THE BACK ALLEY WEBZINE

Volume 1, Number 2
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This is an archived copy of the second issue of **The Back Alley Webzine**. It contains the complete text of the Table of Contents, The Editor's Note, and each of the stories featured in that issue. It will be maintained on **The Back Alley Webzine** site for the enjoyment and entertainment of our readers. Please feel free to download this archived issue for reading on your home computer, laptop, PDAs, electronic books, or whatever other whizbang device those crazy scientists come up with in the future.

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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

BACK OF THE BUS, RIGHT NOW!

When I started ***The Back Alley***, I had several goals. The first, and most obvious, was to help promote and preserve the hardboiled and noir literary genres through a modern, twenty-first century format.

My second goal was to help the authors who were published in ***The Back Alley*** to access some of the major mystery award programs. While the Agatha is probably out our reach, for obvious reasons, I dared to hope that we could garner a few award nominations (and perhaps even wins) with the Shamus, Anthony, Derringer, and Edgar awards. Let's face it, nobody is getting rich in the electronic short story market, so we need to find whatever validation we can beyond simply seeing our words on the screen.

As I was preparing the first issue for release, I contacted Margery Flax at the Mystery Writers of America offices in New York. I've known Margery for several years, and consider her to be a pal. Hell, just about every mystery writer in the country considers Margery a pal. She's that kind of person.

I wrote her because I had read the new restrictions placed on Edgar Award nominations, posted on the MWA website. Based on my reading of the new rules for the Edgar competition this year, any work submitted for consideration must meet the criterion for Active Membership. This does not mean that the author has to be an Active Member, but rather that the publication in which the author's story was first published has to be vetted first by MWA as qualified.

Now, this is where things get a little murky. MWA last year decided to tighten the rules determining who gets to be an Active Member of the organization. It doesn't take an Einstein to figure out in short order that the primary consideration for Active Membership is whether you've made a lot of money through your writing. Period. Only authors who have been paid a considerable sum for writing need apply.

For short story venues like ***The Back Alley***, in order to be considered for the Edgar, a short story first must have been: A) published by an MWA qualified publisher, and B) must have enriched its author by at least $25.

In order to be considered for MWA's Qualified Publisher status, a print or electronic medium must pay a minimum of $25 per story, must publish at least five different authors each year – other than the publisher or anyone else involved with the medium in any financial manner – and must have been in business doing both of the above for at least two years.

A short story author who wants to achieve the mantle of Active Member in MWA must have been paid a minimum of $200 for short stories in the previous year, and that $200 must have been paid in increments of a minimum $25 from MWA qualified publishers! You could have been paid the entire $200 by a startup print magazine, but if MWA hasn't vetted it, you're shit out of luck.

You could be a former Edgar Award winner – as one of our authors was in our first issue - but if your story didn't appear in a print periodical or zine anointed by MWA, your story doesn't count, and won't be considered for next year's awards.

As I write this, Edgar Award Submissions close in eight weeks. I just checked the list of submissions in the Best Short Story category. As of three weeks ago, it consisted of only three publishers – *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, and Akashic Books. Sometime in the interim, somebody taught *The Strand Magazine* the secret handshake, because they now have stories listed.

That's it. Four publications, representing only three publishing companies (AHMM and EQMM are both owned by Dell Publishing). Not one of them is an electronic medium. This isn't a competition for the Best Short Mystery Story. It's a competition for the '*Best Short Story published by Dell, Akashic, or The Strand* ', and if MWA were being honest they'd call it that.

Think that's awful? Wait! There's more! The organizers of Left Coast Crime, an annual convention of mystery authors and fans, announced this spring that they will only allow panels at next year's conference to be populated by MWA Active Members. You newbies, electronic zine writers, and small pressers? You just stay in the back of the auditorium, where you belong. The shockwaves of this action have reverberated around the mystery-writing world for months, with understandable discontent in many quarters.

I've been an MWA Member for a number of years. I'm an Active Member, a status which I imagine was conferred on me during earlier, more lenient days,

and so I can only surmise that I have been grandfathered in. After the crew at 17 E. 47th reads this, I may be demoted, but in my own, humble, borderline insignificant opinion, this new policy – as my children say – sucks balls.

And here is why MWA's policy sucks balls. A quick survey of the online mystery ezines reveals that only one pays the MWA minimum of $25 per story, and therefore has any hope whatsoever of – at any point in the foreseeable future – being qualified by MWA as an acceptable publisher for Active Member or Edgar Nominee status.

You want to know which webzine meets those qualifications?

You're reading it.

As I mentioned, I contacted my pal Margery Flax, and presented her with the information about ***The Back Alley***, including a list of our stellar first issue authors – one of which was a previous Edgar Award Winner. She forwarded my query to the Contest Committee. In late July, I received their decision.

Not this year, Grasshopper.

They had three primary objections. First, at the time I wrote Margery, ***The Back Alley*** was paying $20 a story. MWA insisted that we pay a minimum of $25 per story.

Okay, so we changed that for the second issue, AND we reissued contracts to the authors in the first issue to increase their pay to $25 each. Objection overruled.

They agreed that Barbadoes Hall Communications, the parent company of Back Alley Press, had been in the publishing business for over six years – more than meeting their arbitrary two year rule for qualified publishers – but because we only published my books during that period they said that the clock started ticking with the webzine. They did, however, throw me a bone. Since it was obvious that we would publish at least nine other authors besides me this year – their third objection - they said that I could reapply next year.

Okay, so here's the deal back here in the trees. Our goal at ***The Back Alley*** is to be the first web-based mystery magazine to become an MWA-qualified

publisher. We do intend to meet their criteria next year, and to be allowed to submit our authors' stories for the 2009 Edgar Awards.

Does this mean that we agree with their policies? Absolutely not.

That's why I renewed my MWA Active (I hope) Membership today. MWA's new policy on Active Membership and Qualified Publishers may suck balls, but nobody is going to be able to change it from the outside.

MWA is a private organization, and as such it can make whatever rules it wants to make. If you want to be a member of MWA, or any private organization for that matter, you have to accept the rules as they exist – at least until you can influence a change in them.

More often than not, the rules that are put in place will reflect the beliefs of the rules' makers. In the increasingly polarized world of fiction publishing, which for better or for worse is still dominated by five bloated profit-driven multinational corporations, it stands to reason that the current rules have been written to protect and maintain the status quo. The problem is that we don't live in the twentieth century anymore.

There are all kinds of media out there producing fiction that have nothing to do with dead trees and pulp mills. Like the *samizdat* presses of the post-revolutionary Soviet Union, the new electronic media are nimbler, more flexible, faster, and easier to produce than traditional paper presses. Electronic presses are here to stay and may even, in the fullness of time, supplant physical book publishers. There will come a time when authors will be judged only by the quality of their words, not by the size of their publishing contracts.

MWA's decision to put money before literature is troubling, but they're just one organization. Much more troubling is the elitist view that their new rules represent, and the response by at least one major conference to buy into the view that you're only a writer if you've snagged a four-figure advance or have been published in one of only four (for now) short story venues.

Here at ***The Back Alley***, we know better. We believe that our readers do, also.

Richard Helms, Editor - ***The Back Alley***

LINEUP FOR VOLUME I, NUMBER 2

JOHN WEAGLY, a Windy City actor, playwright, and author, has produced and directed a number of plays for Iguana Productions. In 1998, he started to focus less on writing plays and more on writing fiction. His story ***The Redemption of Tyler Jack*** was published in ***Pirate Writings Magazine***. His book of short stories ***The Undertow of Small Town Dreams*** is currently available from Twilight Tales Publications. Iguana Productions has evolved into Iguana Publications, which publishes cheap, no frills chapbooks. He is a member of the Horror Writers Association, Mystery Writers of America, The Short Mystery Fiction Society, and Private Eye Writers of America.

BRYON QUERTERMOUS produced his first play, a shameless rip-off of **The Maltese Falcon,** when he was 19. He's been shortlisted for the Crime Writers Association Debut Dagger and his fiction has appeared in ***Shots***, ***Noir Originals***, ***CrimeSpree***, ***Crime Scene Scotland***, ***ThugLit***, and ***Hardluck Stories***, among others. He appears - by name, at least - as a reporter in S. J. Rozan's new novel, ***In This Rain***. He is the editor and publisher of ***Demolition*** magazine, one of ***The Back Alley***'s competitors, but we don't hold that against him. This bio was blatantly ripped from a previous bio that accompanied one of his stories in **Shred of Evidence**, which clearly indicates that, at **The Back Alley**, we not only lack shame, but apparently also a conscience.

Kansas City psychologist **WARREN BULL** is the author of ***Abraham Lincoln for the Defense*** (PublishAmerica 2003). Warren's award-winning short story, "***Beecher's Bibles***" is included in ***Manhattan Mysteries*** (KS Publishing, Inc. 2005.) He contributed a memoir to ***Grab Your Tiger*** authored by Kathy Schwadel (Keen Publications, 2007.) Warren has also published fiction and non-fiction in a number of places including ***Amazon Shorts***, ***Great Mystery and Suspense***, ***Espressofiction.com***, ***Mysterical-E***, ***Kansas City Voices***, ***Crimeandsuspense.com***, and ***DownGoSun***.

MEGAN POWELL (not her real name...) is the author of two novels (**Vocation**, Double Dragon E-books, 2002; **Waxing**, Zumaya Publications, 2005), and literally dozens of short stories published in several genres. She is also the editor of the **Shred of Evidence Ezine**. This must mean that this is the visiting editor issue. Megan's short fiction has appeared in (or is slated for) various magazines and anthologies, including ***Underworlds***, ***HandHeldCrime***, ***The Eternal Night***, ***Orchard Press Mysteries***, ***Hardluck Stories***, ***SDO Detective***, ***The Blackest Death Vol. 1, Historical Hardboiled*** and ***Bullet Points.*** Megan, a graduate of Bryn Mawr, now lives in the western suburbs of Philadelphia with her husband Larry, two dogs, and two cats.

KEITH GILMAN, a Pennsylvania cop who writes some righteous hardcore prose, joins us for the second issue of ***The Back Alley***. His stories have appeared in a variety of internet crime magazines including **Thuglit**, **Orchard Press Mysteries**, **Blazing Adventures Magazine** and **Demolition**. His flash fiction has appeared in **Muzzle Flash**, **MFOB**, and O**ut of the Gutter Magazine**. He has stories coming soon to **Spinetingler Magazine**, **Mysterical-E**, and issue three of **The PulpPusher**. Most recently, Keith became one of the first people in modern memory to win the **Private Eye Writers of America/St. Martin's Best First PI Novel** competition, and not be named *Mike*. For that alone, we are honored to include him in this issue. There are no pictures of him anywhere on the Internet, so we inserted a picture of Commando Cody, King of the Rocketmen, who we think is a really cool frood

Texas is home for **JESS NEVINS**, who contributed our Historical/Analytical piece for this issue of ***The Back Alley***. Jess is fascinated with pop culture. He has written a history of Timely Comics - the progenitor of Marvel Comics. No less than Ed Gorman and Martin Greenburg - in their anthology ***The Deadly Bride and 21 of the Year's Finest Crime and Mystery Stories: Volume II*** - have claimed that, "Jess Nevins's remarkable ***The Encyclopedia of Fantastic Victoriana*** (MonkeyBrain) had a wide scope but included more intelligent, knowledgeable, and sometimes iconoclastic history and criticism of 19th-century detective fiction than any book in memory." Jess, a cruel victim of the U.S. Postal Service, was originally scheduled to appear in our inaugural issue, but never received his contract. We're pleased as punch to have him join us for ish two.

FRANK NORRIS holds a very special place in the history of noir fiction. Despite his relative lack of renown today, around the turn of the twentieth century he was setting the world on fire with his naturalistic, dark stories of doomed people. Many of the novels he produced during his tragically brief life were later made into movies, such as ***Moran of the Lady Letty***, and the immensely classic silent film ***Greed*** (1924, Erich von Stroheim), which was based on his massive novel ***McTeague***.

Beginning with this issue, we will serialize ***McTeague***, and attempt in each issue to include some history or critical analysis of the incredible literary work of Frank Norris.

IN THE SHADOWS OF WRIGLEY FIELD

BY

JOHN WEAGLY

Windy City actor, playwright, and author John Weagly has produced and directed a number of plays for Iguana Productions. In 1998, he started to focus less on writing plays and more on writing fiction. His story ***The Redemption of Tyler Jack*** *was published in* ***Pirate Writings*** *Magazine. His book of short stories* ***The Undertow of Small Town Dreams*** *is currently available from Twilight Tales Publications. Iguana Productions has evolved into Iguana Publications, which publishes cheap, no frills chapbooks. He is a member of the Horror Writers Association, Mystery Writers of America, The Short Mystery Fiction Society, and Private Eye Writers of America.*

It's rare that I let one of them keep the underpants, but it has happened.

