorry; I didn't mean to frighten you."

I stopped, realizing that, if I told her what I had come to say, I would be doing exactly that.

"What do you want?"

I told her my name.

"This is very difficult," I said. "I'm not exactly certain how to approach you with this."

"I don't like this," she said, through the speaker. "I think you should go."

"Not before I have a chance to talk with you."

"I'm calling the police."

I tried to think quickly. Maybe the police were exactly what I wanted at that moment. I could explain to them what I had learned.

What were the chances they'd believe me, though? What proof did I have besides a tryst in a neighboring hotel room and talk of insurance policies?

I slapped the screen door frame.

“I think your husband is planning to kill you!” I blurted.
There was silence for a long moment.
Then I heard the deadbolt click. The door opened.
“I think you’d better explain yourself,” she said through the screen.

A half hour later, I sat in Janet Dickman’s living room, sipping a Sprite as I finished my story.

“Let me get this straight,” she said. “You overheard this conversation through a motel room wall?”

I nodded.

“Isn’t it possible that you didn’t understand what they were saying?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “The wall is very thin, and there’s a connecting door between the rooms with a gap under it. I could hear pretty clearly.”

“What am I saying?” she asked, as she stared wistfully out the sliding doors, over the deck, and across the canyon. “I’m arguing with you, and you clearly have evidence that my husband is cheating on me. If he can do that, I suppose he could do anything.”

We were interrupted by the sound of a car pulling into the drive. A car door opened and slammed shut.

“My husband!” she said. “What should we do?”

“Hide me,” I said. “And act naturally.”

She grabbed my hand, and pulled me across the living room to the kitchen. She opened a door to a pantry, and pointed inside.

“Robert never comes into the kitchen, except to get a beer from the refrigerator. Hide in here.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

“I don’t know. When it’s safe, I’ll let you out.”

She pushed me into the narrow space, and closed the door. I pushed it open just a crack, so I could see and hear what happened.

Dickman walked through the front door, and draped his suit jacket over one of the bar stools.

“Darling!” Janet said, with just the slightest quaver in her voice. “What are you doing home so early?”

"I decided to take the afternoon off," he said. "Rough morning. Have you gotten any calls? Someone looking for me?"

"No."

"There was this guy at the office, said he was given my name by his agent. Probably nothing."

Just as Janet had told me, Dickman walked around the bar into the kitchen, and grabbed a beer from the refrigerator. He popped the tab, and took a long swallow.

Janet stepped out to the deck through the sliding door. I could see her wrap her arms around herself. She rocked side to side a little. Robert followed her out.

"What is it?" he asked, as he placed the beer onto the deck rail.

She turned and slapped him, hard. He reeled backward. His hand raised to palm his cheek.

"What in hell!" he gasped.

"I know," she said.

"What?"

"I know about... her."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"The motel in Zuma Beach?"

He stepped back a foot or two. He ran one hand through his thick black hair.

"Oh, my God," he said. "You hired a detective?"

That was when Janet made her mistake. If she had said *yes*, Dickman might have faced a messy divorce, a little embarrassment, and some nasty alimony, but he'd never have tried to harm her.

"No," she said, instead. "I followed you."

Through the crack between the pantry door and the jamb, I saw Dickman's face redden. His fists clenched. Even from my clumsy angle I could tell that he was furious.

"You... stupid... interfering... *bitch!*" he growled.

He reached out, grabbed her by the upper arms, and swung her around. Slowly, he started walking her toward the deck rail.

"You've ruined *everything*," he said, his voice low and menacing. "You stuck your nose where it didn't belong. To think, I had decided not to do anything about you. I'd decided it was too dangerous. Now, you leave me no choice."

“You’re hurting me!” she said.

She glanced backward, into the canyon hollow, as her backside touched the redwood rail. It was a sheer hundred foot drop beyond the deck, with nothing but rocks and scrub below. Nobody could survive a fall from that height.

I stepped out of the pantry, dashed around the bar, and onto the deck.

“Let go of her!” I yelled, finding it hard to believe that it was my own voice shouting.

He turned and saw me.

“You!” he gasped. “What in hell are you doing in my *house*?”

Janet took the opportunity to break away from him. She ran and hid behind me. In retrospect, she could have chosen some more substantial protection.

Dickman stomped across the deck, grabbed me by the lapels of my sport coat, and tried to lift me off the ground.

“Let go!” I yelled.

“Answer me! What have you been telling my wife? Why were you really in my office today?”

I wedged my hands between his wrists, and jerked them upward rapidly, breaking his grip. Immediately, he lunged at me again, grabbing for my neck. We were only a couple of feet from the edge of the deck. I could see the dizzying abyss beyond the railing.

I planted my feet as he reached for me, and shoved him backward with both hands against his chest.

He staggered back, off balance, until his butt hit the deck railing. His arms flailed helplessly as his momentum started to pivot him over the rail. Janet Dickman screamed as he rotated backward, his eyes wide with terror. He rolled over the rail into space.

At the last second, he reached out and tried to grab the rail to stop himself from launching into empty air. His fingers scraped the wood, and then they disappeared over the edge.

A couple of seconds later, I heard him hit the rocks. It was a sound I’ll never forget.

I leaned over the railing and looked down. Dickman’s broken body had hit the incline, and had rolled and skidded along the desert scrub before coming to a stop. He looked like a truck had rolled over him.

I became aware of Janet at my side. Her hand covered her mouth. She turned to me.

“Did you hit him?” she asked.

I was too stunned to understand. I shook my head, trying to clear it.

“*Did you hit him?*” she asked again, more insistently this time.

“What?” I asked.

“In the face! Did you punch him?”

“I... don’t understand,” I said. “No. I just shoved him.”

She backed away from the deck rail and began to walk in a small circle.

“Good. Okay. If you had hit him, there would be bruises. The police would ask questions about that. Why in hell did you come here, anyway? You could have messed up everything!”

“What?”

“It doesn’t matter now.”

She walked to the telephone, dialed three digits. Seconds later, her voice changed dramatically.

“I need help!” she choked into the receiver, between sobs. “My husband’s fallen from our deck. I think he’s terribly hurt. I think he might be dying!”

There was a pause.

“That’s right. 4730 Holly Canyon Road. Please come quickly!”

She replaced the receiver, and turned to me.

“We don’t have much time. You can’t be here, understand? You have to go.”

“Wait,” I protested. “I have to stay. I pushed him over the railing. The police are going to want to know what happened.”

“What happened is that he fell off the deck. It was an accident. That’s what we’re going to tell the police.”

“I can’t lie about this. He was attacking me. It was self-defense. I didn’t do anything wrong. He was planning to kill you.”

“I don’t have time to argue with you,” she said. “I can make it worth your while. I can give you money. A lot of money. Between his insurance and his savings and investments, there will be several million. I can give you a hundred thousand to just disappear. You could take the money and go to Mexico. You could live like a king there for ten thousand a year or so. You could have a house overlooking the beach. You could even have servants. Just take the money and go, before the police arrive!”

I stared at her, unable to speak.

I had heard those exact words once before, earlier that day.

The front door opened. Angelina Flores rushed into the house.

“Wha’ happened?” she asked. “I heard a scream.”

She rushed over to the rail and peered over.

“*Honey,*” she said, as she embraced Janet. “You did eet!”

“No,” Janet said, nodding toward me. “He did.”

Angelina turned to me.

“Wha’ are you doing here?” she asked. “You were jus’ supposed to be a witness!”

“What?” I asked, as the truth slowly began to dawn on me.

“She’s right,” Janet said. “Your agent really shouldn’t drink so much. I met him at a party a few months ago. He told me all about this author he represented, who listened to people in the next motel room and wrote stories about them. That’s what gave Angel and me the idea.”

“You... set me up?” I stammered.

“You were just supposed to be a witness. You weren’t supposed to get involved, not directly. Angel was supposed to get Robert to try to kill me. I’ve been taking martial arts training during the day while he’s at work. I could have tossed him over the rail without even thinking about it. All I had to do was get him to attack me out here.”

Angelina picked up the story from there.

“We wanted you to hear me plotting with that jerk to keel her,” she said. “Afterward, you could testify about wha’ you had heard. Eet woul’ have convinced the police that eet was self-defense.”

“But...” I said, trying to catch up. “But that would implicate you!”

Even in my shock, I was trying to clean up the plot lines, as if I were doing the punch on a screenplay.

“I called the police,” she said. “From the car. I tol’ them that Robert was out of hees mind. I tol’ them that he had threatened to kill Janet, and that I had not been able to talk him out of eet.”

“You have to leave!” Janet said, grabbing my arm. “The police are on their way. The ambulance will be here any second. You can’t be here when they arrive. A quarter million! I’ll give you that much if you’ll just *go!*”

The girls were right. You can live like a king in Mexico for very little. Sure, it costs more than ten grand a year, but not a *lot* more.

I live in a pretty little house overlooking the Sea of Cortez now. It has a couple of nice-sized bedrooms, a lovely terrace where I write as I watch the boats sail on the crystal waters, and an incredible living room where I sometimes entertain friends. The sea breezes waft through the house day and night, sort of like nature's air conditioning.

Through the miracle of satellite Internet, I can still write my stories and screenplays, and send them to my agent in Los Angeles. I hardly even get to the United States anymore.

I discovered that you can get really great tequila down here for next to nothing.

On clear days, all I have to do is pull out my binoculars, and I can see Janet and Angelina lounging on the deck of their own villa a half mile away.

I took the money, of course. I figured I had earned it, for playing the unwitting role of the patsy in Janet's murder plot. After moving to Mexico, I hired a former Mexican prize fighter to work as my bodyguard. He also cooks like a French chef and makes a mean margarita. His girlfriend keeps the place clean.

I like having servants.

I keep a close eye on the girls. We have an uneasy truce. Even though it would be tough for the American officials to touch us down here, we all know what we did. It's kind of like what that old boy Sun Tzu said: *Keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer.*

I think, though, that our tenuous relationship will eventually be better defined by another ancient axiom, something Ben Franklin once said.

Three can keep a secret, if two of them are dead.

You do the math.

END

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AVAILABLE LIGHT

BY

JACK BLUDIS

*Jack Bludis has written dozens of books under a number of pseudonyms. His most notable works, however, have been published under his own name, and feature post-WWII private eyes with names like Rick Page, Ken Sligo, and Brian Kane. He has been nominated for the Shamus and Anthony Awards, and currently lives in Baltimore. His most recent book is **Shadow of the Dahlia**.*

Mrs. Vincent Calibari, the church-going mother of three, stepped from the curb near Bloomingdale's Third Avenue exit. She climbed onto the back of a motorcycle, and put her arms around the rider. It was 1973 and ladies pants suits were in style, so the slacks worked for riding piggyback.

The rider was in his middle twenties and clean-shaven, with hair that extended as far as the words *Harley-Davidson* on the back of his leather jacket.

I was on foot, but by now I knew their routine.

I took a taxi to my Ford Escort and drove to West 55th Street near Twelfth. It was a couple of months before the elevated portion of the Westside Highway had begun collapse, so traffic was slapping along up there, sending down the stench and heat of burning rubber.

I found a parking space under the highway where some of the cops from Midtown North parked their personal cars and walked a half block from where Vancouver's Harley was chained to the iron fence in front his basement-level apartment.

I didn't like Vince Calibari as a person nor did I like the characters he played as an actor, but after watching his wife Joan for more than a week, I didn't like her much better. Calibari was paying me, and that was the difference.

I waited a half hour before a space cleared for me to park, and another two hours before Mrs. Calibari left the apartment, climbed into a taxi, and went home. It was the second time I observed that they were in the apartment alone for over an hour. It should have been enough evidence to make an infidelity case stick and I told that to Calibari's lawyer.

"Keep after them. Vince wants more," he said.

"Whatever he wants," I said. It was more hours for me to bill. I wasn't hurting for cash, but it was smart to stop drawing against my stock portfolio.

I lived only four blocks from the Calibaris. A few days before, I had seen Vancouver pick her up near the corner of 71st and West End Avenue. It was right after her husband left for the theater where he had a lead in an off-Broadway drama.

I had once followed Joan and her young lover to what I thought was a motorcycle bar on Christopher Street. That time, I was wearing a jacket and tie, so I passed on going inside.

Since the lawyer gave me the word that Calibari wanted more, I followed them into the Village again. This time, I wore black jeans and a black T-shirt. I went inside, bought a bottle of Budweiser, and watched them make eyes at each other at one of the corner tables. Mrs. Calibari, in a white blouse with matching green slacks and jacket, seemed more out of place than I did, but it didn't seem to bother anyone.

I was there less than five minutes when a woman in black leather, with chains attached to her jacket, stepped up and scraped her long, red fingernails down the front of my tee shirt.

"I like you," she said.

She wasn't bad. She even had nice breath.

"Thanks," I said.

We chatted briefly but I made it clear that I wasn't into the same things that she was.

"I could let you win," she said and she circled the nail of her index finger around my left nipple.

"No, thanks," I said. She was not the type to *let* anybody win at a game she was probably an expert at playing.

Later, a tall wispy guy sidled up to me and started to chat. I declined his not-so subtle invitation for "fun," and he offered to sell me any assortment of grass, poppers or Quaaludes. I turned him down for that too.

"Cocaine?" he said.

"No thanks," I said.

"Oh, poopy," he said, and he strolled away.

Almost instantly, the doorman stepped to where I was standing against a wall, nursing my Bud.

"What're you doin', pal?"

"Having a beer," I said.

"What're you lookin' for?"

"Nothing."

"Who you watchin'?"

"Nobody."

"You a cop?"

"No."

"You must be private then. Let's try it again--*who* are you watchin'?"

I didn't want to make a commotion with Joan Calibari and Robert Vancouver across the room. They hadn't made me yet and I didn't want them to. I started for the door.

"Get back here," the doorman called after me and he followed.

I kept walking and didn't stop until I was at my car. By that time, he had given up.

I drove around the block a few times, but I was too conspicuous to stay any longer. An hour and twenty minutes later, my subjects showed up at Vancouver's apartment. An hour and a half after that, Joan Calibari took a taxi in plenty of time to beat her husband home from the theater.

At four a.m., two days later, I got a call from my concierge.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Devoe, but Vince Calibari, the actor, down here. He says you're working for him."

I was barely awake, so it took a few seconds for me to make sense of it. Then I said to send him up.

Calibari stepped into my apartment and looked around. "Not a very big place. You sure you're a *good* private eye?"

"Better than most," I said, and I gestured to the sofa.

He was in his late forties, with broad shoulders and a taut jaw. He was not quite good-looking. He had never reached the top rung of the movie ladder, and he was getting too old to make the final pull.

"You're sure he's spending time with this gay guy?" he asked. Apparently, his lawyer had already given him an interim report.

"I don't know that he's gay, I just know that they spend time at an S&M bar in the Village."

"Most of those guys are gay, right?"

"I don't know enough about that kind of thing."

"What the hell did I hire, a boy scout? I want pictures of my wife in bed with him."

Pictures had gotten me into serious trouble before and I didn't want to do it.

"Your lawyer can make a good case without pictures."

"I want air-tight. Get pictures of them doing it," he said. He tried to sound tough, but his real-life persona was less convincing than when he was on the screen. "Do it right, and there's a bonus for you."

"Pictures will cost you another five-hundred."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Going rate."

He snarled. Then his whole body went limp, and finally, he looked up. "I don't even know her since she discovered grass."