This was one of the many times I worked Wrigley Field. I was standing at the corner of Waveland and Sheffield, waiting for the Cubs game to let out. The heat was brutal. As I stood, waiting, I felt a bead of sweat trickle from my right temple down to my jaw. My lower back felt like a swamp. I wanted to disown my armpits. None of it was very lady-like. Not even very lady-of-the-night-like.

I had a spot in an alley a couple of blocks away, behind Metro, a club on Clark. I had several spots in the neighborhood where I took my clients, but I kept the locations in steady rotation, and Metro was where we were going tonight. I'd discovered the logic of using a variety of locations in a movie on Cinemax.

They'd been playing the ninth inning for what seemed like forever. A few people had straggled out, trying to get a jump on traffic I suppose, but none of them had held any potential. Even though I'd only been waiting for a little under an hour, I was ready to quit for the night. Just not in the mood, I guess. The heat didn't help.

I was just about ready to give up and take myself home to a cool bath when I heard the last out. I never paid attention to the final score, it didn't matter. If

the Cubs won, the fans wanted to celebrate; if the Cubs lost, the fans wanted consolation.

Baseball junkies started spilling out into the street. I scanned the crowd, looking for men that were by themselves that might have some money. The search didn't take long. He was throwing a soda cup into a garbage can. His hair was dark, and he was dressed in khaki shorts and a loose white Cubs t-shirt. He looked like he carried enough money on him to afford a fun night, and he didn't look like a trouble-maker. I wandered over to him, walking beside him and trying to blend in with the crowd.

"What ya think?" I asked.

He turned his head and looked me up and down. I had short blonde hair and, like him, I was wearing a white Cubs t-shirt, but mine was a couple of sizes too small, and I complimented it with a denim miniskirt. From the right angles you could make out black lace supplied by Victoria's Secret. I also carried a red purse that was not too big and not too small. I could easily pass for a slightly trashy fan.

"About what?" he asked.

"I don't know. The game? The Cubbies? How about the temperature?"

He looked around like he was trying to see the heat. "It's hot."

"Yes it is."

We kept pace with the rest of the crowd. He didn't say anything else, but he kept glancing at me. A bead of sweat rolled past my left eye. It was too hot for this kind of beating around the bush, so I said, "Are you looking for a date?"

He stopped walking and turned toward me. "I…uh…I don't…"

"No is fine. I just thought I'd ask."

"How…um…How much?"

"Sixty."

He thought for a moment. "Is that a good price?"

I threw some extra sultry into my voice.

"Worth every penny."

He smiled and nodded.

I pointed toward Clark Street.

"Let's go this way." I started moving west.

After a moment, he followed.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Connie."

"That's a girl's name."

"It's short for Cornelius."

I still thought it might be a girl's name. He didn't ask me mine. It's surprising how few men do. They see me as an object, a thing, a non-entity. Nothing doesn't need a name. Until we're done that is, then they see me as even less; a bitch, a whore, a slut.

We walked a little further in silence. With the heat I could feel the air giving as much resistance as possible. Connie kept quiet.

"Anything wrong?" I asked.

"I'm a little nervous."

"Why?"

"I've never done this before."

A lot of guys told me that. I never believed them.

"It's okay," I told him. "I've done this before."

Then, Connie did something that none of my other clients had ever even tried. As we walked down the street, he took my hand in his; gently but with authority, like we were on a date. It felt peculiar, but I didn't mind it.

We got to Metro and went around to the back. There was a Dumpster that provided a little camouflage if anybody else happened to wander this way. The alley smelled like spilled beer and garbage and I could hear music pounding inside the club. While we'd been out in the open I hadn't noticed a breeze, but now, between buildings, I could tell it was missing.

Connie stood, shifting from one foot to the other.

"What do we do now?" he asked.

My whole body felt itchy with perspiration. This was the part I dreaded, but a girl has to make a living.

"You give me my money," I told him.

Connie took out his wallet. While he did so, I opened my purse. When he looked at me again I had my gun pointed at him. Shock spilled over his face.

"Sorry," I told him. "Tonight all of your money is my money."

He handed me his wallet and I took out the cash. Then I took out his driver's license.

"Cornelius White. 1500 West Belle Plain, apartment 3-C," I said. I was surprised he'd given me his real name. "Listen Connie. You might decide you want revenge for what happened tonight. You don't."

I held up the driver's license.

"I know where you live and if anything happens to me, I have friends who will find you."

I didn't have to tell him not to go to the cops, none of them ever did. They didn't want to admit how they ended up in an alley with a strange woman in the first place.

I put the driver's license back into his wallet and handed the wallet back to him. I knew what a pain it was replacing credit cards and all that other crap we carry around.

"Now drop your pants," I told him.

"Are you still going to…"

I rolled my eyes. "Don't get your hopes up."

"Then why do I have to take off my pants?"

"It'll help me make a clean getaway."

"Oh." He thought for a moment. "That makes sense."

He took off his khakis. Underneath he wore boxer shorts with blue and green vertical stripes.

"This isn't network television," I said. "Lose the underpants, too."

He looked embarrassed, but did as he was told.

"Give them to me."

He handed me his clothes.

"Now turn around and face the wall and count to twenty-seven," I told him.

"Twenty-seven?"

"It's the number of ways I can make your night even worse if you don't do as I say."

He faced the back of the building and started counting slowly. I turned to leave the alley. I could hear cars and buses honking and moving back in the proper world. After I'd taken a couple of steps, Connie's counting stopped.

"Excuse me," he said.

I stopped, "Yeah?"

"Can I ask your name?"

I turned around and gave him an icy stare; it wasn't cold enough to help me cool off.

"I'm not going to do anything," he continued. "I'd just like to know."

"It's Carly," I told him. I wasn't sure why I gave him my real name, maybe because he'd given me his.

He gave me a sad smile, and then Connie started counting again.

I'm also not sure why I did what I did next. Maybe because Connie gave me his real name or because he asked me for mine. Maybe it was the way he'd held my hand while we walked. Or maybe it was just the heat.

"Hey," I said.

Connie turned to look at me. In a Mean-Joe-Green-Coca-Cola-Really-You-Can-Have-It commercial moment, I threw him his underpants.

Then I continued on my way out of the alley.

It was too hot to work; I swore I could hear my whole sticky body squish with each sweaty step I took. I'd done well for the night, so I caught a cab in front of the ballpark. That cool bath was waiting.

END

RUINS OF DETROIT

BY

BRYON QUERTERMOUS

Bryon Quertermous's first play was a shameless rip-off of ***The Maltese Falcon*** *and was produced when he was 19. He's been shortlisted for the Crime Writers Association Debut Dagger and his fiction has appeared in* ***Shots***, ***Noir Originals***, ***CrimeSpree***, ***Crime Scene Scotland***, ***ThugLit***, *and* ***Hardluck Stories***, *among others. He appears - by name, at least - as a reporter in S. J. Rozan's new novel,* ***In This Rain****. He is the editor and publisher of* ***Demolition*** *magazine in a debt of literary karma. This bio was blatantly ripped from a previous bio that accompanied one of his stories in* ***Shred of Evidence****, which clearly indicates that, at* ***The Back Alley****, we have no shame.*

"She landed right over there," Denny Samuels said. "I can still hear it."

We were standing on the corner of Griswold and Michigan Avenue downtown Detroit in front of the crumbling, abandoned shell of the Shelby-Wayne hotel. He was talking about his fiancé's suicide. I nodded along because there was nothing I could say that wouldn't sound cheesy or tacky, or just plain stupid.

My dad was Denny's best friend until the night before the wedding when they had a drunken argument over the bride-to-be's loyalties. Denny was stubborn enough to stay mad for twenty years until my dad died, but I wasn't too stubborn to accept his money and pitiful attempts at reconciliation when he called. I followed him as he went down Griswold toward the main entrance of the hotel. All that remained of the luxurious entrance was a couple of padlocked steel doors sprayed painted with vulgar tags and some shattered windows.

"This is where I was standing," Samuels said. "Emily was behind me but she got the…worst of it. The blood I mean. She had it all over her white dress."

I felt like this was one of those moments I should put my arm on his shoulder or do something reassuring, but he wasn't crying or anything and he might think I was weird, so I kept my thoughts to myself and continued watching him relive the worst day of his life.

"Emily came here at least once a month when she was old enough to drive. I think it's one of the main reasons she chose to go to school in the city instead of at Michigan where she was also accepted."

"When was the last time you saw your daughter?"

"All of her?"

I nodded, he'd received a package a few days ago containing just her hand.

"A month or so. Like I said, I didn't keep track of her as well as I probably should have."

"Was it a phone call or visit or postcard?"

"Visit. She was telling me about some of the buildings she'd been in and telling me some things she'd found here."

"And she didn't mention any problems she was having or anything?"

"She didn't seem any worse than usual."

We were walking away from the hotel toward an alley between an abandoned theater and a sparsely populated liquor store. I followed him through the alley and back onto the street behind the old hotel.

"I must have stood there for an hour after she hit," Denny continued. "I had blood all over my pants and people were screaming and I just stood there while Em watched her mom's blood leak onto the sidewalk."

"People react to things in different ways."

"I shouldn't have let Em see that. She should have been inside the hotel."

"Your wife shouldn't have killed herself in front of you two."

"Fiancé," he corrected. "We were never married."

I was looking around at the rest of the abandoned buildings on the block and wondered what they had been like around the time of the Shelby-Wayne's glory days. It was hard to believe the city had once been called the Paris of the West. Now it looked like the Baghdad of the West.

"What makes you think urban explorers are the ones behind your daughter's disappearance?" I asked.

"The note mentions pictures. These guys take pictures and most of what they do is illegal. It only makes sense."

"But they didn't come right out and say they were urban explorers?"

"No, it wasn't on official letterhead."

"So you're hoping if we hang out here long enough these guys will come by? And then what? Ask them if they kidnapped your daughter and chopped her hand off?"

"They didn't even tell me what they want. They just said Emily left it with me and they wanted it."

"You keep saying they," I said. "How do you know it's multiple people? Maybe it's just one disgruntled explorer."

"I don't know. I don't know anything about this. That's why I want to hire you. I have money. Whatever you find out will be more than I know right now."

"You also realize the chances that your daughter is already dead are pretty great?"

"Then I want more of her to bury than just her hand."

I put my hands in my pockets and let my eyes wander around the area and the hotel specifically. I imagined a little girl seeing something no one should ever see in their life and how that might change someone.

"It may sound morbid, but I gotta admit I'm curious," I said. "I'll stake this place out for a couple of days and see what I can find out. If I get any leads I'll look into it further, okay?"

He nodded and wiped his face with the sleeve of his shirt.

"Thanks Dallas. Find her, please."

* * * * *

I watched the building for a few days at different times and didn't see anything more exciting than a few derelicts and lost tourists I helped guide back to the shiny civilized areas. On the fourth day, one of those lost souls turned out not to be a tourist.

"You work for the Mayor's office?" I asked the kid, who couldn't have been more than 22 when he told me who he was.

"I'm an intern," he said. "What are you doing out here? You don't look homeless."

"What's the mayor's interest in an abandoned old building?"

"It's in his city, why shouldn't he be interested?"

"There are more than a few abandoned buildings in this city and I don't see prissy little interns staking out every one of them. Why this one?"

"Who are you again?"

"A concerned citizen who's going to go to his friend in the mayor's office and ask him why he's being harassed by some snot-nosed little—"

"It's no secret. Don't you read the papers around here? The mayor has found a group willing to restore the Shelby-Wayne to its former glory."

"Why are *you* out here?"

"There's going to be a press conference tomorrow morning and I'm scouting locations. We'll have national media here and the mayor wants to make sure he gets the best angle that—"

"Doesn't show his horns?" I asked.

"That shows the biggest potential in the building."

"What time is the press conference?"

"Ten a.m.."

"I guess that's better than eight."

"Seriously, though. Who are you?" he asked me again.

"Batman," I said.

* * * * *

I showed up early the next morning with donuts and Denny Samuels by my side. There was a tiny wisp of a crowd gathering around the recently erected stage but I didn't see anyone who looked out of place.

"I don't see how this is going to help," Denny said, a bit overwhelmed by the whole scene.

"Maybe we can get a few minutes with the mayor and ask him if he knows anything about your daughter."

"That's not funny."

"It could happen."

"Kidnappers don't show up for press conferences."

"Now that's where you wrong," I said. "Most criminals return to the scene of the crime."

"You think this is where she was…where they had her?"

I shrugged my shoulders and led him closer to the stage and a growing throng of gawkers.

"It's all we've got to go on right now," I said. "You said this is the building she spent most of her time in, so the odds are pretty good this is where she found what these guys are looking for."

"I guess that makes sense. But I still don't see why we're here right now."

"If there's something important enough about this building to get the mayor's attention, it might help us figure out what got your daughter in trouble."

"This whole thing is going to make me sick."

"Just don't throw up on me," I said.

An hour later, the group of gawkers had exploded into a full-blown crowd and the mayor was starting his speech. *Detroit is rising*, the mayor said. *Blah blah blah*. Granted, the city looks better than it did when I left ten years ago. But that's like saying an ugly girl looks better now that she had the third eye removed. She's still ugly, just not hideous. Detroit had removed its third eye, but you'd still want to put a bag over its head before you took it to bed.

While the mayor continued sounding like he was giving a pep speech for abandoned buildings, I looked around at the rest of the area. Aside from the hotel, this was actually one of the areas bursting with new development. We were right around the corner from Campus Martius Park and a few blocks away from Greektown.

I was contemplating the pros and cons of moving myself downtown to one of the new condo developments when I heard commotion from the stage area. A group of people behind the mayor were looking up at the top floor of the hotel where it seemed someone was stepping out onto the ledge. I kept my eyes on the sky as something white dropped from the hotel.

As the object closed in on the stage area, it looked more and more like the size of a human and it looked like it was dressed in some kind of white dress, almost like a wedding dress. Before that could register with anyone though, the object hit the stage and exploded in a cloud of red liquid. I swear I heard people throw up next to me but Denny Samuels didn't.

There was screaming and general confusion as people ran away from the mess and turned around to see what was happening. The Mayor's people scurried desperately to keep the Mayor (and themselves of course) safe. and some people just stood there laughing. Okay, maybe one person. Me. When the air cleared and the hysteria blew over, others started realizing what I was laughing at. The object was indeed wearing a wedding dress. But it wasn't a

person, it was a dummy. Therefore the red goo in the air, and now mostly over everything in its path, wasn't blood, rather a syrupy substitute that smelled like Kool-Aid and pancakes.

"Why are you laughing?" Denny asked. "This is horrible. This is—"

"This is the best lead we've got right now and nobody was hurt for us to discover it."

"How can this help us?"

"Suicidal brides are rare at this hotel, so I'm assuming this stunt has something to do with you or your daughter."

"But you don't know who was behind it."

"That's why I'm the detective. I'm going to detect until I find what we're looking for. Or until we get lucky."

"That plan sucks," Denny Samuels said.

"Pay somebody else to come up with a better one."

It didn't take long for me to find someone I knew among the throngs of cops covering their own tails. Paige Daniels is a former homicide cop and current street crimes officer. She'd fallen hard after a previous case I'd been involved in, but she was smart, determined, and female, and she was slowly working her way back up the chain. I found her wiping a wad of the sticky goo from one of the Mayor's assistants.

"From wiping blood off of corpses to wiping sticky red goo off of mayoral toadies," I said. "Oh how the mighty have fallen."

"Shut up, Dallas. This is not the—"

"I'm not here for me," I said. "This is Denny Samuels and his daughter is missing."

"Not now. Can't you see that—"

"His wife committed suicide in her wedding dress at this very hotel."

Paige didn't say anything right away, but she stopped wiping the toady and swiveled around to look at me and Denny next to me.

"Tell me about your daughter, Mr. Samuels."

Denny and I took turns telling the story until we'd refreshed all of the vital points.

"This is obviously someone who knows about Denny's wedding day," I said. "Maybe he can give some information no one else would know."

"Go find one of the uniforms and tell them your little story."

"That was helpful," Denny said when we were out of earshot. "What next?"

"We find one of the uniforms and you tell them your story."

As we were about to breach the circle of blue, the group of officers exploded toward the back of the building. The pile ran a few feet before converging on a single wiry and pale runner in jeans and a white tank top. Denny was off running toward the throng of uniformed officers taking care of the runner while I still thought about the exploding dummy. The uniforms were on the ball and a pair of them had Denny restrained before he could get close enough to do any real damage.

I came up behind them and explained Denny's unique situation to the officers who relaxed their restraint on Denny a little. When he agreed to stay still and stop screaming random conspiracy theories, they let Denny go with them to examine the dummy. I stayed next to him and put my hand on his shoulder every once in while to let him know he wasn't alone. After about half an hour, they were done examining the dummy and hadn't come to any solid conclusions. We were about to go back to my office and figure out what to do next, when a Wayne County Sheriff's deputy walked by with the runner. Denny caught a quick look at his face and I saw recognition.

"My brother," Denny said.

* * * * *

We waited outside of the old Wayne County jail near police headquarters for more than an hour to see if Randy Samuels would be released. I told Denny repeatedly that it was a stupid idea to wait for him, and that they probably wouldn't even take him out the front door, but he insisted and I wasn't up for the guilt if I left him alone and he ended up killing someone. They never brought his brother out the front door, and after exhausting my few reliable sources inside the jail we knew he was staying there overnight.

"You know where he lives, don't you?" I asked Denny as we walked back to my car.

"I'm not going to do anything to him."

"I don't believe you."

"I've had time to cool down and ponder all of this and there's nothing I can really do."

"I'm still going to watch you."

* * * * *

Two days later there was no word from Emily or the police and I decided it was time to check up on the brother.

"We're going to your brother's house," I said, stomping my way through Denny's house.

"You said that wasn't a good idea."

"It's not. But it's all we've got."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"Do you have any other ideas?"

"That's what I hired you for."

"Then let's go talk to your brother."

I made sure my gun was tuned up and loaded before we headed over to a middle class block of houses in the Polish enclave of Hamtramck on the northern end of the city. Denny was driving and he parked a few houses down so we wouldn't draw attention to ourselves. Randy Samuels was sitting on his porch and didn't look all that shocked to see us.

"I made tea," he said.

I was getting creepy vibes from the guy, but Denny seemed comfortable with him so I followed them both into the small "formal" living room off to the right of the entryway. I took a seat next to Denny on the couch and Randy fell into a recliner on the other side of the room.

"You mentioned tea," Denny said.

"I'm sorry about the dummy."

"Why did you do it?"

"They made me," Randy said. "Told me they'd chop her up if I didn't."

"How did they get in contact with you?" I asked.

"I got a package couple days ago. Had her hand in it."

I looked over at Denny, he was guessing the same thing I was.

"Maybe it's not her hand."

"Didn't matter much to me," Randy said. "Hand sure enough was real and that's all the convincing it took."

"I got the same package," Denny said.

"I think it's very dangerous people we're dealing with, but I think it's safe to assume Emily still has her hands."

"Could have both her hands and still be dead," Randy said.

"Are there any other relatives who might have received similar packages?" I asked.

"It's just the two of us," Denny said. "We had a younger sister but she died a while ago. Our parents died a few years ago as well."

I looked over at Randy who was fidgeting in his chair and not looking directly at us or anything else.

"Have you ever been involved in something called urban exploration?" I asked him.

He shook his head no.

"Do you know what urban exploration is?"

He shook his head no again.

"I wonder if we can even track where these packages came from," I said. "There's no return address on either of them. What about the dummy? Was that delivered to your house?"

He shook his head no for a third time and I was about to yell at him when he spoke.

"I picked it up at the hotel."

"What floor?"

"I didn't have to walk real far to the top once I got it, I guess. Maybe a floor or two."

"And you carried the dummy the whole way?"

"Wasn't very heavy. It wasn't like a real body or anything."

"Would you remember where you picked up the dummy if you went back there?"

"I guess so."

"I think it's time for a field trip," I said.

* * * * *

It took us more than an hour to make it up the Shelby-Wayne's 30 flights of stairs to where Randy thought he might have picked up the dummy. All three of us were wheezing and bent over, especially Randy who looked like he was about to pass out and die on us.

"How did you do this the other day?"

"Musta thought it was important cause'a Emily," he said. "Now it just seems hard."

"Take us to where you found the dummy," I said.

Randy led us to a small utility closet near the middle of the hallway. After more than thirty years of neglect, I was a bit surprised to still find several mops and cleaning supplies in the closet.

"It was hangin' up right on the hook there," Randy said.

"And you carried it up to the penthouse where you threw it out the window?"

He nodded his head yes.

"This doesn't make any sense," I said. "Why would they draw attention to themselves if they were looking for something sensitive. This whole thing is going to explode in the press eventually and they lose any edge they have right now."

"Maybe they want the press."

"Maybe they just mean," Randy said.

"Go back to what you said, Denny. I think you might be onto something there."

"This whole thing could be about getting attention," he said. "With the mayor trying to clean up this building and other abandoned buildings around the city these guys are going to lose their playground."

"Where they getting' all the hands from?" Randy asked.

"That's a good question," I said. "Maybe the cops can trace where the hand came from and we can go from there."

"So we came up here for nothing then?"

I shrugged.

"You want to look around some more?"

"I haven't been in here since she died," Denny said.

"Should we go up to the penthouse? That's where she jumped from, right?"

"What do we do, then? Wait for them to do something even bigger?"

I didn't want to tell him the next bigger thing would probably involve his daughter's dead body. But that seemed like bad customer service so I kept my mouth shut and tried to figure out how to find these guys. We left as a group from the building but Denny and Randy went off to talk amongst themselves

and I went to use a traditional and time-honored detective trick: lying. I needed to find out where these hands were coming from and if the police weren't going to help me I was going to have to go to the source.

The only place I knew of in the area with body parts lying about for the taking was the Detroit State University medical center cadaver lab and I'd once found several thousands of dollars worth of stolen jewelry for one of the graduate advisors in the lab. Alison Mackey had ageless features, a brunette ponytail, and a rumpled lab coat. I found her up to her neck in books and ramen noodles in her office at the back of the cadaver lab.

"If I wanted to steal a couple of hands, how hard would that be?" I asked her.

"You looking to make yourself a set of phony fingerprints?"

"Missing person case," I said. "Packages seem to be arriving with chopped off hands to make the threat more real."

"And they came from this lab?"

"Nobody has said that, not officially," I said. "But this is the only place in the area I could think of with multiple body parts handy that wouldn't really miss a few hands."

"I haven't heard of any hands missing," she said. "But that doesn't mean we've looked at every one to check."

"I get what you're saying and I didn't think we'd be able to track whether these hands came from your lab or anything like that—"

"Then what do you—"

"I was hoping you might know if anybody in the department is involved in urban exploration or maybe knows an Emily Samuels."

"Urban exploration?"

"Breaking into abandoned buildings to explore and take pictures."

"And one of these explorers has access to lots of hands?" She asked.

"Not lots, exactly," I said. "But more than the normal person."

"And they're real hands?"

"Very."

"I wish I could help you, but I've never heard of a Emily Samuels or anything about urban exploration."

I made small talk with her for a few more minutes so I didn't seem like a complete jerk, and then thanked her for talking to me and was on my way back to my car when she yelled at me to stop.

"What about paintball?" She asked, huffing up behind me. "Does urban exploration have anything to with paintball?"

"Why?"

"Two of the student assistants—I don't think they're med students they just work in the lab—but they were talking about playing paintball in abandoned buildings the other day."

"It's more than I have to go on right now," I said. "Do you have names?"

She scribbled a couple of names on an index card for me and gave me directions to the student assistant lounge where they usually played cards around this time. I thanked her and headed up two floors to find out more about Stefan Strohvsky and Jeff Chandler.

The student assistant lounge was ripped from the layout of every company break room I'd ever been in. Each wall was covered with announcements and OSHA reports and the room was dominated by two large refrigerators toward the back and a counter with three microwaves along the wall next to me. There was nobody in the room at that moment, so I sat down for a few minutes and waited to see if anybody helpful would come in.

Two girls around 19 years old fluttered in temporarily, but they looked like they wouldn't be caught dead in a discount store, let alone a cadaver lab or abandoned building. The next person through the door wasn't very helpful until I realized that I'd seen him scouting out the Shelby-Wayne for the mayor before his press conference.

* * * * *

I grabbed the kid and took him down to Alison Mackey in the cadaver lab and asked her if she knew who he was. She said no. I said crap. He was smart enough to know he didn't have to go anywhere with me and threatened enough legal action to let me know he'd been paying attention in whatever pre-law classes he was enrolled in.

"But I have friends in the mayor's office," I said. "Friends who can smear your name and make sure you never get another government job again."

"I don't plan on ever having another government job again. I'm doing this as a favor for my father. But I don't like being threatened and imitated by some noir-tinged goon on a law high so I might be tempted have my father

smear *your* name around here. Smear for smear I bet I'd come out ahead in the end."

"Maybe I'll just shoot you," I said. "Who's your father?"

"Morton Taylor, Senior."

And then it all started making sense.

* * * * *

I left little Mort to soil his pants at the thought of fighting me while I went back to my office and pulled up the list of property records I'd been digging through earlier. It took a bit of digging and imaginative thinking, but I was finally able to tack Morton Taylor's name to the company that owned the company that owned the Shelby-Wayne hotel.