I raised my eyebrows. Marijuana wasn't rampant in the middle classes yet, although the movie and theater communities had been doing it for quite a while, and I guess the Calibaris qualified. I was borderline addictive, which cost me two very good, salaried jobs. In her case, I guess I was playing 'holier than thou.'

"Photos won't be good for the kids," I said.

"The kids'll never see them. All I need is the evidence to make her sweat so I can get the divorce."

I didn't like him before, and I liked him even less now.

Robert Vancouver chained his bike to the fence grate while Joan Calibari unlocked the door to the apartment.

Twenty minutes after they went inside, I used the lock-picking techniques I had gotten good at. With high-speed film in my German camera, I negotiated my way through the small apartment. The sounds of four-letter words, heavy breathing, and the burnt-hay aroma of marijuana guided me. There was enough available light for the film, so I flicked off the built-in strobe. I eased down the hall to the bedroom that was level with the backyard, and looked around the corner.

Vancouver was handcuffed to the iron bed and Joan Calibari was busy with him. They were deeply involved and I clicked off a half dozen pictures before Vancouver saw me. His eyes went wide. Mrs. Calibari turned in my direction and I clicked again. She had a nice body.

"No!" she cried.

"Yes!" I called back at her.

I clicked what was probably the best photo of the bunch and stepped quickly through the basement-level apartment and outside. She didn't follow, of course. I took my car-keys from my pocket as I approached my illegally parked car, and a little guy in a silk sports shirt and gold chains stepped from the curb.

"What d'ya got there, pal?" he said

"None of your--"

His very big revolver told me he was going to make it his business.

"Let's have it," he said. He wiggled the fingers of his free hand at the camera.

I was going to lose the evidence along with my camera. I had my .38 in my fanny holster and I thought about fighting him off, but his gun was out and ready to fire. My life is worth more than the evidence or the camera, but I tried to negotiate.

"What do you want? The camera or the film?"

"The whole business."

"I can take the film out for you?"

"It might mess up the pictures." He wiggled his fingers some more.

"I'll roll them back for you," I said.

"Give me the goddamn thing and stop wasting my time."

As I slipped from the strap, I thought about swinging the camera at him, but he still had the gun. I handed over the camera and felt like a fool as I watched him climb into a black Lincoln with an even bigger guy at the wheel.

The camera thief gave a mock salute. Then they turned onto Twelfth Avenue under the Westside Highway.

Less than a week later, a photo of the near-naked Joan Calibari, looking over her shoulder and away from the handcuffed Vancouver, loomed out from

the front page of one of the national tabloids. At seven the following morning, Calibari and his lawyer were in my apartment.

Calibari screamed spit in my face, and I wanted to slug him, but self-control would get me more future work and far less grief.

"I paid you to do a job and you blew it!" Calibari screamed.

I held my ground. "Please sit down."

"Cool it, Vince," his lawyer said.

"I advised him against going for pictures," I said.

"I did too," the lawyer said.

"I wanted a divorce--not pictures in some fucking tabloid. I got a call from *The Times*, do you know that?"

"All the news that's fit to print."

"Don't be smart with me," Calibari said.

His lawyer stayed in the conversation, keeping him under control, but along the way, the lawyer suggested a lawsuit. I wasn't certain what I had to stand on, so I decided not to comment. I didn't think the lawyer had his heart in it anyway.

To even things up, I told them I would testify at any proceeding that might come up.

"After you embarrassed me in front of the world!" Calibari said.

"It might be our best option," the lawyer said.

"But that's why we hired him?"

"Exactly," the lawyer said, and for whatever reason it took the steam out of Calibari.

Over the next few weeks, Mrs. Calibari's infidelity had put Vince not only in the scandal sheets but on the entertainment pages in legitimate newspapers. A month later, *People Magazine* later did a piece about their reconciliation and said that Calibari had signed to do the lead in a TV series based on an off-Broadway play he had done six years ago. His agent and publicist were working overtime, I was sure of it. The bastards, all of them I supposed, had set me up.

I had almost forgotten about the Calibaris when I received a midnight phone call.

"Mr. Devoe?"

The question was tentative, but I didn't think it was somebody calling to sell me a timeshare in the Bahamas.

"I need your help," Joan Calibari said. I finally recognized the voice.

"No thanks."

Instead of hanging up, I held on. The pitiable voice did not seem to go with the woman I had seen hovering over the handcuffed Robert Vancouver.

"He's after me," she said.

"Who is?"

"I'm not sure. I think it's Vince's brother."

The guy behind the wheel of the Lincoln! I should have figured it at the time, but I had been preoccupied with the gun that the little guy was pointing at me.

If it were not for the fact the Calibari was a bastard, I would have wished her all the bad luck in the world, but I thought of her as I saw her before she first climbed on the back of Vancouver's motorcycle: a woman whose husband, a sleazy bastard if there ever was one, was trying to dump her.

"I think they're trying to kill me," she said.

After reading about the reconciliation, I was not certain that they had set her up as well as me. Maybe they had even sicked Vancouver on her.

"No thanks, lady."

I didn't exactly slam the receiver, but I didn't lower it gently either.

I thought about how she sounded, and my old anger at Vince Calibari began to gnaw at me. I paced my apartment for two or three minutes and finally settled on Scotch to calm me down. It was the least dangerous substance available at the moment.

The phone rang again and I heard just one word, "Please?"

"I can't help you."

"They're trying to kill me."

"Where's your husband?"

"He's not home from the theater yet."

"Your Children?"

"With Vince's sister in New Jersey. Please? Hurry. Somebody's trying to get in."

"Call the police."

"I--"

The phone went dead. I did a couple of quick paces, then called 9-1-1 and stayed on the line.

The dispatcher came back, "There's no trouble. The lady said everything is all right."

"She said that someone was ..." I let it hang and so did the dispatcher. Finally, I hit the cradle and called Mrs. Calibari again.

"Did the police call you?"

"Yes."

"Why did you tell them everything was all right?"

Silence.

"Is someone there?"

Silence.

"Speak to me."

The line went dead again.

She and Vince could be setting me up for something else, or she could be in real trouble. I thought about how dangerous it was for me to go to the Calibari's apartment. I didn't know her, and I would be an intruder, subject to God-knew what. Why should I care about her anyway?

Variations of those thoughts kept going through my head as I paced, but the idea that she might be in danger overwhelmed my objections.

I slipped quickly into running shoes and a pair khakis and hooked the .38 holster onto my belt under my sweatshirt. I partly jogged and partly ran the four blocks. The front door of the brownstone was open. I pushed inside and climbed two and three steps at time to the third-floor apartment. I touched the door and it too fell open.

I drew the .38, went low and eased inside.

"Hold it!" someone said from another room and I heard a commotion.

"Is Mrs. Calibari all right?"

"You should know."

"Robert, please," she said.

I had never heard his voice before, except in the form of curses, grunts, groans, and heavy breathing, but the intruder was Vancouver, and not the brother-in-law she suspected.

"She set me up," Vancouver whined. "Both of them did."

"He set us all up. She didn't do anything," I said.

Somehow, Vince Calibari or someone working for him had manipulated both his wife and Vancouver into the relationship in order to further Calibari's career. He wanted a divorce, but he wanted publicity too, and now he wanted revenge.

"She made me hers then she dumped me," he pleaded. It was melodramatic, but it was also sad.

My eyes adjusted to the interior darkness and I saw their outlines and shadows from the night light against the white of the walls and counters in the kitchen. He was pulling back on her hair and with a butcher's knife against her throat.

"This won't achieve anything," I said.

"It'll make me feel better."

"Not for long."

"I won't feel anything dead."

"You want her to feel nothing too?"

"I want her to feel like I feel. She shouldn't have made me love her."

"Who set you up? Who introduced you?"

"Vince's brother," Joan Calibari said. Her voice was gurgling from the fear that the knife was about to slice her throat.

"Have you been seeing each other again?" I asked. I wanted to keep him talking.

"She told me to come over."

"I didn't!"

"Liar."

"Somebody else must have," she pleaded. It was probably one of Calibari's actress friends.

I had the .38 in my hand and ready. From what I could see, I had a clear shot at his shoulder, but his involuntary reaction might draw the knife across her throat and I couldn't take the chance.

"She doesn't deserve to die for liking you."

"I loved him, but that's over. He won't leave me alone and neither will Vince," she said.

"Killing her isn't going to help anybody," I said.

"It'll help me get over her," he said.

He was getting even more melodramatic, but if he moved the sharp edge of the knife against her throat, it would slice through to horror.

"She made a fool of me."

He dropped the flat of the blade to her chest, gesturing through her body to himself.

I couldn't wait any longer.

I pulled the trigger once. The shell slammed into his shoulder and he fell back and away from her. His hand opened on reflex and the knife fell to the stone tiles. I wanted to fire again, to keep him from coming at me, but he had stumbled backward and banged the back of his head on the kitchen island, and I holstered my gun.

He began to whimper and slid all the way to the floor. A strobe light flashed behind me. The little guy with gold chains stepped inside. He was holding a gun again, and his partner, probably Vince Calibari's brother, was taking photos. He caught Vancouver, then a shot of Joan Calibari in her nightgown crouching next to me. He backed away and got us all. I started to go after him, but the little guy was between us. The other hurried through the apartment.

"You don't want to do that." He waved his index finger at me and glancing down at his big gun.

This time I was pissed. I took one long stride away from Joan Calibari and nailed him in the middle of the face with my fist. He released the gun and it fell to the floor without firing. The cameraman was already gone. I picked up the little guy's gun and hurried downstairs and into the street where the Lincoln was double-parked with the flashers going. The photographer was trying to unlock the driver-side door.

I slammed him against the car and grabbed my camera. The little guy came after me screaming and with blood pouring from his nose. I smashed him across the face with his own gun and pushed him between parked cars.

"Bastard," he muttered, but not at all clearly.

I dashed back into the building where the doors had been left open and I rushed upstairs. Mrs. Calibari had pulled herself into a ball against the electric

range and she was sobbing. Vancouver was bleeding and trying to get up. The knife was still in the middle of the floor and I kicked it into the next room.

A neighbor must have called because of the noise, and the police came. I had a lot of explaining to do, but Joan Calibari and Robert Vancouver had more. The police would probably talk to the guys in the Lincoln too.

A few days later, a Vince Calibari-clearing version of the event reached *The Daily News*. His publicist had probably handed it over to the reporter. The story was slow to reach the rest of the media, but when it did, it implied that Robert Vancouver and I were fighting over Joan Calibari. A short version of the true story made it to the Times, but it was buried on the inside pages.

The photos in the kitchen never came into play either in the news or at the divorce proceeding. Calibari offered me big money for the pictures and I declined. One of the tabloids came at me with even more money, but that would have been like selling them to Calibari, who had planted that first picture.

Vince Calibari's lawyer chose not to call me as a witness. Mrs. Calibari's lawyer did though, and I testified honestly. It must have worked in her favor, because she gained custody of her children and a decent settlement.

It was only justice that Vince Calibari's TV series never made it out of the pilot stage.

Although I hate it sometimes, I selectively bury my scruples and take almost any big-money job I can get. I don't like intruding on people's lives and privacy, but being a bastard is where the big money is in most businesses, and it's no different as a private investigator

END

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THE RIGHT THING TO DO

by
G. Miki Hayden

*New York author G. Miki Hayden teaches writing, but she can also sling words with the best of them. She was given the 2004 MWA Edgar Award for her short story **The Maids**, (**Blood On Their Hands**, Berkley Prime Crime). She has also won the Macavity Award for her instructional book **Writing The Mystery: A Start To Finish Guide for Both Novice and Professional**, which was also nominated for the Agatha and Anthony Awards. She has a Derringer Award nomination for her short story **The Girl in Apartment 2-A** (**Dime**, Quiet Storm, 2004).*

A Hollywood movie was shooting on Blackwater, so after a minute of glaring at the oblivious film crew, plainclothes Senior Police Officer Aaron Clement walked down Comanche. Why couldn't these people stay in California?

As he walked, Clement had the sensation of a camera rolling slowly forward behind him, keeping him and everything he did in view.

He lost the feeling in front of the window of the Holder Community Bank, distracted by the sight of a full pot of coffee on the table inside. The point was he maintained a savings account here and even had a safety deposit box downstairs. And that point delivered the justification for his going in to have a cupful without people—if they knew anything at all—thinking he was simply sneaking after a free one. He'd stand in line and ask for a statement on his account. The caffeine might wake him up a little.

His father had been the other kind of cop, anything but on the straight and narrow, the reason Clement responded with such prickliness to this particular subject. Which had been, in a convoluted way not worth remembering, why he'd volunteered for Vietnam.

At that time, ironically, and over his objections, the Army had made Clement an MP, a job he'd accepted with bad grace, but with which he'd subsequently fallen in love. Genetics, maybe. ...But not genetics in regard to the graft.

So he walked inside and got a cup of coffee, then added a few shakes of the white pseudomilk crap. Better living through chemistry, but he liked it.

He swirled the powder creamer in the cup with a wooden stick and didn't bother to get in line just yet. Instead, he studied the room for no particular reason. He wasn't intending to buy the place, and he didn't suspect anyone in here of anything, either. Holder—not at all ornate, with cushy furniture, and

modern design—felt homier than the impressive Bank of America two blocks over, where Clement had his checking account. He poured a little more coffee into the cup and, naturally, a little more of the White'n Lite.

That was about the exact second when everything around him got out of hand, something he never in a million years would've actually expected. Two men in black ski masks crashed through the doors into the quiet bank and pointed guns at the few people in there, while one barked manically, "Hands up, everyone. This is a robbery."

Clement's heart muscle skipped a beat and then took off as if he were on a high speed chase, not something he engaged in very much these days. He flashed on the gun in a front holster inside his khaki pants and wished quite ardently to be anywhere but here, such as standing on Blackwater watching the film crew with fascination and wondering what big star might be in their little Okie town.

The camera was back panning his face, observing the cop to see what he'd do. But Clement didn't have the sense that he was going to do anything, except to wait until all this was over and then report on everything he and his inner camera had recorded.

A couple of the locals in the bank seemed to know who Clement was. They didn't look at him, though, except obliquely, while Clement tried to communicate with the guard, using a little movement of his eyebrow. He tried to tell the old man not, not, not to pull his gun, while the men in masks ran behind the teller counters, shouting out orders and being generally uncivilized.

And stupid. Now if Clement were going to rob a bank, he'd research the most up-to-date methods and order everyone to get down on the floor. How long did they expect people to stand here raising their hands without having heart attacks or something and becoming unpredictable? Absurd.

One of the two men had come out to rob the customers of their jewelry. Oh brother. If Clement hadn't already known this was an out-and-out amateur job, he knew it now. His mental camera rotated about 270 degrees—and he supposed the actual one in the ceiling did too. Clement's mouth had gone dry, and he felt somewhere between panic and falling asleep—as if he easily might pass out from the blood in his body going to all the least logical places.

What woke him up was a baby crying and a woman objecting to some rough treatment. Those two signals put his blood back to where it pounded in his head, making rational thought slightly impossible.

The robber taking people's jewelry and money wheeled on Clement. "Why are they all looking at you?" the ski mask asked him.

Indeed. What did they think Clement could he do? He wasn't a hero.

"I'm the bank manager" came out of Clement's mouth. "They know I have the key to the vault downstairs." What surprised him most was that his voice didn't crack.

Clement must be losing his hearing because he couldn't quite make out a shouted exchange between the two robbers. Oh course he was thinking more than he was listening. Thinking fast.

The robber who had questioned Clement pushed him forward, toward the stairs. The men marched down.

Death was no more than passing from one room into another. Clement believed that. His body, on the other hand, wasn't so sure.

The two now stood at the grille to the vault. Clement glanced at the mechanism with some curiosity. "Hurry up," commanded the masked robber.

"I have the key in my pocket." Clement reached not into his pocket but into the holster inside his khakis and pulled out his 1911, cocked and locked with a round in the chamber. They said he was crazy to carry a cocked gun, but the pistol in all the years he'd been carrying it had never released a bullet on its own accord. "Hey," he said as conversationally as he could manage while he turned.

The robber's black eyes peered quizzically into his a millisecond before Clement shot him directly in the heart and killed him with a deafening explosion. Blood sprayed; Clement stepped aside. He'd expected that the robber, dead or not, would shoot and kill him, too. But the kid had been...inexpert, if nothing else. Finally, the robber dropped, along with his gun, which Clement kicked and sent flying.

He rushed toward the stairs then started up, and the imaginary camera, all this time shooting the scene in a single take, came along still.

Some steps above, the other robber looked down at Clement and at his gun, then sprinted away while Clement finished his ascent.

Outside, no car squealed away. Instead, the second robber neared the corner of Comanche and Ranch on the run. But Clement didn't even consider dashing after. For starters, he was nearly 50 years old, had just shot and killed a man, and was now half-deaf and sick to his stomach. He leaned against the building and called dispatch on his cell. They'd pick up the other one. He hoped.

After a while, what passed for brass in their middling-sized police department showed up, along with a couple of blue and white radio cars. Clement handed his personal .45 over to the captain, while he checked to see how much blood had sprayed on his clothing. Plenty.

A few of them, including Clement, who wanted to see the face of the man he'd shot, went down to look at the scene, while others began to debrief the witnesses upstairs.

A lot of people didn't like SPO Aaron Clement—quite reasonably too, figured the cop. He was an odd duck and a loner, not chummy, maybe not even a team player when it came down to that. So Captain Thalman had assigned him to be the cold case squad. Him, personally. The whole squad. Every PD needed one these days.

Once in a great while Clement made an arrest, and nothing could be more satisfying than nailing an SOB who thought he was home free on a homicide. The very idea made Clement grin.

TV showed solving old crimes as all a matter of DNA. The lab tech called up the detective and told him to sit down—she had a hit. But really, what Clement had found, closing a cold case was the same old matter of wearing shoe leather away, years later re-interviewing the people who had been involved, whose relationships had changed, with old bonds dissolved and new grudges formed.

Having nothing in particular cooking for him now, Clement went back into the spirit room holding the murder books and pulled a few. But once returned to his desk, he didn't look at the folders in front of him. Because he also had a computer file up on the screen. The man he'd killed: Stephen Kahn. Kahn had a sheet of sorts. Clement read the pages a couple of times and printed them out.

The street cops hadn't picked up the other bank robber. The man had simply vanished into thin air. Clement tried to figure out if he could have caught the guy that afternoon, and sometimes he thought he could have, while other times, he laughed at the very idea. Probably not.

He skimmed a list of recent bank robberies in the area with surveillance photos and MOs: "No weapon shown; lookout posted outside. Stole employee's car for getaway." Nothing matched this one. Even the "Armed takeover/counter vaulted" with a single gunman didn't match. And Clement bet the solitary gun-toter'd had the intelligence to order everyone to lie down on the floor.

Clement glanced again at Kahn's history—no robbery priors, banks or otherwise.

He sat a while and studied the picture of the man he'd killed. Young. At 23, Kahn'd had his whole life ahead of him. But not really.

At 16, Kahn had been arrested for breaking into a parked car. He was delivered into the custody of his parents, who'd made restitution. Two minor drug arrests followed the next year, and, at 18, Kahn had been charged with a second degree attempted rape, an accusation dropped two months later. After that, only a series of minor offenses: urinating in public, soliciting a prostitute, criminal trespass, creating a disturbance.

Like a doctor diagnosing a patient from an x-ray and blood-tests, Clement made his professional assessment of the decedent—a sociopath periodically drawn in by situational inducements. Clement nodded in agreement with himself. If Kahn had been a shrewd career criminal, no sign of it showed in the brief pages marked with a range of random impulse crimes.

Clement leaned back and tried to mentally recreate the Holder bank job. Which of them had been the leader, the organizer of this little fiasco? No, not Kahn, who had been enlisted by the better organized, but not overly playful, surviving partner.

Life presented lots of itches in a man, both big and small, and very few of them were accessible to any scratching. Something was tickling SPO Clement right now, and he wondered if he couldn't try to obtain a little relief.

He merely wanted to know what had happened that day, and why. And who was responsible.

A cop who has just killed a son of the house probably shouldn't go and question the family. Even Clement, who had trained himself not to be squeamish about such interviews, felt a bit ill at ease in ringing the bell at six that evening. He wasn't on official business, so he could have just turned around and walked away, but, really, once he'd made up his mind to follow through, he was either going to wind up at a dead end or with an arrest. Of course, what he didn't want was a reprimand for investigating where he had no business to.

A man about Clement's own age came to the door, though neither trim nor kempt as Clement liked to keep himself. Maybe he was overcome by grief and depression.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” Clement said politely. He showed his shield. “I’m looking into the Holder Bank robbery.” His tongue refused to curl around his usual “investigating.”

The man grunted in acknowledgement. That was about it.

“May I come in for a moment and talk to you?”

“No. You want to talk, come back with a warrant.”

Clement let out a short but amiable laugh. “I’m not going to do that. I only want any information you might have about your son’s accomplice.”

The door creaked closed and shut in his face.

And that was what made cold cases just the slightest easier. People had lost some of their passion about the events. ...Now back to square one.

Clement walked toward his car, but a second later he heard the door open again, and a man’s footsteps made him tense and turn.

The man behind him wasn’t the man who’d been at the door. This was just a kid—well, an older teenager, who gave Clement a tentative smile. “Hey,” said the young guy, “I’ll talk to you. We can go in the garage.”

Clement was glad to get in out of the cutting wind. “You play basketball?” he asked as they ducked under the door with a hoop fixed on high. Damn... the kid had probably played with his brother.

“I’m on the team,” the boy acknowledged. “Holder High. My last year. I’m going to State next year in Stillwater, expenses paid.”

Clement nodded. “Look, I’m sorry,” he told the youngster. “I’m sorry about your brother. I’m sorry I’m here. I’m just interested in any hint that might lead me to the guy he was with when they stuck up the bank. The other man is the one really responsible. He got your brother killed. Stephen was your brother?” When the boy nodded, Clement emphasized that Stephen hadn’t really been to blame. “Wrong place, wrong time,” Clement said sympathetically. “Someone else got him into this. Who was he hanging out with recently? Can you give me a name?”

Matt, the brother, gave him a name. “I wish...” he said. “Well, if wishes were horses, huh? Dad was always hard on him, but that’s no excuse. A bad choice is a bad choice, I guess. And when you’re dead, you’re dead.” He locked eyes with Clement in what seemed a moment of understanding. “You’re the cop who killed him,” Matt then added. “I saw you on the TV news.” His expression radiated sorrow.

Clement had actually only killed one man before, the incident leaving him with feelings of guilt and a bout of insomnia. But, honestly, the insomnia would have hit him eventually. His name had been engraved in its annals the moment he was born into this world.

The killing had occurred while Clement was trying to usher some rowdy, drunk privates out of a seedy Saigon bar. Hey, it was wartime, everyone had carried guns, and when the guy had come at him, he'd done as he'd been trained to do, and no one had said boo over the incident once it had been investigated.

Now, he believed the killing of Kahn didn't bother him, but he kept examining his feelings as one probes a bad tooth with a tongue. No, the death of Kahn really didn't bother him. He'd absolutely had no choice. And Kahn's absence wouldn't leave much of a hole in society's fabric—though Clement saw Kahn as a screw-up rather than inherently evil.

Still and all, the kid had been armed and robbing a bank, acting out... something or other... Of course, with time, people can change. Kahn, if given a chance, might have turned out not quite as messed up as when he'd started.

Clement found the name Matt had given him on the list of the those incarcerated at Greenwood, upstate, a medium security joint Clement visited from time to time to interview felons who might be ready to rat out friends. He took the day as lost time after weighing the issues. "Were you on a personal vendetta when you investigated this case, officer?" versus "And you took department time for a crusade of your own?"

Clement settled into one of the rooms provided for inmate/attorney consultations. The space had three ordinary walls and one of steel mesh with a corrections officer monitoring the action from outside. Medium security didn't mean that a visitor could pass drugs to the inmate without observation or that the room could be used for unauthorized conjugal visits.

Harold Spode—Hank, Matt had said he was called—didn't carry himself anything like a hardened criminal. Short, thin, and seeming to be acutely self-conscious, he didn't meet Clement's gaze when taking his seat on the bolted-down metal chair.

"I don't know if you smoke," Clement said, "but I've left you a couple of packs." Even if Spode did smoke, smoking wasn't allowed inside the prison, but only in the yard.

Spode shrugged.

"I want to talk about Stephen Kahn," Clement told him. "You knew him well?"

"That dirt bag," responded Spode with some emotion. "I'm in here because of him." He finally looked up at Clement, chill blue eyes adding emphasis to his resentful words.

"How so?" Clement tried not to display his excited interest.

"I'm in here for five years," Spode answered, outraged.

"Because Kahn..." Clement prompted.

"He was the one who said we should go in at night and take stuff from Weller's, that maybe we'd find a safe, or money in the register." Spode appeared to believe that Kahn's having suggested the crime made his own participation completely blameless. Clement, not unacquainted with such illuminating interpretations, merely nodded. "He's the one who ought to be in here," Spode went on, appearing somewhat mollified by Clement's acknowledgement.

"Yeah," said Clement. He was caught by the idea that Kahn had been able to come up with a full-fledged criminal strategy on his own. Perhaps Clement had misjudged Kahn's abilities. "He thought up the plan, right?"

"Yes. I never would have thought of it." Spode seemed happy now that he had Clement's unqualified agreement. "And two days later, we hit the place. I never told the cops he did it though."

"Good man," Clement put in. He was being sarcastic but didn't expect that Spode would notice. "You heard he hit a bank the week before last?"

Spode relaxed as if he and Clement were gossiping about a mutual friend, and Spode responded in some amazement.

"Does that sound like something Stephen would have thought up on his own?" Clement inquired.

All of a sudden Spode seemed to wake up to the fact that he wasn't talking to another convict, and a cautious look came over his face.

"Stephen's dead," Clement assured him. "You're not going to get your pal in trouble."

Again, Spode showed some surprise, and his attitude of blame toward Kahn transformed into sentimental recollections. "We had some times together," he concluded after a bit of rooting around in his rather meager bag of emotional responses.

"He planned your job, so maybe he planned the bank job." Clement tried to steer him back on point.

"I guess." Spode shrugged. "Sure. He wanted the money cause of Arlen."

"Arlen?" Not a name Matt had mentioned.

"The baby," Spoke answered as if Clement were dim. "Arlen. Cathy and Stephen's little guy."

Cathy Tabachnik and her four-year-old, Arlen, lived in a small house on Eufaula in a somewhat upscale middle-class neighborhood. The Tabachnik parents' home, Clement decided once he'd scoped out the well-landscaped residence.

The girl who answered the door in jeans and a man's flannel shirt must be Cathy. The shirt could be Stephen's or once belonged to Cathy's father. Clement showed his badge. "Can I take two minutes of your time?"

Rather than letting him in, Cathy stepped out, shutting the door. The wind had died down a bit and they stood in the sun. "I want to ask about Stephen Kahn," he said.

"I know," she responded. "I saw you on TV."

"I'm sorry." Clement felt genuinely apologetic. "I had to shoot him."

She took that in. "I told him not to do anything stupid, that I'd supported Arlen to this point and I was completely capable of continuing to do so." She shook her head. "Male pride. He wanted to show that he could make money, scads of it. As if that meant anything. The money he wanted to make was someone else's." She laughed bitterly, then glared at Clement, a glare aimed at Stephen, too, he assumed. Then she looked at her watch.

Clement felt her impatience and rushed ahead. "Do you think he was capable of planning the job himself? Who do you think was in on it with him?"

"I have to get work," she said. "I'm the afternoon pharmacist at Gunnerson Drugs. I have to drop my son off at my mom's." She looked again at her watch then squinted up at Clement.

She had caught him by surprise. Probably had caught Stephen off-guard, too. She was a professional, paid enough to have a nice home and to support herself and her son.

She smiled as if she knew what Clement was thinking. "Stephen wasn't the sharpest tack in the drawer," she admitted, "but sometimes he had a sweetness to him. He was immature though and maybe had attention deficit..." She smiled once more, probably at the display of her expertise. "Being involved with him was a big mistake. But I have Arlen."

“Who might he have done the bank job with?”

“I have no idea what he was up to these days, or who he knew.” For a third time, she referred to her watch. “But Stephen was crazy about Arlen and stopped doing drugs when his son was born.” She turned on her heel and went back into the house.

Clement didn't really have much of anyplace to go with the case after that. An unimportant boy whose attempts at sin had risen to the level of perhaps one class D felony, Kahn hadn't been a very visible young man during the last year or so. Clement didn't find Kahn's lack of trail odd, but sad rather; although, a loner himself, Clement sort of understood.

After another week trying to pick up any scent left by an odorless nonentity who'd never taken a job and didn't even have a credit card, Clement was handed an old set of bones uncovered by some kids playing in Holder Park. No, two sets with half the bones and a skull missing, according to a consulting anthropologist.

Soon Clement had a fire in his own bones to find the freak responsible for ending those two human lives. Clement hated the arrogance that allowed some madman to cut short another person's days on earth.

Kahn was gone, marking time in the great beyond, and even if Clement wasn't entirely done with the case, this other thing pressed on him.

Some day the city would extend itself to engulf Clement's house, but it still hadn't, and he loved it out here. At two a.m., not yet able to sleep, Clement put on his new navy corduroys with a wool shirt and went to sit in the gazebo, which he'd built from a kit a decade before. The moon was up, so he listened to the coyotes for a while and was about to go in when he heard car wheels crunching slowly up the road. Maybe someone from the P.D. to fetch him on a case. He hadn't brought his cell phone out with him, not really being on call right now.

He waited to see who would walk across the drought-browned lawn and watched as someone half-circled the house then came and sat in the swing bought a long time ago for Clement's now-grown son, Rod.

The intruder pushed forward on the little wooden plank, soon picking up some speed and height. Clement stood and moved out toward him, the kid, Matt

Kahn, brother of Stephen, whose heart a bullet from Clement's gun had torn asunder.

"Hey," said Clement.

Matt stopped his legs from pumping skyward and scraped his feet across the ground to come to a stop. "You scared the crap out of me," Matt said, laughing in what might be relief. "Okay, I know I shouldn't have come."

"Well," said Clement. Matt was going to tell him about Arlen, he supposed, about why Stephen had decided he needed the money. "Probably not at two in the morning. But that's okay. What's up?"

Matt extracted himself from the once orange swing seat. "You're way out from the city here," he remarked, not answering the question. "Really country out this way. I thought I was going in the wrong direction, but then I saw a road sign about a mile back. I don't even think you have any neighbors."