All of this was wonderful news and gave me some great ideas, but I didn't really know where to go with it. Neither Denny or I had the pull to get Morton Taylor or his son to tell us the truth about what was going on. What I needed was to find somebody else linked to the hotel I could use to try and track down Emily Samuels. In my haste to bug Little Mort, I'd forgotten about the two paintballing assistants that led me to the lunchroom originally, so I made my way back to DSU with a book and nowhere else to be.

It dawned on me about an hour into my stakeout that the pair could already be done for the day, but I was already committed so I was prepared to stay until they came in or I was kicked out. Luckily the former happened before the later. I didn't know which assistant was which, but the tallest of the two had a nasty black eye and a bandage on his hand and the shorter one was dragging himself around like he'd had his guts removed.

"I'm told you two are the ones to talk to about paintball in abandoned buildings," I said, waiting for them to sit down before talking.

They looked at each other and I could almost see the silent communication of fear between them.

"You don't work here," Guts said.

He had on jeans and a stained white under shirt and there was a balled up uniform shirt in front of him on the table.

"I'm looking for somebody."

"You a pervert?" he asked.

"Private detective," I said, "Looking for a girl who likes to break into abandoned buildings.

"Those building are always open," Black Eye said. "We never broke into nowhere or—"

"Shut up," Guts said.

I got up from my seat in the corner and sat next to them after pulling two twenty dollar bills from my wallet to set in front of them.

"Tell me about the Shelby-Wayne hotel," I said.

"What about the hotel?" He asked.

"You ever see the mayor or his people around there?"

"There's always people 'round that building at some time or another. Kind of stupid too, because it's nasty inside and ain't even one of the cooler dumps down there."

"You've been inside?"

"Not for paintball or anything, just with some friends to…look around."

"What friends?" I asked.

"Just some guys I know who do that sort of thing."

"Any of those guys know a girl named Emily Samuels?"

"I don't know their names, how I'm gonna know some chick they might know?"

I pulled the picture of Emily from my pocket and let them look it over. The flicker of recognition on their faces let me know I was going to have better luck with these two.

"You know her?"

"Never knew her name," Black Eye said. "But she's always around there."

"The Shelby-Wayne?" I asked.

He nodded his head.

"Not with the explorers though," he said. "Not all the time."

On a whim I described little Mort Taylor to them and asked if that was who Emily was hanging around with.

"Sounds like him," Bandage said. "But you didn't hear that from us."

"You didn't hear that from *him*," Guts said. "I didn't say nothin'."

"You know anywhere else Emily and this guy might hang out other than the Shelby-Wayne?"

"He got a place in Bricktown, down by the casino they hang at I heard."

I thanked them, but Guts looked pissed.

"You need to learn to shut up, man," he said to his friend, before looking at me." And you best stay the hell away from that hotel."

* * * * *

Call me contrary, but when somebody tells me not to go somewhere, that's the first place I like to go. I felt bad for leaving Denny out of this recent burst of developments, so I called and asked him if he'd like to join me for a visit to Bricktown. He was waiting for me with a baseball bat in front of the Old Shillelagh pub on Monroe.

"I was hoping you might recognize some of these guys," I said. "Not play wiffle ball with their heads."

"It's safer then a gun."

We walked a few blocks to a cluster of brick buildings filled mostly with bars, restaurants, and the occasional trinket shop. The apartment rumored to be frequented by Emily Samuels and little Mort Taylor was on the fourth floor of a corner building. Nobody answered when I knocked the first couple of times. So when Denny went crazy pounding on the door with, neighbors from both sides peeked their heads out to see what the commotion was.

"I'm looking for my daughter," Denny said, showing around one of Emily's pictures from his pocket. "Have you seen her around here?"

"I don't speak no English," the neighbor to the right said. "So cut out the banging."

Denny gave the other neighbor, a small black women, his saddest parent eyes.

"Please help me, if you've seen her," he said.

"This place might as well be a whore house for all the women coming and going," she said, opening her door a little more. "But there aren't too many guys showing up, so maybe it's just the drugs."

"Have you seen this girl here recently?"

"Not exactly unique, is she?"

"Anyone looking even remotely like her?" I asked, trying to use my voice to indicate the urgency of the matter instead of my fists.

"Why's he got a bat?" She asked, pointing to Denny. "Y'all look a little sketchy to me. I think Jose over there had the right idea."

She started to shut herself back into the apartment, but Denny slammed his foot into the doorway stopping the door from shutting. I thought he was going to go after the woman, and so did she from the look on her face, but he stopped short of entering the apartment.

"My daughter is in danger," he said. "They sent me a package with her hand in it and told me they were going to kill her."

"The people living next door to me?" she asked.

We both nodded.

"Then I don't want them next to me no more. I heard something the other day 'bout them going to a hotel for a party tonight 'round Midnight. I expect that might be where you find them."

"Did you hear what the name of the hotel was?"

"Said it was in the city, guess that means you don't have too many choices."

Denny looked at me.

"You think?"

I nodded.

"Sounds like you boys got a lead to chase," she said, pushing the door against Denny's foot. "Seems I should be getting' ready for work myself."

* * * * *

Denny and I were outside the Shelby-Wayne at 10pm. We should have probably gotten there even earlier, but I wanted to do some trailing of little Morton Taylor as well, to see if he'd lead me to any of the other planners of the party, or possibly to Emily herself.

After talking to the old woman in the apartment and the student assistants, I had an uneasy feeling that Emily wasn't exactly a damsel in distress. Something seemed off about the whole thing since the beginning—the hands seemed like huge overkill for one— but I wasn't about to tell Denny I thought his daughter might be part of the problem. If things worked out the way I was expecting them to, he'd find out all on his own.

Something about the penthouse floor led Emily's mother up there before she jumped, and I was suspecting it was the same thing that this crew was throwing a party for. My plan was a simple one. Denny, and I would hide on the floor below the penthouse until the other party guests started to arrive. If we saw

Emily or little Mort we'd bust out and take them down. It didn't take a lot into consideration, but I'd only been hired to do one thing: find Denny's daughter. I didn't care about solving any crimes or punishing any errant explorers; I just wanted to find Emily Samuels and get her back home. Denny could decide what to do with her from there.

It was nearly 10:30pm before the first person showed up and quarter to eleven before the first valuable person arrived. Little Morton Taylor was dressed in shiny black dress pants and a stretchy black, ribbed shirt I'm sure was meant to be fashionable but made him look instead like a fat, gay, burglar. Denny noticed him first and I could see him itching to move, but I knew he wanted Emily more and was smart enough to wait and see if anyone was with Taylor. Little Mort pulled a small flashlight from the back pocket of his pants and waved it along the wall. It took a second for me to realize the odd light hitting the wall wasn't from a flashlight, rather a black light. Mort took the light slowly along the outer walls of the floor, waving it up and down as high and low as his squatty arms would let him. When he made the complete rounds of the floor, he put the black light away and took one more look around the floor before going to the stairwell.

I counted to ten and when Little Morton didn't come back down the stairs, and no one come up to follow him, I moved out of my hiding space and waved for Denny and Kenny to follow me up the stairs. Denny glared at me when I slipped my gun from the holster clipped to my pants, but I ignored him and made my way slowly to the penthouse floor. When we emerged into the opening of the penthouse, I looked around and didn't see or hear anyone else. There was a small lobby which is where we were standing and two doors at either end of the hallway. I didn't know if they both led into the same room, but I figured the building was so rotted and gutted that it wouldn't really matter and opened the door to the one closet to me.

When nobody jumped out and attacked me, I moved further into the room and let my eyes adjust to the dark. I had a small flashlight on my key chain but wasn't ready to give my position away just yet. I was looking to see if I could see the glow of the black light under any of the doorways. There was no light, but I heard the dull noise of voices from behind a door I'd assumed was a closet.

I put my ear to the door and try to listen to what they were saying but I couldn't make out any specifics so I waved Denny over and whispered my plan.

He would stay in the main area in case anyone else came up for a visit, while I would head into the other room and do something I hadn't quite figured out exactly. The plan became a little more complicated when I opened the door and saw Mort Taylor and Emily Samuels turn a flashlight on us.

"Daddy?" she asked. "Did you bring the police?"

"Or investors?" Little Mort asked.

"Investors?" I asked. "I thought you were trying to avoid investors."

"You thought?" he said. "Maybe that was your first mistake."

Denny moved up beside me and tried to go for Emily, but I pushed myself in his way. I still didn't trust her or what was going on and I didn't want him to set anything off.

"Talk to me Emily. What's going on here? I thought you were in danger."

"This isn't about me, dad. Or you."

I was still on alert and looking around the rest of the room for other people, or other…anything. There didn't seem to be anyone else around, but I was still curious about the black light.

"Why are we here, Mort?" I asked. "There's no party."

"Who said anything about a party?"

"You've been leading us around like teenagers on a scavenger hunt," I said.

Then I pointed at Emily.

"And I think you're the one doing the leading."

She didn't try to deny it, and I give her credit for that.

"I guess you've done your part," she said. "By bringing attention to us and stuff."

Denny was finally able to move past my feeble attempts to block him and he ran to Emily. She cringed and pushed her dad away.

"Not here," she said. "Not right now."

"What are you trying to bring attention to?" Denny asked. "Why did you pretend to be in danger?"

"Why did you pretend to be a good father?"

I wasn't real comfortable with this turning into a father-daughter conflict moment. I was more comfortable with people trying to shoot or beat up each other. Not reconciliation.

"You don't strike me as a family counselor," I said to Little Mort. "What's your game?"

"I do indeed have an interest in this, but I'm not calling the shots."

"You brought us here tonight for a reason and I want to know what that reason is."

"Revenge and explanation," Emily said. "But mostly revenge."

Denny tried to hug his daughter again but she pushed him away again.

"Revenge against me, baby?"

"You knew. When she jumped."

"Knew what? I knew that she jumped, yes. We were both right there."

"I still have the dress with the blood on it," she said. "But you knew why she jumped."

"Honey, nobody knew why your mother jumped. She had some—"

"*She* knew why she jumped."

"Your mother was disturbed."

"I wonder why," Emily said. "Oh wait. No I don't. But I had to hear it from him, not my own father.

She pointed to Little Mort. He didn't look too comfortable with all of the focus suddenly on him.

"Oh, uh, I think you might want to rephrase that, Emily. It's not that—"

Denny lunged for Little Mort, but he easily sidestepped the emotional dive.

"What did you tell my daughter you little prick."

"I only told her what you failed to tell her. About her mother and my father."

"No," Denny said. "It's not what you think."

"She was raped the night before her wedding," Emily said. "And you don't think that *might* have had something to do with what she did."

"She was troubled before that."

"She didn't want to marry you," Emily said. "That's why she was up here."

"My father knew she was unhappy with her pending marriage and he found her here after the rehearsal and tried to seduce her."

"You don't know that," Denny said.

"But she tried to back out in the heat of the moment," Little Mort continued. "Unfortunately my father was used to getting what he wanted."

"And he raped her," Emily said, in case we weren't all smart enough to pick up on Little Mort's innuendo.

"Your mother didn't kill herself because she was raped," Denny said. "She was—"

"Don't you dare say she was disturbed again," Emily said. "But you're right, she didn't do it because she was raped and couldn't go on with her life. She did it out of revenge."

"She wanted to ruin my father and his hotel."

"And it worked. Look at this place. It's a dump and that's the way it should be forever."

"But the city is resurrecting," I said, "And with it, the old ruins are resurrecting and the secrets that were buried with them."

"It's all very Greek when you think about it," Little Mort said.

"So if this whole thing was about revenge," I continued. "Why are you two working together?"

"I'm not on my father's side," Little Mort said. "I found out what he did shortly after, and called him out on it. I worshipped my father and knew there had to be some valid explanation for his actions. But there wasn't."

"And he punished you for making him guilty?" I asked.

"He wrote me out of the will. So I was happy when this place failed and he lost all of his money."

"But there's a chance he could make it back on the Mayor's efforts to revitalize the Shelby-Wayne?"

"There's more than a chance. It's almost a certainty."

"Unless something horrible happens again," Emily said.

"What are you two planning?" I asked.

"It's her," Mort said. "She's got some whacked out ideas of revenge and symbolism and crap like that. I think it's mostly a lost cause and want to get her on board to take this to the mayor, but—"

"But what?" Denny asked. "What horrible things are you thinking Emily?"

"You knew about this when she jumped," Emily said, breaking from her father and Mort and moving to the broken out window on the far wall.

I could see where she was going once she said that, and I was on top of it in a split second, but she was already on the ledge.

"Two jumpers will ruin this place for good," she said.

Before I could even consider a speech to stop or delay her, she was out the window and Denny was screaming. Mort smacked his hands against his head and sighed.

"I told her this was the worst thing she could do," he said. "Two jumpers aren't going to ruin this place. They're going to make it famous."

I was too busy watching a pretty girl fall to her death to pay attention to anything else he said.

END

FUNERAL GAMES

by

WARREN BULL

Kansas City psychologist Warren Bull is the author of ***Abraham Lincoln for the Defense*** *(PublishAmerica 2003) a novel based on an actual murder trial that so intrigued Lincoln that he was still writing about it five years later. Resolution of the case solved one mystery but it created a greater question that remains unanswered to this day. Warren's award-winning short story, "****Beecher's Bibles****" is included in* ***Manhattan Mysteries*** *(KS Publishing, Inc. 2005.) He contributed a memoir to* ***Grab Your Tiger*** *authored by Kathy Schwadel (Keen Publications, 2007.) Warren has also published fiction and non-fiction in a number of places including* ***Amazon Shorts***, ***Great Mystery and Suspense***, ***Espressofiction.com***, ***Mysterical-E***, ***Kansas City Voices***, ***Crimeandsuspense.com***, *and* ***DownGoSun***. *We are thrilled to add* ***The Back Alley*** *to his list of credits, with his story* ***Funeral Games***.

Dead bodies don't look like they were ever living, breathing people. Even intact bodies, like those floating off Omaha Beach or frozen to the ground in the Ardennes Forest, looked less than human. Emaciated bodies stacked like firewood in a concentration camp looked like a nightmare of hell worse than any painting by Hieronymus Bosch. They didn't look human. I don't sleep much because every time I close my eyes I see dead bodies.

The body lying in my brother's mahogany casket resembled Denny, but it looked more like a wax museum figure. Its face was an unnatural shade of pink.

"Excuse me," said a man, putting his hand on my shoulder. "We need to talk."

I repressed the urge to slug him for touching me. I don't like to be touched. I looked up at him. He was matinee-idol-handsome with black hair and a thin moustache. His well-tailored suit made his broad shoulders look even wider than they actually were and only a hinted at the shoulder holster

underneath. I knew who he was. Behind him was an even bigger and younger man with auburn hair, who I also recognized.

"Let me buy you a cup of coffee," the man suggested.

I looked over at Denny's widow, Janie. Blond and statuesque, she looked lovely and vulnerable in black. I didn't want her to get upset so I allowed myself to be steered out of the funeral home to a nearby café. The man chose a table in the back of the busy café with a view out the side window. He sat with his back to the wall. The other man sat facing the window. I faced them.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked.

I'd seen his picture in the paper. Duke Palermo was a mobster. Bluebloods liked to have their pictures taken with him to impress their friends. He ran one of the bright lights on Broadway where you could satisfy any desire the deepest, darkest part of your psyche could dream up. Gambling, pornography, drugs, loans impossible to repay, prostitution with any gender and age - whatever your poison, Palermo would sell it to you.

"No, but I recognize Dynamite Malone." I turned to the younger man. "I saw you beat Terry Brown. I don't care what the official outcome was. The ref must have been paid off to give a long count to Brown in the third round and a short count to you in the sixth."

"I slipped," said Malone. "He missed me with an upper cut. I got tangled up in the ropes. The damn ref had to skip some numbers fast as he counted."

Palermo gritted his teeth.

"I thought he tagged you," I answered. "The ref started counting before you hit the canvas."

Malone said, "Maybe Brown tapped me, but I slipped."

Palermo cut in, "We didn't come here to discuss ancient history. We got business. My name is Duke Palermo. You might have heard of me."

He looked at me expectantly.

I shook my head no and looked over at Malone again.

"You beat Alfie Gonzales, too. You knocked him all around the ring for the whole fight. I know you didn't put him down, but he has a head like a bowling ball. He's never been knocked down. The judges must have been on the take."

Malone said, "You're right."

Palermo struck like a snake, backhanding Malone and leaving a red mark.

"I warned you," snarled Palermo. "When I want to talk business you keep your trap shut and watch out for trouble. You don't listen to the business. If some mug tries to talk to you, you ignore him. Now sit there like the dummy you are."

"You didn't need to do that," I said to Palermo.

"He never was an Einstein," said Palermo. "He took too many punches and now he's washed up in the fight game. He hasn't got the brains for honest work and I'm a sap enough to give him a job. But let's get down to business. I run a club on Broadway. I'm sorry about your brother. Everybody knows how he dodged Jap Zeros, became an ace and came home without a scratch. A year later, a stolen taxi flattens him. It's one thing to survive World War II. Staying alive these days in New York City is something else."

"Ironic," I replied.

"Did they ever find the driver?"

"No."

Palermo leaned toward me. "The thing is, your brother never got over the war. He needed excitement to feel alive."

"That's not me. I just want to be left alone."

"He gambled at my place. Sometimes he won big. Other times he lost a bundle. He didn't seem to care. I let it ride. It was good for business to have a big war hero in my joint. He added class and attracted the swells. Just before he died, your brother ran into a long losing streak. He was into me for five thousand dollars."

"I can give you the name of the attorney handling his estate, but I don't think he had much money."

"No shyster is going take a marker. Now that Denny's dead, he can't pay off the marker. My boss wants to know where that money will come from."

I nodded and sipped my coffee.

"In his memory, you could repay your brother's debt," said Palermo.

"It's not my debt," I answered. "In his memory, I could see that my sister-in-law is looked out for."

"I've met her," said Palermo. "I have to tell you, if you can't pay back your brother's debt, I wouldn't mind collecting it from her, one night at a time."

I dropped my hands to the chair and gripped hard to keep from smashing my fists into Palermo's face.

"Five thousand dollars is a lot to me, " I said. "I'm a janitor. To you it's just pocket change. And I thought you mob guys left families of civilians alone."

Palermo said, "Okay, I'll level with you. You're right. I take in more than five grand in profit on a good Saturday night and my boss wouldn't like it if I messed with your brother's widow. But I won't let it slide."

Palermo poked his finger into my chest. I had an urge to kick him in the nuts. "Your brother got under my skin. He acted like he was better than me. What did he have that I don't? He was a war hero, but I've been fighting all my life. I fought my way up out of the gutter. They don't hand out medals for that. The swells come to my place because it's the popular thing to do right now. Next week or next month they'll get bored and find a new thrill. I'll go back to being a bum in their eyes. But your brother could do no wrong. Rich guys, the mayor, maybe even the president would be happy to talk to him. He ran up a debt and he didn't worry about paying it back. He wasn't even scared of me."

Palermo's eyes bored into me. "You're just like him. I won't let him end up getting something over on me. One way or another, I will get even."

I sighed, realizing that he wasn't going to give it up.

"Give me a few days," I said. "Maybe I can come up with something."

"I know about you, too," said Palermo. "Another war hero."

Malone turned his head toward me. Palermo didn't notice.

"No," I said, "The real heroes didn't make it home. About my brother, though, he *was* better than you."

Palermo whipped out his pistol and pointed it between my eyes. The noise in the café diminished and then stopped. People stared at us.

"Are you going to shoot me?" I asked. "In front of all these witnesses? Go ahead. The mob would disown you for sheer stupidity. As pretty as you are, I bet in the prison shower room you'd always have your dance card full."

I raised my voice.

"The man with the gun is Duke Palermo. Remember and be ready to testify about it. Duke Palermo."

Palermo's hand shook. Slowly he returned the pistol to his holster.

"I'll see you later," hissed Palermo.

He stood up and walked out of the café without a backward glance. Malone gave me a worried look and hurried after him.

* * * * *

Lieutenant Randall looked me up late that night while I mopped the floor of the hallway outside the offices in the Acme Building.

"I heard about what happened," said Randall. "Palermo isn't as nuts as Bugsy Siegel, but he's dangerous. You might want to skip town for a while."

"Thanks for the advice, Lieutenant, but if I disappear he'll go after my sister-in-law, Janie. For her to be safe, I need him to focus on me."

"Luciano and Laskey won't like that he's bothering civilian family members, especially family members of a war hero." said Randall.

"You must know somebody who could clue them in."

"They won't do anything about it," warned Randall. "Palermo brings the rich in and he makes a mint for the mob. He's got a rotten temper. Someday he'll tromp on the wrong set of toes and get a visit from Murder Incorporated, but it won't be soon."

"I know, but it might help to get the word out."

"Anything else I can do for you?"

"Yes. Pull back the men you've got watching me and keep them far away from for a while. Captain O'Bannon is going to find out that you've got men on a stakeout when no crime has been committed. He'll be after your scalp. Even if they saw Palermo enter the building, what could they do?"

Randall frowned, but he nodded. "I talked to the detectives working on your brother's death and told them a snitch said it was murder. They're going to treat it that way from now on. One of the witnesses said the taxi waited until your brother was in the middle of the street before it ran the red light. We discounted her testimony at the time since nobody else saw it that way. I was never satisfied that we knew why the taxi was stolen and then just abandoned."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

I kept mopping. It wasn't long after he left that I heard Dynamite Malone doing a bad impression of a cat burglar. I walked up behind him and let the mop handle fall to the floor. Malone nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Were you looking for me?"

"You scared me out of ten year's growth," said Malone.

"Good. You're big enough already."

"You gotta get out of here. Palermo's coming and he's loaded for bear. I told him I'd come in first and soften you up for him, but he won't wait long."

"I know."

"I was too young to get into the war, but I appreciate what you and your brother did. I wanted to warn you about Palermo. You embarrassed him in the restaurant. He hates being shown up. He used to hate your brother, especially. I don't know why."

"The same reason he hates you," I said. I reached up and touched his chin with my fingers, moving his face from side to side to look at the bruises.

"He's been using you for a punching bag, hasn't he? My brother was real. You were a real contender. That's why he had my brother killed and why he ruined your boxing career. He's not a real man. He gets nervous and angry when he runs into one."

Malone looked puzzled. "How do you know he was the one who ruined my career?"

"The night before you fought Gonzales, did a woman come to your room and wear you out all night long?"

"How did you know that?"

"Put it together, Malone. Who made money when you lost those two bouts? A gambler. Who could fix a referee and judges? A mobster. Who could send you a woman to break your concentration and wear you out? A pimp. Who do you know that's a gambler, a mobster and a pimp who enjoys whacking you around and making fun of you?"

"I didn't do nothing to him," protested Malone.

"Neither did my brother, but Palermo had him killed. Neither did I, but when I didn't break out bawling after he pulled a gun, Palermo went ape, didn't he?"

Malone nodded.

"He said he'd kill you."

"I've spent the last couple of years getting shot at," I answered. "I'm still standing. Thanks for the warning. Now get out of here. You're a good kid. You shouldn't be hanging around with scum like Palermo."

"I'll leave if you do."

I shook my head. "He'd go after my sister-in-law, Janie, then. I have to stay and see it through. You need to get out."

"Yeah, get the hell out of my sight." Palermo stormed toward us. "Softening him up, dummy? After I finish off this jerk, I'm coming after you."

Palermo raised a fist to Malone. Malone chopped a short left into Palermo's ribs and knocked him into the wall. Palermo's head bounced off the wall and he staggered. Malone smashed Palermo's nose with a right cross. Palermo slammed into the wall again. His legs went out from under him and he slid down into a sitting position.

Palermo pulled his pistol and started firing. The first shot went wild. The second shot grazed Malone's skull leaving a long red welt just above his ear. Malone collapsed. Breathing heavily, Palermo stood up and took an unsteady step so he was standing over Malone. His hands shook as he fired all the bullets in the gun at Malone's fallen body. He pulled the trigger four times more, not noticing that the weapon was empty.

I moved quickly over to Malone and knelt by him. He was leaking blood, but he was still breathing.

"That son of a bitch was trying to kill me," whined Palermo.

"He did kill you," I said. "He kept knocking your head against the wall until your brains were like scrambled eggs."

Palermo looked confused. "When did he do that?"

"Right now," I said, rising. I grabbed him by the ears and rammed him nose-first into the wall. As he sat, dazed, I reached for the mop to unscrew the handle

A few minutes later, Malone groaned and opened his eyes.

"God that hurts," he said.

"Take it easy, kid. The ambulance is on its way."

"What about Palermo?"

I glanced at Palermo's crumpled remains.

"He won't need one. You got up off the canvas and finished him. That's why they call you Dynamite. When somebody hurts you, it just lights your fuse."

"Gee, I'm sorry I missed it."

"It wasn't much of a fight, really. A pretender can't do much against a real contender."

"Did I use my jab?"

"Yes. You kept him at arm's length with the jab. When he got close, you used the straight left and the right cross. He never laid a hand on you. You should have done that with Gonzales."

"Everybody tells me that. Do you think I could get a rematch?"

"Sure thing, kid. You can get another shot at Brown, too. You got a lot of heart. That will take you a long way."

Malone shuddered and grabbed my hand.

"I'm cold. Don't leave me alone. I'm scared."

"I'll stay with you as long as you want." I held his hand. The light went out of his eyes just before I heard the wail of the sirens in the distance. Lying in a heap, Malone's body didn't look like it had ever belonged to a human being.

Captain O'Bannon was mad that the building had been under surveillance and mad that the surveillance had been withdrawn. He questioned me himself, even though he was obviously out of practice.