"Yeah," Clement agreed. "Not much out here. We can sit in the gazebo if you want to talk."

Matt followed Clement, both of them picking their way carefully in the semi-darkness. With his boot, Clement found the step onto the wooden platform and settled himself on the circular bench. "Nice," said Matt who sat right next to him. "I wouldn't picture you as a gazebo guy."

"You never know what you'll be until you are it. You never know what you'll do until you do it," Clement observed.

"You're a fortune cookie guy." Matt laughed. "See, that doesn't surprise me."

Clement, who thought of himself as wise with age, felt slightly put out. "You're the one who came out here at two a.m. ...Was that on impulse, or a decision you made?" He thought really that Matt must have come on impulse and not known what to do when he'd arrived, thus the stint on the swing.

"Just came here," said Matt, reaching into his windbreaker, "in order to kill you." He brought out a fair-sized pistol. "I've been planning on it since you murdered Stephen."

Wrenched from a moment in which nothing was in question, to the next when everything was, Clement felt like throwing up or blacking out. But neither thing happened and he caught a tight grip on himself. "That doesn't make any sense," Clement told Matt quietly.

Matt laughed that little boyish laugh of his. "Well, yes, it does." And he formed his face into the shape of an innocent and child-like smile.

“Oh God,” groaned Clement. “You’re the one. You’re the partner. The so-called brains.” Maybe Matt had even planned the job his brother had done with Spode. Clement lost his cool. “Some brains you are. You had no idea how a bank is robbed or how to get away with it.”

“Oh, I got away with it,” refuted Matt.

About to be killed in his own back yard, Clement understood he wasn’t supposed to rile the man holding the gun. “How much did you get away with?” he asked. “Exactly nothing. You left the bags at the scene—just as well since one of the tellers dropped in a dye packet. If you’d taken the money, you’d have been purple- and pepper-sprayed from the bank to Sunday. So shoot me, you horse’s ass. You’re the one who got your brother killed.”

Hothead that Clement had just found out he was, he pushed himself all the way forward in a single motion, and with one hand forced Matt to raise up his gun. In a moment the gun would come down and a bullet would skewer Clement exactly as one of his had delivered a death blow to Matt’s brother, Stephen.

But Clement took that moment and made the most of it, reaching into the holster in his new cords for the cocked and locked .45 that he pulled out just as he had at the Holder Bank. He fired into the 18-year-old’s chest, once again creating a too-loud explosion.

He held onto Matt’s hand as the boy died, and the holding wasn’t the least in consolation, but simply to keep the kid and his death grip from firing an answering shot into the cop who only a beat of time ago had killed him.

This stupid, sickening case had ended with a second young body bursting into lifeless human bits and pieces. Stephen Kahn had been clueless; Matt, a calculating psychopath, but dumb. Another 10 years and Matt would have been... well, psychopaths only became bolder as they got away with each crime.

After Clement had returned from Vietnam, he’d once explained to his dad that he couldn’t sleep.

“You’ll rest after you’re dead,” Sam Clement had answered his son with little empathy.

Now, Matt Kahn’s eyes closed and he was off to sleep—or some other surely well-earned reward.

END

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rEstLeSs 2NitE

by
John Lau

*While he may be a new name to mystery fiction readers, John Lau has been a professional screenwriter since 1984 and has written - among other things - a Mike Hammer movie on CBS and an original thriller on HBO called **Second Skin**. He currently has a latter day L.A. detective story called **What I Did For Deidra** in preproduction.*

When Wally Aquirre and Anne Strelecki got serious, they decided that he would move into her one bedroom apartment in Canoga Park. Wally's roommates Keith Crawford and Gary Taylor helped him load up his belongings, and the three of them got the job done in one afternoon.

That night, they went out drinking at the Woodland Hills Red Onion. Gary's girlfriend Kym Johnson joined them briefly before leaving for Holy Cross hospital. Kym worked nightshift in the maternity ward and the job suited her perfectly. She made no secret of her tremendous love for infants, and her constant jabbering on the subject was beginning to get on Gary's nerves.

Wally and Anne left the bar at 11 to go home, screw each other's eyes out, then screw them back in again. Gary and Keith stayed till closing, ripping off other people's drinks when they ran out of money, and hitting on progressively uglier women.

When closing time came, Keith insisted on driving home despite the fact that he had two DWI's and a suspended license. Keith was bigger than Gary and a mean drunk besides, so Gary gritted his teeth and got in the passenger seat of the battered Camaro. Doing over a hundred on the 118 East, Gary's life flashed before his eyes when they blew past a CHP going the opposite direction. If Keith even noticed, he didn't let on. Five minutes later they were safe in the living room of their rented house in Sylmar. Keith packed bongs of Thai weed till they both passed out on the floor. There they remained until the next morning when Keith's dog Satan started scratching on the door to be let out in the yard.

* * * * *

Keith and Gary had few friends remaining from their Kennedy High School days, and not one of them was responsible enough to be trusted to come up with a third of the rent. After weighing their alternatives, Gary put an ad in the classified section of the L.A. Daily News soliciting a new roommate. Keith and Gary figured they'd interview candidates for about a week and then pick the one that they liked best. Who knows? Maybe they'd get lucky and they'd get a chick who'd keep the place clean and maybe even give them both an occasional blowjob, no strings attached. Then she'd like them both so much, she'd pay all the rent.

Two weeks later, without a single credible response and the rent looming like the next offramp, the boys were ready to lower their standards to anyone under 30 who wouldn't shit on the rug. That's when they met Rick Poole. In retrospect, they would have been better off scraping up the extra \$150 and change each.

* * * * *

"I'm not," said Poole when they asked him where he was working. "I just got in town. I was gonna stay with this bitch, but she moved back in with her mother."

"What kind of work do you do?" asked Gary.

"This and that," shrugged Poole. He did not elaborate.

"Where you from?"

Another shrug. Along with a smirk.

"Everywhere."

Keith looked at Gary and rolled his eyes. *What a loser.* And it wasn't just the way the interview was going. Poole looked and smelled like he was unclear on the concept of bathwater.

"Look dude," Keith said, "we're not in the business of helping the homeless. I don't know what brings you bozos to L.A. anyway. But no wonder the place is going downhill."

Poole turned to look at Keith and for a second Gary thought a fight might break out.

"Hey," Gary said to break the tension, "we just don't wanna get stuck carrying some guy we don't know for the rent. Understand? Nothing personal."

Poole looked at Gary. He had an unnervingly direct gaze.

"How much is the rent in this shithole?"

Keith stood up and snapped, "\$900 a month, plus utilities, dicknose. \$325 each, which I'm sure that you don't got. So let's stop wasting each other's time and you just get the fuck lost, okay?"

Then Poole stood up too and held Keith's gaze. He wasn't bulked up like Keith, Gary noticed, but there was something lean and dangerous about him that reminded Gary of an animal he once saw at the zoo. What was that fucking thing? A wolverine-- that's what it was. Gary started looking around for a blunt object... And that's when Poole pulled out the WAD. It was more money than either of the boys had seen in their entire lives. And the guy just kept it wrapped in this dirty, snot-stained handkerchief.

Keith and Gary's eyes popped as Poole calmly peeled off ten hundred dollar bills.

"Here's three months in advance, plus 25 for groceries," Poole held out the money and smiled. "Whaddaya say, boys?"

Keith stared at the dough warily but didn't reach for it. Gary took him aside. Poole wandered into the kitchen and took a look out the window at the overgrown backyard. He turned around when he heard their footsteps.

Gary said, "Your room's the one at the end of the hall. You'll have to share the big bathroom with me. Uh... y'know I work at this shop... they're looking for a guy to drive a forklift--"

Poole snickered, grabbed his duffle and brushed Keith with his shoulder on his way down the hall.

"Not my style." he said.

* * * * *

If Poole was looking for a job, it was a news to his roommates. All the guy did was sleep in late, lay out in the backyard, watch TV all night, and eat take-out junkfood. Nachos, that's what he liked. Cheap, smelly, Jack-In-The Box nachos. Poole ate them for six nights straight. Gary counted. After a week of this he started to go out. Not regularly though. Just one or two nights a week, that's all. Poole would do something like suddenly stand up in the middle of Married: With Children, stretch and say "Feel kinda restless..." Then he'd go in his room for a second before disappearing till sometime the next day.

What could they say to him? They had his money. They had to put up with him for at least three months. Keith went out of his way to avoid the guy, and Gary hung with Keith. Poole basically ignored the two of them, but he was cordial, even flippant whenever they'd bump in the hall.

* * * * *

It was the car that got Keith's attention. Three weeks after moving in, Poole drove home in a black, '94 Boss Mustang. It was fucking cherry. He said he stole it off a used car lot for 12 grand cash. That really got Keith wondering. Who the hell had they let into their house?

So with Gary gone for the weekend and Poole taking a leasurely dump, Keith decided to have a look around the enigma's bedroom.

Poole hadn't done much with it. After sleeping on the floor for two days he had dragged home a mattress. He found it in the Recycler and the guy he bought it from had brought it over in the back of his mini-van. Now it lay off-center in the middle of the room, but that was it furniture-wise.

Poole's clothes lay scattered in unlaundered piles. Keith kicked at them in disgust. Even though the window was open, the room smelled rank. And then he saw the gun.

Although he practically expected it, Keith still felt his breath catch. It was a big, ugly, Colt pistol. A .45 automatic. In businesslike blue steel, it had been buried under some dirty socks. Now uncovered, it lay there naked on the floor.

Keith picked it up and held it in his hand. He felt a chill run up his spine. At the same time his cock twitched like it did when some babe in an oversized t-shirt raised her arm and he got a glimpse of inadvertent tit. Poole cleared his throat in the doorway. Keith turned around.

It could have been a bad moment for Keith, but deep down inside he believed he could take Poole apart anytime he wanted. Keith had kicked his share of ass in 22 years. He was bigger than Poole. He was younger too. And shit, who was holding the gun?

"What are you, some drug dealer on the run?" Keith asked.

Poole grinned at him.

"Fuck that shit," he said. "I do robberies."

"Sure you do," Keith said.

* * * * *

Poole and Keith watched the Hasidic dude shuffle down the residential sidewalk. It was well after nightfall, and the Fairfax district was relatively quiet. "These fuckers crack me up," said Poole. "They think they look good with those shitty beards? They look like fucking Z.Z. Top."

Keith laughed nervously. In spite of the money, the car and then the gun, he still didn't believe that a little rodent like Poole went around just sticking people up like Jesse James. Oh, he could accept that Poole stole the money. He probably took it from his old lady, Keith had thought. But after riding around with the guy for a couple of hours, and listening to his sociopathic diatribes on women, the elderly, communism, the homeless, and any and all ethnic groups, Keith was ready to keep an open mind. Poole seemed to exist on the fringe of civilization the way a jungle cat circled a herd of gazelle.

Poole drove past the Hasidic and made a right turn. He pulled over to the curb and opened the car door.

"Get behind the wheel and keep the motor running," he said. "Be ready to burn rubber."

Keith opened his mouth to say something, but Poole was already out of the car. Keith slid over the stickshift and adjusted the driver's seat. He reached for the rear view mirror...

Holy shit- it was happening! It was really fucking happening! Poole had the Hasidic down on his knees, his hands in the air. Keith could hear yelling, but he couldn't make out the words. Then he saw Poole belt the Jew alongside the head with the pistol and the victim went down. Poole was running toward the car.

"Open the fucking door, goddammit!" Poole was pounding on the window and Keith realized that the car was locked. He frantically searched for the release. His heart pounded in his ears. Poole jumped into the car.

"Drive, stupid!!!"

Keith stomped on the throttle, the rear tires squealed and the car fishtailed wildly out of control. Keith fought the wheel. The Ford straightened out and accelerated down the narrow street. Too late, Keith saw the old lady edge the shopping cart into the crosswalk in front of him. His right front fender caught it flush and sent it spinning off to the side, the old lady hanging on for dear life. Keith glanced at the mirror. "She's alright! Keep going!" Poole yelled and Keith concentrated on getting the fuck out of there. He skidded around a corner onto Beverly Boulevard and put the pedal through the floorboards.

"Look at all this fucking money!!!" Poole screamed. "Fucking Hymie had almost three grand on him..!"

* * * * *

"You did what???" Gary demanded and so Keith told the story all over again. The three of them quaffed brews and did bong loads in the living room. The World Wrestling Federation was on the TV. Gary had spent the weekend with Kym and her parents in Palm Springs. The Johnsons had outnumbered him 3 to 1 and spent a fair amount of time turning up the heat about him marrying Kym. Gary had returned home far from rested, and now with this wild story he was hearing, he didn't know what to think about anything anymore. It was too fucking incredible. And yet... there was the money. There was this humongous gun. And there was Poole and Keith acting like the best of friends. Life was getting weird.

"Dump the bitch," Poole was saying.

"What?" Gary said.

"Dump her before it's too late."

"I'm going to," Gary said.

"When?"

"I'm just waiting for the right time."

"Oh bullshit," Keith said.

"You'll never dump Kym. You don't have the fucking balls."

"Fuck you!" said Gary, incredulous that now his roommates were ganging up on him too.

"He's pussywhipped," said Keith as he fired up the bong.

"I AM NOT!!!"

"Then dump her."

"I will!"

"When?"

"I'll let you know, alright?" Gary said sarcastically. He folded his arms and scowled.

"I'll do it," Poole said.

"What?"

"I'll dump her for you, Gar. When she comes over, I'll just tell her, 'Gary doesn't want to see you no more, bitch. So get the fuck out.'"

"Yeah, right," Gary said.

"Knock knock." said Kym as she walked in the front door. "Hi, Keith. Hi, Rick." She walked over and kissed Gary on the lips. Gary scowled.

"Rick has something to tell you, Kym," Keith snickered and Poole erupted in laughter.

"What's that, Rick?" asked Kym.

"Nothing!" snapped Gary. Keith and Poole laughed even harder. Kym strolled into the kitchen. "Any beers left?"

"Bring me one, honey!" Keith hollered.

"Assholes," Gary muttered.

Kym returned with the beers and passed them around.

Poole caught her gaze and looked at her seriously.

"I think you'd better sit down, Kym," he said and Keith fell on the floor. Poole busted up all over again. Kym looked at the two guys laughing and had to giggle herself.

"What're you laughing at???" Gary growled and Keith and Poole went and lost it completely.

Gary got up and stomped down the hall. His bedroom door slammed. Kym ignored him and packed herself a bong.

Keith finally regained enough control to sit up and look at Poole. "You feeling ruthless tonight..?" he grinned at his roommate.

Poole grinned back and got to his feet.

* * * * *

Two days later, Keith quit his job at the shop. It wasn't something he planned, it just happened. The thing that set Keith off was, the foreman gave him some shit for something he didn't do. So Keith just quit right there on the spot.

Gary ran to catch up with him.

"Whaddaya think you're doing???" he asked.

Keith peeled off his shop coat and threw it on the floor. "There's two kinds of people in the world," he said, "the eaters and the eaten. I'm through being eaten, Gary." And he walked out the door.

Gary quit the next day. That night, the three of them became a gang.

* * * * *

Poole stepped back and pocketed the money.

"Hit him." he said.

"What?" asked Gary, holding the gun to the back of the Korean's head. The shopkeeper's eyes opened wide.

"I said hit him!" Poole said.

Gary gulped, swung and grazed the store owner's skull with the tip of the gun barrel. The Korean yelped, grabbed his head, but didn't go down. Instead he got a crazed look in his eye.

Gary hesitated and looked at Poole. Mistake. Suddenly the Korean became a whirlwind of flying feet and fists. The next thing Gary knew, he was face down on the damp pavement. He couldn't breathe and his right hand was throbbing.

The pint-sized dervish turned toward Poole, but Poole had already picked up the gun. He casually shot the Korean once in the stomach. The roar of the big .45 reverberated through the darkened parking lot.

Keith was so shocked watching the incident go down that he stalled the car in his haste to get over there. The store owner was moaning hideously on the ground as Poole stuffed Gary into the Mustang's backseat. Poole was surprisingly calm. "Drive slowly. No one saw a thing. Just get us out of here." he said.

Keith was white as a sheet. "You can't leave the guy like that!"

"Why not?" Poole said. "He didn't see shit. All white people look alike to him anyway."

* * * * *

The Korean had broken Gary's hand. It swelled up to twice normal size, so they took him to the hospital and got it set the next day. They told the doc Gary slammed it in a door. Afterward, since none of them had jobs any more, they hung out at the Sherman Oaks Galleria. Poole loved the place, with its food court, escalators, fun little stores and trendily dressed women.

Gary, understandably, was in one of his moods. The normally upbeat Keith was quiet too. The incident in Koreatown had brought him back to Earth.

Maybe they were crazy for taking these kind of risks, he admitted, and Gary grumbled assent.

To their surprise, Poole agreed.

"You're right," he said. "It's stupid of us hanging our ass out night in and night out for the kind of money we're pulling in. Especially since now we gotta split it three ways."

By now, both of his partners knew him well enough to realize that he wasn't talking about retirement.

"What?" Gary sneered, "You wanna rob a bank now?"

"Don't be silly," Poole said.

* * * * *

What Poole had in mind was something more in line with his cowboy nature.

"You gotta be fucking kidding!" said Gary from the Mustang's backseat.

They were sitting in the parking lot of the Gelsen's in Encino. A Loomis Armored Transport truck was idling in front. The three of them watched as a uniformed guard carried white canvas sacks out of the upscale supermarket and tossed them into the back of the truck.

"I've never been more serious," said Poole.

"These fuckers carry guns," Keith said.

"Look at him," Poole said. "He's got it in his holster. That way he can carry a sack in each hand. They only carry the piece in their hand when they're nervous, like when they're in a bad neighborhood. Who's a threat to him here? You think one of these rich housewives is gonna drop him?"

Gary was shaking his head. "Oh yeah- what about the driver? He's got a gun too. That's two guys with guns, holstered or not."

"Don't worry about the driver," Poole said. "They're instructed to never leave the wheel. That way nobody drives off with the truck."

"How much you think's in the back of the truck?" Keith asked.

"Doesn't matter," Poole said. "All we want is the two sacks in the guard's hand. That's plenty. Believe me."

The three of them fell silent. Mulling their own private thoughts.

"I don't like it," Gary finally said. "If it's that fucking easy, why doesn't everybody do it?"

Poole turned around and looked right at Gary.
"Because they ain't got the balls," he said.
It was obvious who he meant.

* * * * *

Gary entered the market and walked straight to the magazine rack. It was one week after Poole had told them about the truck. In the interim, they had laid out a plan, and even walked through it.

Rehearsing the caper, Gary never had felt more alive. He was smarter, tougher and ballsier than all the dumb fucks who lived their meager lives around their stupid, asshole jobs. But now that it was happening, Gary felt scared. He felt like everybody he saw was looking right at him and knew what he was doing...

While they were planning it, they didn't even consider that something could go wrong. The plan was so simple! They could see it unfold in their heads. Gary would distract. Poole would slug the guard and grab the dough. Keith would drive the car. Gary would meet them later. Simple. What could go wrong..?

"Jesus Fucking Christ!" Gary thought. Any number of things could go wrong! What if Poole was mistaken and the driver did get out of the truck? Or what if the guard felt nervous that day and had his gun in his hand? Holy shit- what if somehow the cops suspected them of the robberies they pulled and had them under surveillance??? They would be caught in the act and killed, or worse. Gary imagined being butt-fucked in prison and almost passed out right there in the supermarket. Shit- why was that checker over there staring at him??? Jeez, he's awful big to be working for Gelsen's..! Gary felt a wave of panic and fought the urge to run... Shit. Shit shit shit shit.

The guard was coming out from the back of the store. Gary looked at him hard. The guy didn't seem in the least bit worried. The gun was in his holster. He was carrying the sacks like they had his laundry in them, rather than neatly wrapped bindles of tens, twenties and hundreds. Look how he's even checking out the tits on that babe...

Gary took a deep breath and walked out of the store, knowing that doing so would change his life forever. He forced himself not to look at where Poole would now get out of Keith's Camaro and walk toward the store entrance. He

fished in his pocket for the quarters he would dump in the ice machine. He saw himself do it like it was someone else and not him...

"Goddammit!" Gary yelled and kicked the machine. "Gimme back my fucking quarter you piece of shit machine!" Coming out the door, the guard turned his head to look...

The gunshot sounded like a bomb going off. His nerves already way on edge, Gary almost jumped out of his clothes. He gave himself whiplash, he spun around so fast...

He saw the horrified expression on the driver in the truck...

He saw more blood than he'd ever seen in his life...

He saw the guard's decapitated body still twitching on the cement...

He saw Poole pick up the discarded sacks in one hand, stand up straight, and point the gun right at him...

* * * * *

Keith sat up straight when he heard the first shot. He was sitting in the Mustang, engine idling. Then he heard the second shot and Poole sprinted around the corner toward the car. Keith dropped it into gear.

Poole slammed the door and Keith popped the clutch. The Mustang laid skidmarks twelve feet long. Seven seconds later they were doing 60+ down a pre-driven route. Poole's face was tight.

"I heard shots!" Keith said as he skidded around a turn. "What the fuck happened???"

"Roll down your window." Poole said.

Keith just stared at him, uncomprehending.

"Roll down your window!" Poole said louder. Keith reached for the switch. The window slid down.

Poole said "Stop the car. I'm going to be sick."

And again Keith stared.

"Stop the fucking car!"

Keith slammed on the brakes. "What the fuck happened???"

Poole stared back.

"I just killed Gary," he said and shot Keith in the face. Red mist and bonemeal exploded out the open car window. Poole reached across Keith's body

and opened the door. He pushed the corpse out onto the pavement and slid behind the wheel.

Poole turned the car around and drove back down to Ventura Boulevard. As he paused at the stop sign, an LAPD black and white blew by, siren howling.

* * * * *

The detective closed the mug book and said, "If we don't catch him, you're going to do time."

The doctor said, "If you don't leave this room right now, he won't live to do time."

Gary said, "Just check it out. He loves the fucking place," and passed back out.

Then he had a nightmare about a big, black dick, coming in his mouth. Again and again and again.

* * * * *

Poole made the two guys for cops from 50 feet away. They wore the two cheapest suits, and two worst haircuts in the Sherman Oaks Galleria. They weren't looking in windows like all the other nice shoppers. They were staring right at him. Poole turned and ran without any pretense.

"Police! Freeze!"

People started screaming.

Poole reached the escalator and headed down, two steps at once. A blonde woman working on her second divorce turned around but didn't move in time. Poole straight-armed her out of his way and she went over the side. Spinning in mid-air as she fell, her head hit the second floor railing, breaking her neck. She was dead before she smacked into the first floor carpet a half second later. In spite of her faults, her ex-husbands would miss her.

The screaming got louder.

At the bottom of the escalator, Poole pulled his gun. He waited out of view until the two cops were halfway down a few seconds later. He then stepped out and shot them both through the heart with a single bullet. He ran for the outside door.

Two uniform cops came through it. "Freeze!"

Poole opened fire, wounding one. The other one hit the dirt. Behind them, the glass doors shattered into jagged shards. Poole turned to go in another direction.

People were running around all three tiers of the mall in panic. Through the crowd, another guy in plainclothes was sprinting right toward him.

Poole fired and missed, hitting instead a fifteen-year-old honor student at Birmingham High School, thus ending a bright academic future.

He fired again and tore the left middle finger off a married entertainment lawyer who had just used it on his secretary four hours earlier.

Poole was out of bullets. But by then, the plainclothesman was right in his face. Without hesitation, he emptied his .38 Special into Poole's chest, point blank.

More than two minutes passed after that before the screaming finally stopped.

* * * * *

"Good to see you, Wally," Gary said. "I don't get a lot of visitors these days."

"Good to see you too, Gar," said Wally Aquirre, his smile just a tad strained. He added a little white lie. "Lookin' good, dude."

Actually Gary looked pale. Pale and thin and scared. He rubbed his arms constantly.

"How's Anne?" Gary asked.

"Good. She's good..." Wally smiled. And nodded.

"Good," Gary smiled. And nodded.

They both smiled and nodded. Gary started chewing on a fingernail. Wally noticed that all of Gary's nails were pretty well chewed.

"Man..." he said.

"Yeah, really..." Gary said.

For awhile then, neither said anything. They didn't have much in common these days.

Finally Gary said, "You seen Kym? She hasn't been by in over a month."

"Oh yeah," Wally said. "She came by last week."

"How is she?"

Wally didn't say anything.

"What?" Gary said.

Wally looked his friend in the eye.

"She wants to break up with you, Gar. She doesn't know how to tell you herself. She asked me if I could say something to you."

Gary took the news as expected.

"Hey, man. What's so funny?" Wally said.

END

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SERVICES RENDERED

by

Stephen D. Rogers

*What premier of a new webzine featuring hardboiled and noir short stories would be complete without a tale from Stephen D. Rogers? One of the hardest working authors in America, Rogers has been nominated six times for the Short Mystery Fiction Society's prestigious Derringer Award. He won it in 2006, for his story **Zipped** in **Windchill: Crime Stories by New England Writers**. Stephen lives near Cape Cod in Massachusetts.*

"I'm not your mother, your sister, or your wife. And even if I was, I still wouldn't do what you're asking."

The man sitting across my desk frowned. "Look, do you want my business or not?"

"Since you've asked, no. I'm a private investigator, Mr. Henderson, not a whore."

His hands shot up into the air. "Whoa. All I said--"

"I know what you said." Even if I'd over-reacted, I wasn't about to apologize now. "My answer stands."

He climbed up out of the chair. "So you won't help me."

"No. There are other private investigators working on Cape Cod, however, and one of them might feel be more interested in your proposal."

"And if they're not?"

"Then you get to solve your own problems."

He left in a huff, slamming the door hard enough to knock over a picture of my son. I righted the photograph. "Sorry about that, Jason."

Why did I bother to advertise when I rarely accepted jobs from private citizens? Insurance companies understood what I did. Lawyers understand what I did. Neither group was filing for bankruptcy protection any time soon.

A loud thud. Somebody'd thrown a rock against the side of the building. That would be Mr. Henderson. If he'd been trying for the window, his aim was no better than his judgment.

My phone rang. And that would be Jason, who always called me on days he brought a report card home, perhaps needing more praise than his stepmother provided.

"You've made a big mistake, crossing me."

Henderson.

He disconnected before I'd even begun to formulate a response. The rock demonstrated a lack of control. Calling me afterwards implied something more disturbing.

By the time I deemed it safe to look outside, his car was no longer visible. So much for catching a sight of his plates.

What did I have? Joe Henderson. A description. A bad taste in my mouth.

His request.

That's how I'd track him down if I needed to find him.

That evening, I knew that I did when I flipped on my apartment lights and a rock crashed through my third-story window.

Since I never gave out my home address, Henderson must have followed me here from my office. I wasn't sure which was more disturbing, that he had or that I hadn't noticed, focusing instead on the grades my son called to share.

My phone rang, showing the same number that had appeared earlier. I turned off the ringer. Stalking a PI made almost as much sense as stalking a cop, which meant Henderson was dangerous.

Back in my office, before I'd turned him down, Henderson had seemed almost timid.

"But now I want to break off the relationship and Beth won't accept that." He had sat with his hands folded.

"Take your dry cleaning elsewhere."

"But Bayside Coin-Op does such a good job." His excuse for not following my advice came out as a whine. "Besides, why should I be the one to be inconvenienced? Why can't she find somewhere else to work?"

"Why would she?"

He wiggled in the chair. "This is my plan. You go into the laundromat and say you're my wife, that you're there to pick up. Once she learns I'm married, she's not going to want to see me again."

Then he'd been too timid to break up. Now he was throwing rocks through my windows. Was he punishing me for not helping him or desensitizing himself to violence before turning on Beth?

As soon as my phone sent him to voicemail, I called 911 to document the attack.

The young officer Tally who presently arrived explained the relevant statues and took the rock into custody.

I left my apartment two minutes after he did and raced across town.

Assume Tally didn't act on my sorry tale before he talked to the sergeant. Perhaps conferred with a detective. Maybe even waited for the Chief to return the call from either source.

A rookie, fresh out of Academy? More than likely, Tally would go back to the station and sweat out his report before approaching the sergeant to ask for advice.

At the minimum, I had fifteen minutes with Beth before the cavalry interrupted. That's if she was working at the laundromat tonight.

Approaching the large plate-glass window, I watched the woman behind the counter as she hung plastic-wrapped clothes.

A bell tinkled as I opened the door.

"Are you Beth?" Smooth took time.

"Yes. Can I help you?"

"I'd like to talk to you about Joe Henderson."

"Who?" Her puzzlement appeared sincere.

"Joe Henderson." I described him.

"Is he a customer here? We're very busy, what with the washers and dryers. There's no way I can remember everybody who comes in."

"He told me you were dating."

Beth laughed. "Don't let my husband hear that. I'm sure he'd have an issue."

"Henderson tried to hire me to talk to you." I glanced at the window, seeing only my reflection. Henderson had sent me here to find Beth. He wasn't using me to find her. "Perhaps there's another Beth who works here?"

"I'm it. Look, I'm sorry, but somebody has their story mixed up."

"Does Bayside Coin-Op have any other locations?"

"This is the only them, and I'm the only me."

I drummed the counter. "Does the name Henderson mean anything to you?"

"Not off the top of my head."

I reached into my bag and handed her a business card. "This Henderson might be dangerous. Give me a call if you sense anything odd."

"Does your stopping in here count?"

Outside, I took a moment to generate theories. None impressed me. Not having one to work with made me even less happy.

Tune out the white noise and what was left? A man calling himself Joe Henderson came into my office. He later targeted me. Why? Had he selected me in some random serial killer fashion or was it personal?

A guy I didn't know....

I looked out over the parking lot. Why had he left my car alone? He wanted me to be able to drive. Drive here, to Beth. Was he simply trying to spook her?

She hadn't struck me as someone worried about secrets.

Her husband, perhaps. Beth goes home and tells him about the odd thing that happened at work, a PI nosing around.

I turned to face the laundromat and saw Beth place a phone in her bag. She was still frowning when I tinkled the bell.

"You remembered something."

Beth crossed her arms. "Stacy Henderson. My husband's secretary. I wasn't sure about the last name until I called him."

"Did your husband admit anything?"

"He didn't need to." The frown had already set, carving deep lines into her mask.

"I'm sorry."

"That doesn't make up for the damage you've done."

Knowing I wouldn't be able to set her straight, I returned to my car. Used the call history to ring Henderson back.