"Tell me the story," he commanded.

He sounded like a spoiled brat demanding a bed time story so I obliged him with a fairy tale. I told him that I heard shouts and noises. Then I heard the shots. Being the cautious type, I waited a long time before I investigated. When I saw the men, I went to them to see if they were alive. One was still living, so I called the ambulance. Then I went back to see if I could do anything. I was upset and I didn't remember how many times I walked through the blood or what I touched.

How did a man being beaten to death pull a trigger? How did a man dying of gunshot wounds beat another man to death? Not being there, I didn't know. Why were Palermo's wallet and pockets empty except for two lead pennies? I didn't know. Did the Captain know how much money Palermo usually carried? I didn't. The Captain backed off that line of questioning immediately. He kept after me and after me, but he wasn't very good.

I knew the men. One was a boxer and the other pulled a gun on me earlier in the day trying to get me to pay my dead brother's gambling debt, but there was nothing to connect me with the crime. I had blood on my hands and clothes, of course. I had touched the men to see if they were alive. The ambulance attendants found me still holding Malone's hand. I had no bruises on my body. My knuckles were not scraped or swollen. Then I told the Captain the truth for a change: I didn't punch Palermo and I didn't shoot Malone. Although

he hated to do it, O'Bannon had to let me go the next morning. One good thing about the Captain having done the interview was that he could not blame Randall for the lack of results. I went home and slept for twenty-four hours.

Palermo's death was a three-day journalistic wonder. Some papers eulogized Palermo. Others declared Malone to be the hero. Some hinted darkly at conspiracies and unexplained mysteries. O'Bannon promised a clear solution to the puzzle, which, of course, he never delivered. I read all the papers. None of them mentioned me by name. One or two hinted there was a witness. The police refused to comment. One enterprising editor hired a lip reader who claimed O'Bannon muttered something about a '*damn mob jockey*' after one news conference. That set off a brief storm of speculation about fixed horse races. Nobody ever thought about a mop jockey.

When the police released the crime scene, I was the one who cleaned it up. Somehow it's always left to me to clean up the messes. When I was done, the floor and the wall were spotless. Just to be sure, I used nearly half a gallon of bleach cleaning the mop handle over and over again. Then I threw it in the garbage bin and got a new one. The handle had served me well, but you can't get sentimental about the tools of your trade.

I got a call from Janie a few weeks later. I arranged to meet her in the lobby of the Acme building at dusk.

"You're really all right?" she asked. "Is this where it happened?"

"I'm fine," I said. "It happened in this building, but not right here."

"I've been doing a lot of thinking," she said. "I loved Denny. I don't know if I'll ever love another man as much. But he's dead and I have to think about my future." She bit her lip. "I don't suppose you've thought about us."

I had, of course. I often dreamed about having sex with her and every time I woke up shivering, with a pounding headache. That is another reason I don't sleep much. Why was I still alive when so many men were dead? I didn't deserve to even touch her. I fought down the desire to rip her clothes off and fuck her right then on the floor.

"I have thought about us," I said. "I love you. I'll always love you, but to me you'll always be Denny's wife. Wherever we went, whatever we did, he'd always be there."

"That's what I thought. I'm glad you came into some money recently. I won't accept your five thousand dollars. I don't believe Denny ever loaned you

that much. He might have borrowed it from you, but he never would have saved that much money."

"Probably not," I admitted.

"You know that before I met Denny I was a …"

"…party girl," I finished for her.

"That's a nice way to put it," she said. She smiled. "You've always been nice to me. I'm not going to become a kindergarten teacher now. I'm going to get a job in a nightclub. I can sing and dance a little. Maybe if I work in a place like Palermo used to run, I'll meet some society swell who'll want to take care of me. Palermo used to check me out every time I went into his place with Denny. I didn't mind. It made me feel good. I flirted a little but was never unfaithful to Denny."

She paused.

"Are you disappointed?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I know how you felt about Denny. What happened was not your fault. As to what you want to do, it's a free country. I know. I fought to keep it that way. If that's what you really want, do it."

I watched her walk away. For a little while I could see her when she walked under streetlights and when headlights from passing cars illuminated her. She got smaller and harder to see. Then she disappeared into the darkness.

END

LAST WORDS

BY

MEGAN POWELL

*Megan Powell grew up in upstate New York, where the winters are long and filled with the heady joys of lake effect snow. She graduated from Bryn Mawr College with a major in History, and now has a job completely unrelated to classical Athens, medieval Britain, or traditional Chinese architecture. She lives in the western suburbs of Philadelphia with her husband Larry, two dogs, and two cats. She has two novels in print (**Vocation**, Double Dragon E-books, 2002; **Waxing**, Zumaya Publications, 2005), and literally dozens of short stories published in several genres. She is also the editor of the **Shred of Evidence Ezine**.*

Everybody dies. If you're careful and lucky it might take a while, but the curtain comes down eventually.

Most people leave a mark behind, even if it's only fleeting. Eleanor Rigby's funeral at least got Father McKenzie out of the house for the afternoon. If you're famous, people remember great works and/or great scandals. If you're loved, those closest to you remember all the little things.

People will also remember the way you died. Were you taken too soon? Did you linger too long? Was it tragic, fast, agonizing, unexpected, fated? How did you face death, if you had the opportunity to realize what was happening? How did you react, and what did you say?

Lisa Irwin said "*eggplant*."

* * * * *

Two days before her murder, Lisa Irwin walked into my office. She was in her early twenties, still in college or recently graduated with a degree in some liberal art. She carried herself proudly, not yet world-weary or genuinely cynical. Her hair was dark, pulled back from a pale face free of makeup except

for burgundy lipstick. She wore black pants and a black turtleneck and dark-rimmed glasses. In ten seconds I decided I could probably guess what books she read, what music she listened to and what causes she held dear.

I felt bad about that later. Nobody deserves to be sized up and written off so quickly. It didn't make me feel any better to know I was right, to find out that she'd been an English major with a concentration in Women's Studies, that she listened to Tori Amos and Ani DiFranco and the Indigo Girls, that she'd interned with nonprofits between semesters, that she adored Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison.

"Mr. Ogundana?" she said, and I offered her a seat. "I heard about you from your brother, and I thought maybe you could help me."

She probably thought that was a good opening, and it would have been except for the fact that my brother can charitably be described as a flake. That wasn't her fault any more than it was mine, so I resolved that if she wouldn't hold my relationship with Ekundayo against me I'd extend her the same courtesy.

"He's a friend of a friend, I just bumped into him a couple times," she continued. "My name's Lisa Irwin."

"Pleased to meet you."

Clients are nice and I figured this one couldn't have any serious problems. She was too young, too privileged, to have amassed any history. And I confess I was pleased to have an attractive young woman in my office, even if she was there to see me in a professional capacity. It took my mind off my mostly-ex-girlfriend, and Lisa Irwin was young enough to be a cute young thing but old enough that I didn't feel sketchy entertaining fantasies.

Not that I expected anything to come of our conversation, except maybe her hiring me for a couple days. But I like my fantasies to have some element of possibility, no matter how infinitesimal.

"I think someone may be stalking me," she said.

"Any idea who?"

She shook her head.

"I'm not even sure I should be worried. It's possible it's just a joke."

I made a disapproving noise.

"What sort of joke?"

"I've gotten some kinky e-mails," she shrugged, "and a couple that sound a little threatening. I think they're from the same person, but I can't be sure."

"Is it just cyber-stalking at this point?"

She hesitated, and I wondered how carefully she'd considered the possibility of a physical threat.

"I haven't seen anybody following me."

"Okay, that's good. The downside of modern technology is that you can be stalked by somebody half a world away. The upside is they're half a world away."

She smiled. It was a nice expression. She had good teeth, even enough to indicate orthodontic intervention, and free of smudged lipstick.

"Is there anybody close to home that might be doing this?"

"No one I can think of."

"No bitter ex-boyfriends?"

She shook her head.

"No bitter ex-girlfriends?"

A smile, and another shake of the head. I hoped it meant that she approved of my open-mindedness and not that she was a lesbian.

As I said, I like to be able to hope.

"Lascivious employers, inappropriately affectionate uncles, psycho fanboys from chatrooms?"

I was being flip. It wouldn't have changed anything if I'd acted differently, but I still wish I'd taken the matter more seriously from the beginning.

"Sorry. You've got to pound the pavement, literally or virtually," she grinned.

"Money for nothing's too much to hope for, I guess. Send me what you've got, and I'll see what I can turn up."

* * * * *

Hemingway defined courage as grace under pressure. I don't particularly care for Hemingway, but I've always liked that sentiment. It awards points for effort. Sometimes that's the best you can hope for, in a world where bad things happen to good people.

Two days after I met Lisa, I found the police outside her building. I couldn't get into the apartment, but it turned out I was on the list of people the

police wanted to question. At the same time I'd been coming to see Lisa Irwin, they'd found my business card on her dresser.

I had nothing to hide, aside from the fact that it was technically illegal for me to conduct my business without a license, so I didn't see any reason to resist an interview. No one answered my questions about Lisa, and as time dragged on that seemed more of a confirmation that she was hurt, possibly dead.

My business cards say I'm a consultant; that was my sister-in-law's idea. So, of course, I got a lot of questions about what sort of consulting I do. I played up the family connection: Lisa was a friend of my brother's, this was really just a favor, and so on. I outlined what little I knew about her stalker.

Talking to the police always makes me feel guilty, and in this case I was in the wrong as far as my P.I. license, or lack thereof, went. I felt far guiltier about the fact that something had happened to Lisa. I played through all sorts of scenarios, all the things I could have done differently to save her. Since I didn't have any details about what had actually happened, there were an awful lot of permutations to go through. It provided me with something to occupy my mind between rounds of good cop/bad cop.

I hadn't done anything to hurt her. I could account for my whereabouts for most of the morning. Unless something had happened very early or during a very narrow window, I was pretty much in the clear, barring paranoid conspiracy theories. So I couldn't distract myself from wondering about Lisa's situation by worrying about my own.

* * * * *

Dropping by Lisa Irwin's apartment the day after she hired me probably wasn't the most professional move I ever made. I didn't have any information for her about who might have sent the e-mails. My friend Hakim had so far contributed the expert opinion that AOL is evil, which wasn't especially useful.

But I wanted to be diligent. It was nice to have a client I didn't dislike, and I wanted her to feel like she was in good hands. At around six I called her work number and hung up on the voicemail system. She'd joked about long hours and other drawbacks of working for evil lawyers, but it was possible she'd left for the day. I didn't want to send her an e-mail, so I dialed her home number. Neither Lisa, voicemail nor answering machine picked up.

That struck me as somewhat odd, and I decided to use it as an excuse to see her in person.

As it turned out she was home, and buzzed me up without hesitation after I identified myself. In an effort to be professional I made a note of details, like the brick sitting next to the front door of her building.

Lisa smiled and invited me in. She was wearing another turtleneck, but this time her hair was down. She kept a nice apartment, small but furnished with care and a certain pizzazz. I guessed the landlord hadn't been the one to paint the walls green and purple. "Did you find anything out?"

"Nothing solid yet," I confessed. "My technical consultant thinks the stalker's using trial CDs from AOL, which he could have picked up anywhere. The e-mail accounts are owned by Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and Wile E. Coyote, who live in Springfield, East Buttfuck, Gotham, and Metropolis, respectively."

"Wile E. Coyote's good news, anyway."

I had the feeling her high spirits were a front. "Maybe you should ask the landlord to remind the other tenants it's dangerous to leave doors propped open."

"If anyone wanted to get in badly enough, he could smash the glass."

A valid point. I wondered how much time she'd spent considering that scenario. Did she think about it every day when she walked past the brick sitting on the sidewalk?

"Do you want something to drink? I don't actually have much time, but I don't want to be a bad hostess--"

"No, I'm fine." I knew how to take a hint. "I just wanted to give you an update."

I glanced around the room again, hoping for an inspired topic of discussion or a suave exit line. Instead, I saw an answering machine sitting on an end table next to her phone.

"You've turned your machine off?"

"Yeah. It was such a pain, every night it would be filled with telemarketers or annoying parents or--" She smiled, but the expression was off.

"Or what?"

She sat down on a dark purple couch.

"When I was in college I'd get obscene calls, especially around pledge time. We'd have contests in the dorm, rate the calls for lameness and physical impracticality, and rate the wittiness of our responses." She smiled faintly. "I

once told a guy I was wearing Wonder Woman underoos. That was a good night."

"When did the new calls start?"

"I don't even know for sure." She shrugged. "Every so often some jerk calls, or somebody hangs up after a few seconds. Maybe some of them are random crank calls or actual wrong numbers."

Or maybe one of the jerks had AOL accounts under cartoon aliases. "Do you have any of these calls on tape?"

"There's no tape. The chip gets wiped when you unplug it."

"And you've unplugged it."