He answered with a chuckle. "I guess you worked for me after all."

"No. In order for that to have happened, I would have had to take your money."

"But--"

I disconnected and headed home.

Henderson may have aimed me like a bullet but he couldn't control the ricochets. Maybe he'd scattered the lovebirds and maybe he'd driven them off together. Only time would tell how this would all play out.

Meanwhile, I could nail him for stalking and vandalism, and that would be payment enough.

END

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THE FALSE BURTON COMBS

by
Carroll John Daly

*This, to the best of my knowledge, is the only Carroll John Daly story in the public domain. There is a story he wrote for **Black Mask** in 1921 entitled **Dolly** which should also be openly available, but I have not been able to locate a copy of it. This story, while not technically a PI tale, does contain many of the features that would later be associated with characters such as Travis McGee, and my own protagonist Pat Gallegher. This is, I believe, from the very last issue of **Black Mask** that was not renewed for copyright in 1950. Enjoy – RH, ed.*

I had an outside stateroom on the upper deck of the Fall River boat and ten minutes after I parked my bag there I knew that I was being watched. The boat had already cleared and was slowly making its way toward the Battery

I didn't take the shadowing too seriously. There was nothing to be nervous about—my little trip was purely a pleasure one this time. But then a dick getting you smoke is not pleasant under the best of circumstance! And yet I was sure I had come aboard unobserved.

This chap was a new one on me and I thought he must have just picked me up on suspicion—trailed along in the hope of getting something. But I cheeked up my past offences and there was really nothing they could hold me on.

I ain't a crook; just a gentleman adventurer and make my living working against the law breakers. Not that I work with the police—no, not me. I'm no *knight errant* either. It just came to me that the simplest people in the world are crooks. They are so set on their own plans to fleece others that they never imagine that they are the simplest sort to do. Why, the best safe cracker in the country—the dread of the police of seven states—will drop all his hard-earned money in three weeks on the race track and many a well-thought-of stick-up man will turn out his wad in one evening's crap game. Get the game? I guess I'm just one of the few that see how soft the lay is.

There's a lot of little stunts to tell about if I wanted to give away professional secrets but the game's too good to spread broadcast. It's enough to say that I've been in card games with four sharpers and did the quartet. At that I don't know a thing about cards and couldn't stack a deck if I was given half the night.

But as I say, I'm an adventurer. Not the kind the name generally means; those that sit around waiting for a sucker or spend their time helping governments out of trouble. Not that I ain't willing to help governments at a certain price but none have asked me. Those kind of chaps are found between the pages of a book, I guess. I know. I tried the game just once and nearly starved to death. There ain't nothing in governments unless you're a politician. And as I said before, I ain't a crook.

I've done a lot of business in blackmail cases. I find out a lad that's being blackmailed and then I visit him. He pays me for my services and like as not we do the blackmailers every time. You see I'm a kind of a fellow in the center—not a crook and not a policeman. Both of them look on me with suspicion, though the crooks don't often know I'm out after their hides. And the police—well they run me pretty close at times but I got to take the chances.

But it ain't a nice feeling to be trailed when you're out for pleasure so I trotted about the deck a few times whistling just to be sure there wasn't any mistake. And that bird come a-tramping after me as innocent as if it was his first job.

Then I had dinner and he sits at the next table and eyes me with a wistful longing like he hadn't made a pinch in a long time and is just dying to lock somebody up. But I study him, too, and he strikes me queer. He ain't got none of the earmarks of a dick. He acts like a lad with money and orders without even looking at the prices and it comes to me that I may have him wrong and that he might be one of these fellows that wanted to sell me oil stock. I always fall hard for the oil stock game. There ain't much in it but it passes the time and lets you eat well without paying for it.

Along about nine o'clock I am leaning over the rail just thinking and figuring how far the swim to shore is if a fellow had to do it. Not that I had any thought of taking to the water—no, not me—but I always like to figure what the chances are. You never can tell.

Well, that bird with the longing eyes cuddles right up and leans over the rail alongside of me.

"It's a nice night," he says.

"A first rate night for a swim."

I looked him over carefully out of the corner of my eyes.

He sort of straightens up and looks out toward the flickering shore lights.

"It is a long swim," he says, just like he had the idea in mind.

Then he asks me to have a cigar and it's a quarter one and I take it.

"I wonder would you do me a favor," he says, after a bit.

This was about what I expected. Con men are full of that kind of gush.

"Hmmm," is all I get off. My game is a waiting one.

"I came aboard a bit late," he goes right on. "I couldn't get a room—now I wonder would you let me take the upper berth in yours. I have been kind of watching you and saw that you were all alone."

Kind of watching me was right. And now he wanted to share my room. Well, that don't exactly appeal to me, for I'm banking on a good night's sleep. Besides I know that the story is fishy for I bought my room aboard and got an outsider. But I don't tell him that right off. I think I'll work him out a bit first.

"I'm a friend of the purser," I tell him. "I'll get you a room."

And I make to pass him.

"No—don't do that," he takes me by the arm. "It isn't that."

"Isn't what?"

I look him straight in the eyes and there's a look there that I have seen before and comes in my line of business. As he half turned and I caught the reflection of his eyes under the tiny deck light I read fear in his face—a real fear—almost a terror. Then I give it to him straight.

"Out with what you want," I says. "Maybe I can help you but let me tell you first that there are plenty of rooms aboard the boat. Now, you don't look like a crook—you don't look sharp enough. What's the big idea of wanting to bunk with me?"

He thought a moment and then leaned far over the rail and started to talk, keeping his eyes on the water.

"I'm in some kind of trouble. I don't know if I have been followed aboard this boat or not. I don't think so but I can't chance it. I haven't had any sleep in two nights and while I don't expect to sleep tonight I'm afraid I may drop off. I don't want to be alone and—and you struck me as an easy-going fellow who might—might—"

"Like to take a chance on getting bumped off," I cut in. He kind of drew away when I said this but I let him see right away that perhaps he didn't have me wrong. "And you would like me to sit up and protect you, eh?"

"I didn't exactly mean that but I—I don't want to be alone. Now, if you were a man I could offer money to—" He paused and waited. I give him credit for putting the thing delicately and leaving the next move to me.

I didn't want to scare him off by putting him wise that he had come within my line of business. It might look suspicious to him. And I didn't want him to get the impression that I was a novice. There might be some future money in a job like this and it wouldn't do to be underrated.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," I says. "I've been all over the world and done some odd jobs for different South American governments"—that always has its appeal—"and I'll sit up and keep an eye on you for a hundred bucks."

Crude?—maybe—but then I know my game and you don't.

"And I can sleep?" he chirps, and his eyes sort of brighten up.

"Like a baby," I tells him.

"Good," he says, and "Come to my cabin."

So I take the number of his cabin and tell him that I'll meet him there as soon as I get my bag. Then I leave him and fetch my bag and put what money I have in the purser's office, for, although I can size up a game right away, a fellow can't afford to take chances. I have run across queerer ducks than this in my time.

Twenty minutes later he's in bed and we've turned the sign about smoking to the wall and are puffing away on a couple of good cigars. All content—he's paid me the hundred like a man; two nice new fifties.

He just lay there and smoked and didn't talk much and didn't seem as sleepy as I had thought he was. But I guess he was too tired to sleep, which is a queer thing but I've had it lots of times myself.

He seemed to be thinking, too. Like he was planning something and I was concerned in it. But I didn't bother him none. I saw what was on his chest and he didn't seem in a condition to keep things to himself. I thought he'd out with some proposition for me. But I didn't know. I wasn't anxious to travel about and be a nurse to him. That's more of a job for a private detective but they ain't used over much because they want to know all about your business and then you're worse off than you were before.

At last he opens up.

"What's your business?" he says.

And seeing I got his hundred there ain't no reason to dodge the question I up and tells him.

"I'm a soldier of fortune."

He kind of blinks at this and then asks.

"That means a chap who takes chances for—for a consideration."

"Certain kind of chances." I qualify his statement.

"Like this for instance?"

"Sometimes; but I don't reckon to travel around as a body guard if that's what you're thinking."

He laughs like he was more at ease. But I often see them laugh when they are getting ready to send me into the danger that they fear. It's not downright meanness like I used to think when I was younger. It's relief, I guess.

"I think I can use you," he said slowly. "And pay you well and you won't need to see me again."

"Oh, I ain't got any particular dislike to you," I tell him. "It's only that I like to work alone. Let me hear what you have to offer and then—well, you can get some sleep tonight anyways."

He thought a moment.

"How much do I have to tell you?" he asked.

"As much or as little as you like. The less the better—but all I ought to know to make things go right for you."

"Well, then, there isn't much to tell. In the first place I want you to impersonate me for the summer or a greater part of it."

"That's not so easy." I shook my head.

"It's easy enough," he went on eagerly. "I am supposed to go to my father's hotel on Nantucket Island—"

Then he leaned out of the bed and talked quickly. He spoke very low and was very much in earnest. They could not possibly know me there. His father was abroad and he had not been to Nantucket since he was ten.

"How old are you?" he asked me suddenly.

"Thirty," I told him.

"You don't look more than I do. We are much alike— about the same size—the same features. And you won't meet anyone I know. If things should go wrong I'll be in touch with you."

"And your trouble?" I questioned. "What should I know about that?"

"That my life is threatened. I have been mixed up with some people whom I am not proud of."

"And they threaten to kill you."

I stroked my chin. Not that I minded taking the chances but somewheres I had learned that a laborer is worthy of his hire. It looked like he was hiring me

to get bumped off in his place. Which was all right if I was paid enough. I had taken such chances before and nothing had come of it. That is - nothing to *me*.

"Yes, they threaten my life—but I think it's all bluff."

I nodded. I could plainly see it was that, so I handed out a little talk.

"And that's why you paid me a hundred to sit up with you all night. Mind you, I don't mind the risk, but I must be paid accordingly."

When he saw that it was only a question of money he opens up considerable. He didn't exactly give me the facts in the case but he tells me enough and I learned that he had never seen the parties.

The end of it was that he draws up a paper which asks me to impersonate him and lets me out of all trouble. Of course, the paper wouldn't be much good in a bad jam but it would help if his old man should return suddenly from Europe. But I don't aim to produce that paper. I play the game fair and the figure he names was a good one—not what I would have liked perhaps but all he could afford to pay without bringing his old man into the case, which could not be done.

Somehow, when we finished talking, I got the idea that he had been mixed up in a shady deal—bootlegging or something—and a couple of friends had gone to jail on his evidence. There were three others from Canada who were coming on to get him—the three he had never seen. But it didn't matter much to me. I was just to show them that he wasn't afraid and then when they called things off or got me all was over.

Personally I did think that there was a lot of bluff in the whole business but he didn't and it wasn't my game to wise him up.

It was a big hotel I was going to for the summer and if things got melodramatic why I guess I could shoot as good as any bootlegger that ever robbed a church. They're hard guys, yes, but then I ain't exactly a cake-eater myself.

An hour or more talk in which I learn all about his family and the hotel and Burton Combs drops off for his first real sleep in months.

The next morning we part company in his stateroom and I taxied over to New Bedford. He thinks that's better than taking the train because there is a change of cars in the open country and he don't want me to drop too soon.

There are only about ten staterooms on the little tub that makes the trip from New Bedford to Nantucket and I have one of them which is already reserved in Burton Combs's name. After taking a walk about the ship I figure that there ain't

no Desperate Desmonds aboard, and having earned my hundred the night before I just curl up in that little cabin and hit the hay.

Five hours and not a dream disturbed me and when I come on deck there's Nantucket right under our nose and we are rounding the little lighthouse that stands on the point leading into the bay.

There's a pile of people on the dock and they sure did look innocent enough and I take a stretch and feel mighty good. From some of the outfits I see I know that I'm going to travel in class and I hope that Burton Combs's clothes fit me for I didn't come away prepared for any social gayety. But it's early in the season yet and I'll get a chance, to look around before the big rash begins.

There is a bus at the dock which is labeled "Sea Breeze Inn" and that's my meat. I climb in with about five others and we are off. Up one shady street and down another; up a bit of a hill and a short straightaway and we are at the hotel. It's a peach, too, with a view of the ocean that would knock your eye out.

The manager spots me at once and says that he'd know me among a thousand as a Combs. Which was real sweet of him seeing that he was expecting me, and the others in the bus were an old man, three old women and a young girl about nineteen. But it wasn't my part to enlighten him and tell him that I was on to his flattery. Besides he was an old bird and probably believed what he said.

He was right glad to see me and tried to look like he meant it and wondered why I hadn't come up there again in all these years but guessed it was because it was kind of slow with my father having a hotel at Atlantic City and at Ostend. And he wanted to know if I was going to study the business. Said my father wrote him that he would like to see me interested in the hotel line.

I didn't say much. There wasn't no need. Mr. Rowlands, the manager, was one of those fussy old parties and he talked all the way up in the elevator and right into the room.

There were about fifty people there all told on the first of July but they kept coming in all the time and after I was there about two weeks the place was fairly well crowded. But I didn't make any effort to learn the business, thinking it might hurt young Combs who didn't strike me as a chap who would like any kind of work.

There was one young girl there—the one that came up in the bus with me—Marion St. James, and we had quite some times together. She was young and full of life and wanted to be up and doing all the time and we did a great deal of golf together.

Then there was another who took an interest in me. She was a widow and a fine looker and it was her first season there. I thought that she was more used to playing Atlantic City for she didn't look like the usual run of staunch New England dames. Sort of out of place and she looked to me to trot her around.

But I didn't have the time; there was Marion to be taken about. She was what you'd call a flapper and talked of the moonlight and such rot but she was real and had a big heart and after all a sensible little head on her shoulders. And she couldn't see the widow a mile and looked upon me as her own special property and blew the widow up every chance she got.

But the widow, I guess, was bent on making a match, and she was finding the Island pretty dead though the son of John B. Combs, the hotel magnate, looked like a big catch. So you see my time was fairly well taken up and I grabbed many a good laugh. I never took women seriously. My game and women don't go well together.

Yet that widow was persistent and curious and wanted to know every place Marion and me went and used to keep asking me where we drove to nights. For the kid and me did a pile of motoring. Yes, I had a car. A nice little touring car came with the Burton Combs moniker.

Marion was different. She was just a slip of a kid stuck up in a place like that and it was up to me to show her a good time. I kind of felt sorry for her and then she was pretty and a fellow felt proud to be seen with her.

All the time I kept an eye peeled for the bad men. I wondered if they'd come at all and if they did I thought that they would come in the busy season when they wouldn't be noticed much. But that they'd come at all I very much doubted.

And then they came—the three of them. I knew them the very second they entered the door. They were dolled right up to the height of fashion—just what the others were wearing. But I knew them. They just didn't belong. Maybe the others didn't spot them as outsiders but I did.

They were no bluff, either. I have met all kinds of men in my day; bad and worse and these three were the real thing. It came to me that if these gents were bent on murder I had better be up and doing.

And that Island boasted that it had never had a real murder. Yes, it sure did look like all records were going to be broken.

One of them was a tall skinny fellow and he looked more like a real summer visitor than the others. But his mouth gave him away. When he thought he was

alone with the others he'd talk through the side of it, a trick which is only found in the underworld or on the track.

One of the others was fat and looked like an ex-bartender and the third I should say was just a common jailbird that could cut a man's throat with a smile.

The tall skinny one was the leader and he was booked as Mr. James Farrow. He made friends with me right off the bat. Didn't overdo it, you know; just gave me the usual amount of attention that most of the guests showed toward the owner's son. He must-a read a book about the Island for he tried to tell me things about the different points of interest like he'd been there before. But he had a bad memory like on dates and things. Marion gave me the dope on that. She knew that Island like a book.

I didn't have much doubt as to who they were but I checked them up, liking to make sure. I didn't know just what their game was and I didn't see the big idea of wanting to bump me off. If they wanted money I could catch their point but they seemed well supplied with the ready. Yes, sir, I looked this Farrow over and he's a tough bird and no mistake. But then I've seen them just as tough before and pulled through it. Besides, I hold a few tricks myself. They don't know I'm on and they don't know that I'm mighty quick with the artillery myself.

And that gun is always with me. It ain't like I only carry it when I think there's trouble coming. I always have it You see, a chap in my line of work makes a lot of bad friends and he can't tell when one of them is going to bob up and demand an explanation. But they all find out that I ain't a bird to fool with and am just as likely to start the fireworks as they are.

Nearly every night after dinner I'd take the car and Marion and me would go for a little spin about the Island. I don't know when I ever enjoyed anything so much and sometimes I'd forget the game I was playing and think that things were different. I've met a pile of women in my time but none like Marion nor near like her. Not since the days when I went to school—and that's a memory only.

Well, we'd just drive about and talk and she'd ask me about the different places I had been to. And I could hold my own there, for I've been all over the world.

Then one night—about ten days after the troop arrived—I get a real scare. We've been over 'Sconset way and are driving home along about nine-thirty when—*zip*—there's a whiz in the air and a hole in the windshield. Then there's another *zip* and I see Marion jump.

It's nothing new to me. I knew that sound right away. It's a noiseless gun and someone has taken a couple of plugs at us from the distance. Well, it ain't my cue to stop, so I speed up and it's pretty near town before I slow down beneath a lamp and turn to Marion.

There is a little trickle of blood running down her cheek and she's pretty white. But she ain't hurt any. It's just a scratch and I stop in the drug store and get some stuff and bathe it off.

She is a mighty game little kid and don't shake a bit and act nervous. But I'm unsteady for the first time in my life and my hand shook. I wouldn't of been much good on a quick draw then. But later I would, for I was mad—bad mad—if you know what that is. I see that all the danger ain't mine. Not that I think they meant to get Marion. But I had brought that Kid into something, and all because she kind of liked me a bit and I took her around.

On the way back to the hotel I buck up and tell her that it must have been some of the natives hunting the hares and not to say anything about it but that I would speak to the authorities in the morning.

She just looked at me funny and I knew that she did not believe me but she let it go at that.

"If that's all you want to tell me, Burt—why—all right—I shan't say a word to anyone. You can trust me."

That was all. Neither of us spoke again until we reached the hotel and I had parked the car under the shed at the side and we were standing at the bottom of the steps by the little side entrance. Then she turned and put her two tiny hands up on my shoulders and the paleness had gone from her face but just across her cheek where the bullet had passed was the smallest streak of vivid red.

"You can trust me, Burt," she said again and there seemed to be a question in her voice.

"Of course I trust you, Marion," I answered and my voice was husky and seemed to come from a distance.

It all happened very suddenly after that. Her head was very close. I know, for her soft hair brushed my cheek. I think that she leaned forward but I know that she looked up into my eyes and that the next moment I had leaned down and kissed and held her so a moment. So we stood and she did not draw away and I made no movement to release her. We were alone there, very much alone.

Then there was the sudden chug of a motor, a second's flash of light and I had opened my arms and Marion was gone and I stood alone in the blackness.

So the spell of Marion's prince was broken and I stood silently in the shadow as Farrow and his two companions passed and entered the hotel lobby.

Had they seen us? Yes—I knew that they had. For they smiled as they passed. Smiled and never knew that they had passed close to death. For at that moment it was only the press of a trigger that lay between them and eternity.

The curtain had been rung up on the first act and the show was on. Before, I could sleep easy at night for the danger was mine and I had thought little of it. But now I felt that it was another's—and—well I resolved to bring things to a head that night.

Ten minutes later I went to my room but not to bed. I put my light out and sat in the room until about twelve o'clock. At that time the hotel was as quiet as death.

Then I stepped out of my window and climbed down the fire escape which led to the little terrace which overlooked the ocean. I knew just where Farrow's room was and I walked along the terrace until I was under it and then swung myself up the fire escape and climbed to the third story. His window was open and thirty seconds later I had dropped into the room and was seated on the end of Farrow's bed.

Then I switched on the light and waited till he woke up. Guess he didn't have much fear of me for he slept right on for another five minutes and then he kind of turned over and blinked and—opened his eyes. He was awake fast enough then for he was looking in the mean end of my automatic.

He was-quick witted, too, for he rubbed his eyes with one hand while he let the other slip under his pillow. Then I laughed and he drew it out empty and sat bolt upright in bed and faced the gun.

"Farrow," I says. "You were mighty near to going out tonight. And if I hadn't already lifted that gun of yours I'd a popped you then."

And I half wished that I had let his gun stay there for then there would have been an excuse to let him have it. A poor excuse but still an excuse. It's hard to shoot a man when he ain't armed and prepared but it's another thing to shoot when he's reaching for a gun and it's your life or his. Then you can let him have it with your mind easy.

He was a game bird, was Farrow, for he must have had plenty to think about at that moment. You see he couldn't tell just what was coming to him and from his point of view it must have looked mighty bad but he started right in to talk. Told me the chances I was taking and that I couldn't possibly get away with it.

He' didn't waste any time in bluffing and pretending surprise at seeing me sitting there with the gun. I give him credit—now—for understanding the situation.

But I stopped his wind.

"Shut up," I says.

And he caught the anger in my eyes and in my voice and he shut—which was good for him, for a chap can't tell for sure what he's going to do when he's seeing red and has the drop on a lad that he figures needs killing.

Then I did a bit of talking. I told him what had taken place that night and I knew it was his doing. And he nodded and never tried to deny it.

"You killed my brother," he says, "For he died in trying to break jail a few months ago—the jail where you sent him."

"So—I killed your brother, eh? Well every man is entitled to his own opinion. Now, I don't know about the killing of your brother but I'll tell you this, my friend, I come mighty near to killing you and I don't miss either and I don't crack windshields and I don't go for to hit innocent parties."

I could see that he was kind of surprised at the way I talked for I wasn't specially careful about my language like I had been about the hotel and like what he would expect from the real Burton Combs. But I could see that he kind of smacked his lips at the mention of the girl and he knew that he had a hold on me there. But I didn't care what was on his chest. I knew that the morning would see the end of the thing one way or the other.

"I am going to give you until the six-thirty boat tomorrow morning to leave the Island," I told him.

And I was not bluffing, either. After a man has had his warning it's good ethics to shoot him down—at least I see it that way. That is, if he needs it bad and you happen to have my code of morals. Also if you want to live to a ripe old age.

"What then?" he sort of sneers.

Seeing as how he wasn't going over the hurdles right away he thinks I'm a bit soft. In the same position his own doubt about shooting me would be the chances of a getaway. And the chances were not good on that Island unless you had made plans in advance. Perhaps he had—I didn't know then for I hadn't seen any boat hanging about the harbor.

"What then?" he sneers again.

"Then—" I says very slowly and thinking of Marion. "Then I'll cop you off at breakfast tomorrow morning. Yes—as soon as that boat leaves the dock I'll be

gunning for you, Mr. James Farrow. And as sure as you're not a better shot than you were tonight out on the moors you'll go join your brother."

With that I turned from the bed and, unlocking his door, walked out of his room. The temptation to shoot was too great.

But I didn't go to bed that night. I just put out my light and sat smoking in my room—smoking and thinking. So I spent the second night that summer awake. I knew that the three would meet and talk it over and no doubt—get. But I just sat there; half facing the door and half facing the window with my gun on my knees waiting.

How nice it would be if they would only come by the window? It would be sweet then—and what a lot of credit I'd get as Burton Combs protecting his father's property. They meant real business all right for I see now that there was sentiment behind the whole thing—sentiment and honor. That peculiar honor of the underworld which goes and gets a squealer. Combs had evidently squealed and Farrow's brother had paid the price. And Combs went free. Position and evidence and politics had done the trick, I guess.

I heard the clock strike two and then two-thirty and then there was a footstep in the hall and I turned and faced the door and then there come a light tap on the door. This sure was a surprise.

I didn't turn on the electric light but just went to the door and swung it open suddenly and stepped back. But no one came in.

Then I heard a kind of a gasp—a woman's voice. The first thing I thought of was Marion and then I see the widow in the dim hall light. Her hat was all down and she had thrown a light robe about her and she was excited and her eyes were wide open and she looked frightened.

"It's Marion—little Miss St. James," she sobbed, "and she's in my room now—and it was terrible and I think—I think she fainted."

Then she stopped and kind of choked a bit.

Right away it came to me that this gang had done something to her and I wished that I had settled the whole thing earlier in the evening when I had the chance but—

"Come," I said to the widow and took her by the arm and led her down the hall to her room. The door was open and gun in hand I rushed into the room ahead of her.

"There on the bed," she gasped behind me.

I turned to the bed—and it was empty and then I knew. But it was too late, for I was trapped. There was a muzzle of a gun shoved into the middle of my back and a hard laugh. Then Farrow spoke.

"Throw that gun on the bed and throw it quick."

And—and I threw it and threw it quick. I was done. I should have suspected the widow from the first day I laid eyes on her, for she didn't belong. Yes, she was this gang's come on. And me, who had never fallen for women, was now caught by women. A good one and a bad one. One whom I wanted to protect and one who knew it. Now you see how the game is played. Neither a good nor a bad woman can help you in my sort of life. And yet I would take any chance for that little Marion who used to stand out on the moor at the—but Farrow was talking.

"And now, Mr. Combs, we meet again—and you're the one to do the listening. We are going to take you for a little motor ride—that is you are going out with me to meet my friends. We don't intend to kill you. That is if you have proved yourself a man and come along quietly. There is some information I want from you. And thanks for the return of my gun," he finished as he picked the gun off the bed.

Yes, it was his gun and mine was still in my pocket and I'd a shot him then only I saw that the widow was covering me.

"Come."

Farrow turned and, poking the gun close to my ribs, he induced me to leave the room with him.

"If you make a noise you go," he told me as we walked down the long narrow hall to the servants' stairs. But I didn't intend to cry out. If he would just move that gun of his the least little bit I could draw and shoot. I almost laughed, the thing was so easy.

"The *Elsie* is lying right off the point," he went on, as we approached the little shed where my car was kept. "You remember the *Elsie*—it used to be your boat. The government remembers it, too. But they don't know it now nor would you. But enough of that. Climb into your car—we'll use that for our little jaunt."

We had reached the little shed now and I climbed into the car, always waiting for *a* chance to use my gun, but he watched me like a hawk. Then he laughed—a queer, weird laugh which had the ring of death in it.

I drove as he said and we turned from the hotel and out onto the moors—that long stretch of desolate road that leads across the Island. And then he made me stop the car and stand up.

"I'll take your gun," he said and he lifted it from my hip. "We won't need more than one gun between us tonight. For if it comes to shooting I'll take care of that end of it."

He threw the gun into the back of the car where I heard it strike the cushion of the rear seat and bounce to the floor.

We drove on in silence. He never said a word but I felt as clearly as if he had told me so that he was driving me to my death. The gun, he had let me carry until we were safe away. Perhaps he had thought that without it I might have cried out in the hotel but this I shall never know. That he knew all along I had it I have no doubt.

More than once I was on the edge of telling him that I was not the man he thought I was, for it looked as though the game was up. But he would not have believed me and besides my little agreement with Combs was back in my hotel room.

Not a soul did we pass as we sped over the deserted road. No light but the dulled rays of the moon broke the darkness all around us. Half hour or more and then suddenly I see a car in the road as the moon pops out from behind the clouds.

Then Farrow spoke and there was the snarl of an animal in his voice.

"Here's where you stop," he growled, "and here's where you get yours. They'll find you out here in the morning and they can think what they want; we'll be gone. And the killing of a rat like you is the only business I've got on the moors this night."

I had pulled up short in the center of the road now for a big touring car which I recognized as Farrow's was stretched across our path blocking the passage. In it I clearly saw his two friends.

It was death now sure but I made up my mind to go out as gracefully as possible and when he ordered me to open the door I leaned over and placed my hand upon the seat. And it fell on the cool muzzle of a revolver. Yes, my fingers closed over a gun and I knew that that gun was mine.

Thrills in life—yes—there are many but I guess that that moment was my biggest. I didn't stop to think how that gun got there. I didn't care. I just

tightened on it and felt the blood of life pass quickly through my body—if you know what I mean.

I couldn't turn and shoot him for he had his pistol pressed close against my side. What he feared I don't know but I guess he was just one of these overcareful fellows who didn't take any chances.

"Open that door and get out," he ordered again as he gave me a dig in the ribs.

I leaned over again and placed my hand upon the handle of the door and then I got a happy thought.

"I can't open it," I said and I let my voice tremble and my hand shake. But in my left hand I now held my gun and thanked my lucky stars that I was lefthanded, for I knew if I got the one chance that I hoped for it would have to be a perfect shot.

"White livered after all," he muttered and he stooped over and placed his left hand upon the handle of the door.

His right hand still held the gun close to my side and his eyes were watching my every movement. I never seen a man so careful before. I couldn't pull the gun up and shoot for he would get me at the very first movement— and although I was tempted I waited. The other two sat in the car ahead and were smoking and laughing. Of course I knew that if I once stepped out in the moonlight with the gun in my hand that it was all up but I waited and then—

The door really stuck a bit, for the nights are mighty damp on that island and it was that dampness which saved my life. For just the fraction of a second he took his eyes off me—just a glance down at the door with a curse on his lips.

And with that curse on his lips he died.

For as he turned the handle I give it to him right through the heart. I don't miss at that range—no—not me. The door flew open and he tumbled out on the road— dead.

I don't offer no apologies, for it was his life or mine and—as I said—he tumbled out on the road—dead.

Another fellow writing might say that things weren't clear after that. But they were clear enough to me because I never lose my head. That's why I have lived to be thirty and expect to die in bed. Yes, things are always clear when clearness means a little matter of life or death.

Those other chaps were so surprised at the turn things had taken that I had jumped to the road and winged one of them before they knew what had

happened. But the other fellow was quick and had started shooting and I felt a sharp pain in my right shoulder. But one shot was all that he fired and then I had him—one good shot was all I needed - and he went out. I don't go for to miss.

I didn't take the time to examine them to see if they were dead. I'm not an undertaker and it wasn't my business. I guessed they were but if they wasn't I didn't intend to finish the job. I'm not a murderer, either. Then there were a couple of houses not so far off and I could see lights —lights that weren't there before—in both of them. Even on a quiet Island like that you can't start a gun party without disturbing some of the people.

I just turned my car around and started back to the hotel. Twenty minutes later I had parked it in the shed and gone to my room. As far as I knew no one could know what had taken place on the lonely moor that night. I played doctor to my shoulder. It wasn't so very bad, either, though it pained a lot, but the bullet had gone through the flesh and passed out. I guess a little home treatment was as good as any doctor could do.

Then the morning came and my arm was not so good but I dressed and went down to breakfast and saw the manager and he told me that the widow had gone on the early boat. I don't think that she was a real widow but that she was the wife of one of those chaps. Farrow, I guess. But that didn't bother me none. She was a widow now all right.