Lisa nodded. "I guess that was a dumb move. But I didn't really think it was important. I mean, it wasn't anything definitive...."

But it was important enough that she didn't want to plug the answering machine back in. I could understand denial. "It might not be, but it's also possible that your stalker called."

So now we had phone records. At any rate, *somebody* had phone records. I somehow doubted that anyone would turn them over to an unlicensed private investigator who thought that maybe one of the callers might possibly be harassing his client. And I had a feeling that the police had enough actual crimes on their hands that they wouldn't prioritize a report like this too highly.

"First off, I'd like you to plug it back in." The words were barely out of my mouth before she complied. It was nice to be taken seriously. "Save anything that's even vaguely creepy. We might learn something. My technical consultant's watched *The Conversation* more times than any person should, and he'd love the opportunity to play Gene Hackman."

That earned me a smile, and I made a note to refresh my knowledge of 70s cinema.

"Do you remember when you got the other calls?"

"There was one last Friday, I think, and a hang-up yesterday...." Lisa shook her head.

"Think about it. Write down as much as you can remember," I said, "even if it seems dumb."

"Okay." She seemed more comfortable now that someone was telling her what to do. I was glad I could do at least that much for her, and that feeling lasted until she said: "How are we doing so far?"

Honesty isn't always the best policy, but I didn't trust my ability to talk convincingly out of my ass. "I have no idea. When I'm hired to find someone, I typically know who that person is."

She just nodded. "I know it's kind of unusual, but your brother said you'd do your best to help."

Ekundayo probably thought a little word-of-mouth advertising was just what I needed.

"I won't string you along if I don't think I can do any good," I promised. "And if we find anything that the police might take seriously, I really think you should go to them. Just in case this is more than a bored frat guy."

"Okay. Yeah. That sounds like good advice."

I was no longer comfortable as the font of all wisdom and knowledge. Before I could say anything, the buzzer sounded. Lisa crossed the room quickly, and after the masculine

"It's me" buzzed up her new visitor.

"His name's Nick Marsh," she told me. "We work together, and nothing else is the evil lawyer's business."

Of course she had a social life. Of course she and Nick Marsh would be discreet at work.

"No, it isn't."

Pretty clearly she didn't see me as fling or boyfriend material, and any sexual tension between us was completely one-sided.

That was fine. I hadn't really been under any illusions.

Nick Marsh turned out to be white, skinny, and blond. He might have benefited from braces as a kid but, despite my hindbrain's attempts to focus on his flaws, he wasn't bad looking. Lisa introduced me as "the man I mentioned the other day," so apparently she and Nick talked as well as...whatever else they did. In the elevator, I did my best not to speculate about those non-verbal activities.

* * * * *

Apparently I wasn't considered good suspect material. At least, the police didn't ask the type of questions I'd have asked someone I thought was guilty. Eventually the designated Good Cop told me that Lisa was dead.

I felt it in the gut, even though I barely knew her, even though I'd already come to the conclusion she was dead. There were pictures as further confirmation. It was difficult to resolve the dead body in the photos with my memory of the living woman I'd seen a day earlier.

She was mostly naked, covered in blood. I almost asked if she'd been raped or just killed, but stopped myself. "Just killed" was a ridiculous statement, and I assumed a rapist wouldn't bother pulling her underpants back up. Had he--and call me sexist, but when a semi-naked woman is sliced up with a sharp phallic symbol, I start thinking "he"--surprised her while she was changing? Forced her to undress? Or had she undressed for him willingly?

"Do you have any idea who could have done this?" Good Cop asked, and I shook my head. "Did she mention a boyfriend? An unhappy ex?"

"Not anyone dangerous," I said, reluctant to betray a secret Lisa had shared with me. Good Cop and Bad Cop had Nick Marsh's name--I'd categorized him as a concerned coworker--and could connect the dots on their own. Someone might already have established whether or not Marsh had been at work or otherwise alibied when Lisa was killed. But in any case, time was no longer of the essence.

I looked at the photographs more closely. Lisa's throat was cut, and stab wounds covered her chest and abdomen. Her hands and forearms were sliced up as well. Even without a background in forensics, I could recognize defensive wounds. Lisa had known she was in mortal danger, and she'd wanted to live.

I also recognized bruises on her arms and ribs. I frowned and looked more closely, not caring what Good Cop thought. The bruising I could see ran the spectrum of abused flesh, from pale yellow to dark black-and-blue, and it seemed that she must have collected minor injuries over the course of time. "You think she was in an abusive relationship?"

He shrugged, waiting for me to fill the silence.

Some people bruise more easily than others, and some people really do fall down stairs or walk into doors. Lisa Irwin had never seemed to be particularly clumsy.

For that matter, Lisa Irwin had never seemed particularly frightened. She'd been nervous about the stalker, nervous enough to hire me. But she'd done it calmly.

I'd seen the effects of physical abuse, and Lisa Irwin hadn't seemed to be suffering from them. Her body language had never said "victim." She'd never seemed skittish, never looked over her shoulder to see if she was being watched....

"What do you think?" Good Cop finally prompted.

"I don't know, but nothing seemed to be wrong."

"A battered women might believe she was at fault."

"I know. But she didn't seem guilty or scared."

"What does the word 'Eckland' mean to you?"

I shook my head.

"A name? A person or a business?" he persisted. "Is it close to something?"

"It's something Lisa said?"

He nodded. "Our witness isn't a hundred percent sure she heard it right. Someone else heard 'eggplant.'"

Misheard words and a bloody corpse; maybe the orangutan did it. It felt like Good Cop was grasping at straws, so I supposed Nick Marsh's alibi--not to mention mine--had checked out. But the word--"Eckland" or "eggplant" or whatever it had been--was important. It was the last thing Lisa Irwin had ever said.

I recalled reading somewhere that "shit" is the most common last word on cockpit voice recorders. If Lisa Irwin had said "shit," if she'd said anything that even vaguely sounded like "shit," Good Cop wouldn't have give it a second thought--last word or not, it would have been written off as irrelevant. That suddenly seemed like the saddest thing in the world.

"She worked for Eddelson, but that's probably not it," I said. Based on Good Cop's expression, he agreed. "Eckland" could be anyone or anything, and "eggplant" was just ridiculous. What, then? Something screamed by a dying woman in pain, heard by two people who were within earshot but didn't see anything. Strangers trying to make sense out of a couple muffled syllables.

I recalled dark purple upholstery.

* * * * *

"Mr. Ogundana? It's Nick Marsh."

"What can I do for you?" I tried not to think of what he and Lisa might have been doing last night, and tried even harder not to hold it against him. My involuntary celibacy wasn't his fault.

"I'm probably being silly," he said, and I sat up a little straighter in my chair. Sentences that begin like that don't usually lead anywhere good. "Lisa's not at work."

I glanced at the clock. It was quarter after ten.

"It's not like her. She'd have called in." He was making a valiant effort to hide the quaver in his voice, but I could tell he was upset. If he wasn't sincerely concerned, he deserved an Academy Award. "I left a message a little while ago, but she hasn't called back."

"Okay, try not to worry." I tried to take my own advice and failed. I did stop myself from demanding why he hadn't slept over. If someone else had been there, maybe this--whatever this might be--wouldn't have happened. "I'll go check out her apartment and make sure everything's all right."

* * * * *

"You think she really said 'eggplant'?"

I nodded. "It's utterly ridiculous. It's not a common word. Most people only say it in conjunction with 'parmesan.'"

"Then why would she say it while she was being stabbed?"

The bruises, the turtlenecks and Lisa Irwin's non-victim demeanor now added up. Unfortunately, none of it shed any light on who actually killed her.

"Talk to Nick Marsh."

"His alibi's better than yours."

For Lisa's sake, I was relieved to hear it. Bad enough to be murdered; how much worse to be murdered by someone you trusted? Surely Lisa would approve of me speaking up for him. "Ask him about their safe words."

"Safe words." I couldn't tell if Good Cop's skepticism was genuine or a professional put-on. For all I knew, they'd already asked Nick Marsh about the particulars of the bedroom. "This isn't a case of S&M gone bad."

A slit throat was a far cry from accidental death. I imagined how scared she must have been. And hated whoever had done that to her. "She was hurt--really hurt--and she wanted it to stop."

"So she yelled her safe word."

"Even though she knew it wouldn't do any good." Her choice of last words had been a little more unique than "shit," but ultimately there was no hidden meaning to the word "eggplant," no clue as to the identity of her killer. No significance at all.

Grace under pressure. What could be more graceful than using your final breath to identify your killer? I would have liked to imagine Lisa Irwin doing that. I would have liked to have that puzzle, would have liked to solve it and discover who needed to be punished. In a weird way it would have been like collaborating with her.

But it had been much simpler than that, and I had no right to feel disappointed, not after she'd fought so hard. Someone was hurting her, and she wanted him to stop. She wanted to live. There was no shame in that. She still deserved points for effort.

She deserved a hell of a lot more, and I wished I could have offered more than posthumous praise.

END

SAY YOUR PRAYERS

by

KEITH GILMAN

*Penn State's **Keith Gilman** is a cop who writes crime fiction. His stories have appeared in a variety of internet crime magazines including **Thuglit**, **Orchard Press Mysteries**, **Blazing Adventures Magazine** and **Demolition**. His flash fiction has appeared in **Muzzle Flash**, **Mouth Full Of Bullets**, and **Out of the Gutter Magazine**. He has stories coming soon to **Spinetingler Magazine**, **Mysterical-E**, and issue three of **The PulpPusher**. We are especially proud to include Keith's short story in this issue of **The Back Alley**, because his novel (working title **Father's Day**) recently won the Private Eye Writers of America/St. Martin's Best First PI Novel competition.*

The kid stood in front of the Family Market. He leaned against the wall, his arm propped on the brick ledge, his head just high enough to see through the tinted windows. His jeans were soiled with grease and hung off his narrow hips. His black T-shirt was torn, a patch of pale skin showing through. His sneakers were untied and his dark hair poked out from under a black hat. Even at fifteen, a pretty sloppy bandit.

His accomplice showed and together they tucked themselves behind a soda machine just outside the entrance. They shared a lit cigarette, each one taking a drag and placing it back on the brick ledge. It finally got too hot to handle and rolled like a firecracker onto the sidewalk. They both jumped at it, stepping on each other's toes trying to stomp it out.

The parking lot was filled with mini-vans and big sedans, little old ladies pushing rusty shopping carts through the automatic doors and loading their trunks full of groceries. The afternoon sun had already started its slow trip downward. The rush was on, housewives hurrying home, one step ahead of their husbands with the evening supper.

A woman in a short, black skirt pushed an overloaded cart into the lot. Her ten year old son towed the cart from the front. A bag of frozen french-fries fell out and she bent to pick it up. She raised the rear hatch of a brand new Mercedes. Her tight white sweater slid up, revealing the taught muscle of her midsection, the smooth, tanned skin. She had money written all over her.

"Hey lady, can we help you with those?"

A coy, knowing smile trickled over her lips. Her son scowled, defensive, the little man.

"Absolutely boys, I sure could use it."

They started loading the plastic bags, two at a time, into the truck. Her son eyed the boys suspiciously. It was a job normally reserved for him. He noticed his mother's purse in the cart, wedged between a gallon of milk and a box of tissues. It was a big brown leather job with handles that hung down like meat hooks.

The two bandits reached for the purse, almost split it in two, tearing through the parking lot, dodging cars across the busy street. They ran down the sidewalk like rabbits, wide-eyed, afraid to look over their shoulders, see who might be chasing them. They never thought it would be that kid.

* * * * *

Jack Sullivan swung his car door open and blocked the path of the two escaping thieves. He caught them in his arms and pinned them to the emerald green hood of his Chrysler convertible. He snatched the purse, lifted a monogrammed wallet off the top and pawed the bills inside.

"A nice catch, gentlemen. Keep up the good work. Another couple of dumb crooks."

The manager of the grocery store was outside now, comforting the young lady, with a hairy arm over her shoulder, holding her hand as though he was about to propose. They heard the sirens, just like Jack did, just like those boys did, the police coming fast and furious like it was the crime of the century.

The squad car came to a screeching halt, blocking the entrance to the Family Market. The wailing siren echoed and slowly died, its overhead lights still pulsating. A uniformed officer ran to the woman, replacing the shopkeepers arm with his own, while she pointed down the block, directly at Jack Sullivan.

The officer smoothed his dark mustache, straightened his hat and led the way. His blue shirt and pants didn't have a wrinkle on them. The gray tie lay flat against his chest, between a polished gold badge, nameplate and ribbons. The three of them marched down the middle of the street, like some half-ass posse.

Traffic was backing up behind the police car, customers waiting to get out of the lot and others waiting to get in. Somebody beeped their horn and others followed before they realized that the police weren't going anywhere, not until they were good and ready.

"Drop the purse, Jack."

"Are you going to shoot me, Bill, or is the gun just to scare me? Here are the culprits, caught red-handed."