And then about nine o'clock news of the three dead men being found away off on the road came in. And I know I got all three of them.

There was a lot of talk and newspaper men from the city came over and detectives and one thing and another. The morning papers of the following day had it all in and wild guesses as to how it happened. The three were recognized by the police as notorious characters and then it got about that a rum runner had been seen off the east shore that very morning. The general opinion seemed to be that there had been a fight among the pirates and that. these three men got theirs—which suited me to a T.

I would-a beat it only that would have looked mighty queer and honestly I didn't see where they had a thing on me. I thought the best thing to do was to sit tight and for nearly a week I sat.

And then the unexpected—unexpected by me at least— happened.

The widow sent a telegram to the Boston police and they came down and nailed me. You see the writing on the wall? Keep clear of the women.

A dick from Boston dropped in one morning and I knew him the minute he stepped foot in the hotel. And I also knew that he was after me though at the time I didn't wise up as to how he was on. But he wasn't sure of himself and he had the manager introduce him to me. Then he talked about everything but the killing and of course he was the only one at the hotel that left that topic out of his conversation. And that was his idea of hiding his identity!

But he was sharp enough at that and hadn't gone about the Island more than a couple of days, before he stuck this and that together and had enough on me to make the charge. But he was a decent sort of chap and came up to my room late at night with the manager and put the whole thing straight up to me and told me about the widow's telegram and that I was under arrest and that I had better get a hold of the best lawyer that money could buy for I was in for a tough time.

He was right and I knew that I was in a mighty bad hole. But I also knew that there would be plenty of money behind me when the whole thing came out and money is a mighty good thing to get out of a hole with.

So I played the game and never let on that I wasn't the real Burton Combs. They locked me up and notified my adopted father and the next morning the news was shouted all over the world, for John B. Combs cut a big figure and his son's arrest made some music.

And then the Combs lawyer, Harvey Benton, came up to see me and the minute he set eyes on me the cat was out of the bag and I up and tells him the whole story though I didn't give him the reason for Combs being frightened but just said that he was threatened by these three rum-runners. I felt that my playing the game fair would give me a better standing with the Combses and help loosen up the old purse strings.

Young Combs wasn't such a bad fellow either, for the next day he was down to see me and ready to tell the whole story and stand up for me.

Then we moved over to the mainland and I couldn't get out on bail and the prosecuting attorney started to have my record looked up and I can tell you that after that things didn't look so rosy. It all goes to prove that a clean sheet helps a man though mine wasn't nothing to be ashamed of. But I will admit that it looked pretty sick on the front pages of the newspapers.

Then John B. Combs himself arrives and conies up to see me. He listens to my story at first with a hard, cold face but when I come to the part where I have to shoot quick or die his eyes kind of fill and I see he's thinking of his son and

the chances he would of had in the same place —and how if I hadn't got them they would a got Burton.

Then he stretches forth his hand and grasps mine and I see it would have been better if Burton had taken his father into his confidence in the first place.

Yes, the old boy was a good scout and he told me that he loved his son and that I had saved his son's life and he didn't care what my past had been. And he would see me through this thing that his son had gotten me into if it cost a fortune.

It was a funny thing all around. Here was me, the sufferer, comforting the old boy and telling him that it was nothing. Just like the chair looking me in the face was an everyday affair. But I didn't much like the idea of his being so sad, for it gives me the impression that my chances are not so good and that I am going to pay the price for his son. Which ain't nothing to sing about. But it was my word against the word of the gang, and they - being dead - wouldn't have much to say.

Yes, I was indicted all right and held for the grand jury—first degree murder was the charge. Then come a wait with my lawyers trying to get a hold of some farmer who might of seen something of the shooting and would corroborate my story. Then comes the trial and you would a-thought that the District Attorney had a personal grudge against me all his life and that all the politicians and one-horse newspapers were after his job. He paints up those three crooks like they were innocent young country girls that had been trapped by a couple of designing men. And he tells how Burton Combs done them in a shady deal and when he feared they was going to tell the authorities he up and hires a professional murderer to kill them.

I tell you it made a mighty good story and he told it well. One could almost see those three cherubs going forth in child-like innocence to be slaughtered by the butcher— which is me.

And he punched holes in my story. Especially that part about how I put down my hand and found the gun on the seat. And he said that I took them out on some pretense and shot them down in cold blood—quick shooting being my business and shady deals my living.

When he got through with my story it was as full of holes as a sieve and I had a funny feeling around the chest because I thought anyone could see what a rotten gang this was and what a clean-living young fellow I was. For my lawyer

painted me up as a young gentleman what went around the world trying to help others.

Just when I think that things are all up and the jury are eyeing me with hard, stern faces comes the surprise. You see, I had never told a soul about Marion being in the car with me when that gang first started the gun play out on the 'Sconset road. You see, I didn't see the need of it and—and—well, somehow I just couldn't drag her into it. Weakness, I'll admit, for a fellow facing death should fight with every weapon he can grab. And there's that thing about women cropping up again.

But somehow there in that stuffy courtroom her innocent face and those soft, child-like eyes come up before me and I see she might of helped me a lot with the simple truth about the bullet that crossed her cheek. And while I was thinking about Marion and telling myself that my goose was cooked comes that big surprise.

My lawyer calls a witness, and it's Marion St. James. Gad! my heart just stops beating for the moment.

She was very quiet and very calm but her voice was low and the jury had to lean forward to catch what she said. She told about the ride that night and how the bullet broke the windshield and scratched her cheek.

And then came the shock. I was just dreaming there and thinking of the trouble I had caused her when I heard what she was saying and I woke up—quick.

:"—after I left Mr. Combs—I called him Burton," and she pointed down at me. "I went upstairs but I couldn't sleep. I was thinking about what had happened out on the moor that night. Of course, I didn't believe what Burton had told me—about the hares. And then I remembered the look on his face as he bathed off my cheek—and it was terrible to see and—"

Then she paused a moment and wiped her eyes and went on.

"After a bit I looked out the window and I could see the little shed, where Burt kept his car, and I just caught the glimpse of a man going into it. I thought it was Burt and that he was going to drive out on the moor and— Oh, I didn't know what I thought, but I was frightened and didn't want him to go and I just rushed out of my room and down the back stairs and out toward the shed.

"I was just in time to see a big touring car pull out and two men were in it. And then I waited a minute and went and looked into the shed and Burt's car was

still there. I don't know why but I was frightened and I climbed into the little touring car and sat down in the back and kind of rested.

"Then I heard someone coming and I hid down in the back of the car and pulled some rugs up over me and waited."

"And why did you wait?" my lawyer asked her kindly.

"I just thought that I would be able to help Mr.—Burt —and I wanted to help him,"

"Was there any other reason?"

"Yes—I thought that he was going into trouble for me and—and—" she paused a moment.

"Yes," the lawyer encouraged.

"And I wanted to help him."

She said the words so low that you could hardly catch them. But the lawyer didn't ask her to repeat them. I guess he thought it went over better that way and it sure did—at least with me. For I knew what she meant.

Then she went on.

"Pretty soon Mr. Combs came along" (for she kept calling me Burton Combs) "and that big man was with him. The one they called Mr. Farrow. I looked carefully up over the door, for it was very dark where I was, and I saw that Mr. Farrow had a gun in his hand and that he held it close up against Mr. Combs's back. And he talked rough but too low to understand and then they both climbed into the front of the machine. I did not know just what I could do, but I thought—oh—I don't know what I thought, but I did so want to help him and I was just too scared to cry out.

"And then they started off and after they were a little way out in the country Mr. Farrow made Burton stop the car and stand up while he searched him. And he found his revolver and took it from him and threw it into the back of the car. It landed on the seat and bounced off and I stretched out my hand and took hold of it and held it there under the rugs. I didn't know what to do with it at first for I had never fired a gun.

"Then I heard Mr. Farrow say that he was going to kill Mr. Combs and I was terribly frightened but I leaned up and stretched my hand over the seat and tried to give the pistol to Mr. Combs. But Mr. Farrow turned suddenly and I became frightened and dropped the pistol. Then I dropped back in the car again but I was half out of the covers and afraid to pull them over me for the car had stopped again and I had a feeling that someone was looking down at me. Then I heard

them moving in front of the car and I looked up and I saw that Mr. Farrow had his gun pressed close against Mr. Combs's side and that Mr. Combs was trying to open the door.

"Then came the sudden report and I think that I cried out, for I thought that Burt was shot. Then came several more shots, one right after another, and I looked out and saw Mr. Combs standing in the moonlight and a man beside another big car firing at him—and then the man fell and—"

She broke off suddenly and started to cry.

"And after that?" my lawyer smiled at her.

"I climbed back under the robes and—Mr. Combs drove me back to the hotel—but he never knew I was there."

Well, that just about settled it, I guess. The room was in more or less of an uproar. And you ought to have heard my lawyer! Now I know why good lawyers get so much money. He started in and he sure did paint that gang up mighty black, and now I was the innocent boy led into danger by these hardened criminals. And he showed how the gun was held close to my side when I fired.

"And if that isn't self-defense and good American pluck I'd like to ask you what in heaven's name is?"

And that's the whole show. One hour later I was a free man. Everybody was shaking hands with me, and from a desperate criminal I had suddenly become a hero. And I guess that Marion had done it.

Then Old Combs came up to me and shook me by the hand and told me how glad he was that I was free and what a plucky little thing Marion was, and how I owed my life twice over to her.

Then he offered me a job. Imagine! Another job for the Combs family. But this was different.

"There is too much good in you to lead the life you have been leading. You may think that it is all right, but there will be others that won't. I can offer you something that will be mighty good."

But I shook my head.

"I guess I'll stick to my trade," I said. "I've had good offers before, and in my line—this little notoriety won't hurt none."

"It's a good position," he says, not paying much attention to what I was getting off. "The right people will be glad to know you—and there will be enough money in it to get married."

I started to shake my head again when he handed me a note.

"Read this note and then let me know. Not another word until you have read it."

He smiles.

I took the little blue envelope and tore it open, and it was from Marion:

I would like to see you again when you take that position of Mr. Combs'.

I guess I read that simple sentence over a couple of dozen times before I again turned to Mr. Combs.

"I guess I'll take that job—if it pays enough to get married on," was all that I said.

There ain't no explanation unless—unless I wanted to see Marion again myself.

That's all, unless to warn you that it would be kind of foolish to take too seriously anything I said about keeping clear of the women.

END

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

The Back Alley is a webzine devoted to the hardboiled and noir genres of popular fiction. We welcome submissions of stories which fall within the guidelines of these genres, and historical/critical/analytical nonfiction related to these genres.

The discussion, even among those who are well-read in these literary forms, surrounding just what constitutes hardboiled or noir fiction is ongoing, often confrontational, and seldom results in anything resembling agreement.

Basically, hardboiled crime fiction involves a stronger description of violence, sex, and contains harsher language than you might find in traditional crime fiction. The protagonist more often than not is a private investigator. This investigator may fall under the tradition of Chandler's Marlowe and his successors such as Lew Archer and Spenser, in which the crimes are vicious but the detectives are not. They may more closely resemble the work of Carroll John Daly or Mickey Spillane, where the detective is as likely to engage in violence as the criminals are.

Noir stories often defy description, except that you are aware from the beginning that the protagonist and those around him are probably doomed no matter what they do to prevent it. The source of their damnation is their own personal weaknesses and frailties. They give in to temptation and, as in the story of Adam and Eve, their own choices condemn them. Greed, avarice, lust, and envy figure heavily in noir stories. Often, the noir protagonist believes him(her)self to be virtuous or to be acting correctly. It is only later that they discover that their decisions - well-meaning or not - have led to their undoing.

There is an ongoing discussion on the Rara Avis list regarding the nature of hardboiled versus noir literature. Jim Doherty has stated that "*...hard-boiled describes an attitude that's tough and colloquial, while noir describes an atmosphere that's dark and gloomy*".

In response, Jack Bludis, in an attempt to take the two genres down to their bare essentials, has asserted that "*hardboiled = tough; noir = screwed*".

More often than not, the discussion comes down to an uneasy truce based on a statement something like, "*Well, I know it when I see it.*"

Which, when all is said and done, will also be the reasoning we will employ when deciding whether to accept a story for. **The Back Alley**.

Since I have failed so miserably at describing exactly what hardboiled and noir fiction is, I would like to take a moment to describe exactly what it is not.

We do not want to see any story involving a cat, talking or otherwise, unless the cat is dead by the end of the story. We love cats, have a bunch of them ourselves. They have no place in hardboiled stories, especially if they talk, think, reason, or engage in any other behavior than eating, sleeping, and licking their butts. Don't submit cat mysteries. We will reject them and then post ugly comments about your mama.

If there is an 'Inspector' in your story, there had also better damned well be some rats, roaches or other vermin. We will consider making an exception for building inspectors, but only if they are brutally victimized. If you have ever built a house, you know why.

If Aunt Lucy is solving the crime, she had better also have some prison tats, drink like Foster Brooks, and spray the bad guys with an Uzi. The only tea I want to read about in these stories is Mexican pot.

We are open to foul language, substance abuse, graphic and frequent violence, and sex. If you don't know how to write sex, don't submit any. Most people don't know how to write it. If your early writing career was spent typing with one hand, feel free to toss in a little of the ol' wokka-wokka. If it's embarrassing, we'll ask you to cut it.

We don't want to read international thrillers, gaslight armchair detectives, kung-fu adventures, serial killer stories, forensic procedurals, police procedurals, courtroom procedurals, or medical mysteries. We do not want to read anything that takes place more than ten years in the future. We do not want to read anything that takes place more than one hundred years in the past.

If you are still in doubt, query.

Okay, as to the mechanics: We are looking for stories up to 10,000 words. We will entertain submissions that are longer, up to novella length, but query first. We are only accepting electronic submissions, because we are tree huggers and we don't like dealing with all that SASE crap.

Here is the procedure for submitting your story.

Format it in the standard method (one inch margins, double spaced, yada yada yada. If you don't know, consult Writers Digest or google it.). Save your story in RTF format. Close it to strip out all the weird but cool formatting like em dashes and smart quotes, and reopen it to assure yourself that you are not

going to offend us. Close it and attach it to an email. In the body of the email, write your query. Impress us. We like that.

Send the email to: BarHallCom@aol.com Slug your email *Back Alley Submission*.

Make some microwave popcorn. Pop open a cold one. Wait a while. Weeks, maybe. We have day jobs.

Eventually, we will let you know what we think. Seems pretentious, considering that we're only paying twenty bucks or so a story, but we do care about the quality of the material we will publish in our webzine. We may ask you to edit your story, and if we do we will tell you what we would like changed. If you don't want to edit it, we're cool with that, but we won't publish it.

If we decide to publish your work, you lucky dog, we will send you two copies of the contract and an SASE. Sign them, and send BOTH back. We will countersign them and send you one for your records. Sounds convoluted, but it works for us.

We will be buying first serial rights only. Should we decide at some point in the future to publish a print anthology of stories originally published in **The Back Alley**, and to use your story in that anthology, we will contact you to offer to buy those rights separately. Please be aware that first periodical rights will include the right to include your stories in our archived editions of **The Back Alley**. However, our contract will state that you are free to sell reprint rights to your story elsewhere six months after initial publication.

Any other questions, query.

We're looking forward to reading the fruits of your genius.