"What happened here, Monica?"

She didn't answer. She brushed past them, reached for the purse and yanked it out of Jack's hand. Her light blond hair splashed against his cheek. Her movements were fast and she smelled like wild flowers. Jack never took his eyes off her.

"Take a picture, Jack. It'll last longer."

"Don't need one. Nothing I haven't seen before."

"Get in the back of that police car, boys, and I'll drive you home. I'll see you at home too, Monica."

She turned and walked away, back up the center of the street like she owned the whole town and everybody in it. She jumped in her car, looked in the rear-view mirror and applied a coat of thick red lipstick. She brushed her hair, lit a cigarette and sped off.

"You're not going to arrest them, Sgt. Lasher. Looks like I'll just have to make a citizen's arrest. I don't mind doing your job for you, not after all you've done for me."

"When did you get out, Jack?"

"Last night."

"And you came right back here."

"This is my home. At least it was until you sent me up."

"And you just happen to be here in your car while Monica was in there shopping?

"Strange coincidence, isn't it?"

"You plan on staying?"

"Haven't made up my mind yet."

"You staying with your mom?"

"You sound more and more like a cop, Bill, and less like an old friend."

"And you sound like an ex-con."

Jack folded his arms across his chest, lifted his face to the blazing afternoon sun, closed his eyes and felt its warmth.

"She could sure use my help over there. Things got sort of run down since I've been gone."

"I would have helped her, Jack. You know that. She wouldn't let me through the front door. That woman has a lot of hate in her."

"You can't blame her."

"She don't know the whole story. I had to lock you up, had no choice. Burglary is one thing. Murder is another."

"I didn't kill that woman, Bill, and you know it. Trevor lied through his teeth, left me to hang. My mother knows it too. There's only one person she hates more than you, even more than Trevor, and like I said, I don't blame her."

"Monica never did anything to hurt her, Jack."

"She didn't have to. She had other people do her dirty work for her, get her whatever she wanted, at any cost. She got you, didn't she?"

"She didn't want that to happen, Jack. It was my fault. We spent a lot of time together during the trial and one thing led to another."

"Save it. You two have done nothing but lie to me, tried to make an old lady believe her son is a killer, a woman who was more of a mother to you than your own flesh and blood. Now that I'm out, the truth may not be far behind."

Jack turned his back to him and swung the car door open. It scraped roughly against the high curb. He fell heavily into the driver's seat. His weight pulled the car down and anchored the door onto the concrete. Bill got a firm hold on the handle and lifted. He swung the door shut and leaned in.

"Keep your nose clean, Jack. I'll do what I can to help you, but I have a job to do and I take it seriously."

"I can see that."

"One more thing, Jack. Stay away from Monica."

* * * * *

Jack stopped at Sanko's Tavern on the way home. Ronny was behind the bar and his first cold beer in ten years was on the house. Dickie Meyers and Goldie Miller were in there too. They practically lived there.

Dickie was on disability from a truck accident. He lived about a block away. He limped down every day around noon and limped home to bed around ten. Ronny had given him a key to the place, let him open up if Ronny was running late.

Goldie inherited a ton of money from a father he never knew and planned on spending it, one dollar at a time, on draft beer and deviled eggs.

Ronny filled a frosted mug and slid it across the bar. Jack caught it in his left hand, a lit cigarette in his right.

"When did you get out?"

"Today."

"Welcome home."

"Thanks."

"How's your mom?"

"Haven't seen her yet."

"What are you waiting for?"

"What are you a fucking priest?"

"Just asking."

"Well don't."

"You want a piece of advice, Jack?"

"Not really."

"Get out of this town. There's nothing here for you, nothing but trouble. Too many bad memories, it'll poison you. If you ask me, Jack, say your good-byes and hit the road."

"Thanks but I didn't ask you."

Jack rolled off the stool and carried his glass over to the jukebox. The cigarette dangled loosely from his mouth. The blue smoke burned his eyes. He dropped in three quarters and pushed a few buttons. Sanko's was a place where you could still hear Elvis, Patsy Cline and old Motown shit like the Four Tops and Smokey Robinson. The place would never change. Ronny would burn it down before he'd let that happen.

"Rack 'em up, Jack."

He recognized the voice instantly.

"I didn't see you come in, Trevor."

"I come in here everyday. You haven't forgotten, have you?"

"Bad habits are hard to break, I guess."

"You should know. You spent a lot of time in here yourself. The beer is cold and Ronny takes care of us. Don't you Ronny?" he yelled over his shoulder. "The foods not bad either, better than what you've been eating lately."

"I ain't hungry. How'd you know I was back?"

"C'mon now Jack. You know the answer to that. Women like to gossip. The bigger the secret, the more they talk, especially my sister. She can't keep her mouth shut to save her life."

"Is that why you came over here, to pass on a message from Monica? Well, save it. I'm not listening."

"Actually Jack, I came to thank you. I appreciate what you did for me. I owe you."

"Can you give me back ten years of my life?"

Jack racked the balls and broke. The crack was like a pistol shot.

"If you're short on cash, Jack, need a loan or a job, I could help out."

"I can take care of myself."

Jack chalked the stick and studied the table. He kissed the three ball into the side pocket. He tapped the twelve and it rolled down the rail into the corner. He tried a bank shot, a shot he might have made ten years ago. The eight ball sailed toward the corner and stopped short. The cue ball scratched.

"You ought to get your floor leveled, Ronny."

"You ought to get your eyes examined," he shouted back

Jack raised the glass of beer to his lips before he realized it was empty.

"Keep it in mind, Jack. I can hook you up. Just say the word. I'll see ya."

He dropped a five on the bar on his way out the door. Jack put his glass on the bar and Ronny filled it.

"Do you got anything lined up, Jack," Goldie asked.

"Like what?"

"Like a job."

"I'm working on something."

"Oh yeah. What are you working on?"

"None of your fucking business. Why do I have to live in a town where someone takes a shit and everyone else can smell it?"

Jack took a swallow of beer, slammed the glass down and stomped out. Dusk had settled in, with a grayness that made him feel heavy, weighed down. He walked the three blocks to Dayton Road, past a long line of row homes with concrete stoops and wrought iron rails. His mother was sitting on the steps, waiting, watching him walk towards her with tears in her eyes.

Jack held her to his chest and helped her into the house. Her tears soaked the front of his shirt. She sat on the couch and wiped her eyes with a crumpled tissue. The cushion sagged under her. She straightened the slipcover over the frayed arm of the couch and blew her nose. Jack sat next to her.

"There's a pot of soup on the stove if you're hungry," she said, still fiddling with the loose threads.

"Are you kidding? I'm always hungry for your soup. The soup in prison is like dirty dishwater."

"Don't talk about it Jack. Don't even mention it. Let's just enjoy our time together, like it never happened."

"Ok, Mom."

Jack sat at the kitchen table and stirred the hot soup with a spoon. His mom pulled a paper towel off a roll, folded it in half and placed it next to his bowl. She sat in a crooked wooden chair, against the wall, her arms folded.

"You look great, Ma."

"I don't feel great. I'm sitting here all day waiting for you, been sitting here waiting for ten years and you wander in with beer on your breath."

"Don't start on me, Ma. You said we were supposed to enjoy ourselves."

She pulled herself slowly to her feet, turned the heat down on the stove and stood with her back to him, mixing the soup.

"Uncle Chet said you could work with him at the garage."

"I'll think about it."

"Think about it! What else you going to do?"

"I said, I'd think about it."

She dropped the ladle on the counter and it rattled onto the floor.

"Why did you come back here, Jack?"

"To see you, Ma."

"Just tell me you won't see her."

"I won't."

"She's no good, Jack. Promise me you'll stay away from her."

"She's married to Bill now. They got a kid."

"Promise me, Jack."

"I don't want nothing to do with her, Ma. I know what she is and I know what'll happen if I get mixed up with her again."

"Promise me!"

He put his bowl in the sink, wiped his face with the dishtowel on her shoulder, picked up the ladle and placed it gently on the counter.

"I promise."

* * * * *

He climbed the stairs and crawled into bed, drowsy from the mixture of warm soup and alcohol. Shadows crept across the windows. Headlights, coming up Valley Road, filtered through the trees. A car stopped outside. Its engine purred urgently. He saw Monica duck behind the hedge. He cringed on every creaking step on the way down.

"I had to come, Jack. I'm sorry."

"Won't Bill be worried if he wakes up and finds you gone? Or is he used to your disappearing acts by now."

"He's working. The boy's with Trevor."

"You left your son with Trevor? Are you crazy?"

"It was the only way."

"I wouldn't leave my dog with your brother, let alone my son. He's crazy. You know that."

"You didn't care about that when you two were robbing houses."

"What does one thing have to do with the other? You're as crazy as he is."

"Maybe I am a little crazy."

She moved closer. The darkness was thick around them. Jack smelled her sweet, cloying perfume, the booze on her breath. Her head rested on his chest, her arms around his waist.

He pushed her deeper into the bushes, hidden from the house and the road. The sharp branches scratched their skin. Her body was alive, moving, pulling him closer as though they could melt into one.

"Why couldn't you have stayed away, Jack?"

"You know why."

"If it's revenge you're after, forget it."

"You wouldn't understand, Monica."

"It can't be like it was."

"Why would I want it to? I was set up, Monica, spent ten years in prison. I'm just taking what's owed me. That's it."

"If I give you what you want, will you leave us alone, me and Bill, and the boy?"

"I don't think you have a choice."

Jack grabbed her by the arm and kissed her hard. Their teeth smashed together and he tasted blood. Her mouth was warm and wet. He pushed her to the ground and was on top of her. She never uttered a sound.

* * * * *

Chet's garage was down a narrow alley called Caitlan Court, sandwiched in a row of dilapidated garages. The wooden doors hung open, warped and dry-rotted. He stacked an odd assortment of folding chairs against the wall, where the old guys from the neighborhood sat and smoked.

Chet had an old Mustang up on the lift when Jack walked in.

"Glad you could make it, Jack. Fix yourself a cup of coffee."

"Thanks, Chet."

"You know Georgie and Fred, don't you?"

The two old men nodded in unison, nothing coming out of their mouths.

"Sure do. That's exactly where they were the last time I saw them."

They coaxed a weak laugh out of their toothless mouths and sipped their coffee, touching the mugs lightly to their lips like they were kissing a baby.

"Your mom asked me to keep an eye on you but you look like you can take pretty good care of yourself."

"Thanks."

Jack hadn't been there an hour, barely got his hands dirty, when a motorcycle thundered down the alley. Trevor parked a shiny new Harley in front of the garage, dropped the kickstand and stepped off the bike as though he'd been in the saddle all day. A black bandanna was tied around his head and hung down in the back like Indian braids. He wore tight black gloves and dark sunglasses that clung to his angular, reptilian face.

"You don't waste any time. Do you Trevor," Jack said.

"I stopped by the house. You weren't there. You're mom told me where you were."

"My mom wouldn't give you the time of day."

"I guess that depends on how you ask the question."

"Stay away from her. I'm warning you."

"I believe you were warned to stay away from Monica."

Chet stepped out with a double-barrel shotgun in his hand. He looked Trevor square in the eye.

"What's your business here?"

"Petey Johnstone wants to see Jack."

Chet didn't have anything to say about that. Petey Johnstone owned TNT Tire and was a silent partner in a dozen other businesses. He owned people too, like politicians, police chiefs and judges. He was President of the bank, the Chamber of Commerce and the church. He gave generously to local charities, a real solid citizen. Nobody sold so much as a cigarette in that town without a nickel landing in Petey's pocket.

"What if I don't want to see him?"

"I'm just the messenger."

"Is that all you do for Petey Johnstone--deliver messages?"

He didn't answer. He exposed a row of sharp white teeth, gunned the bike and rumbled away.

* * * * *

Jack shuffled through the showroom of TNT Tire like any other customer. The oily smell of new rubber was heavy like furniture polish. He poured himself a cup of coffee from the silver pot on the counter. Johnstone's office was upstairs. Petey would send one of his grease monkeys to escort him up.

He waited by the window, watched the cars roll in and out of the lot. He didn't have to wait very long. He saw Monica, moving toward her car in a thin yellow dress and heels. His appointment with Petey Johnstone suddenly had new meaning. Jack had seen that dress before. The sheer summer material clung to her skin, danced over her swaying hips and long lean legs. When the sun hit her just right, she was like a picture in a magazine. If she was wearing anything underneath, it wasn't much.

He caught her by the arm and led her behind a minivan with plenty tinted glass.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asked.

His grip tightened on her arm.

"I should ask you the same question."

"Do you ever give a straight answer, Monica?"

"I don't owe you any explanations."

"You got something going with Petey, don't you? He's just your type, just the type you'd set your sights on."

"Let go of my arm, Jack."

"You better be careful with Petey Johnstone. He doesn't fool around and he doesn't like to lose. You might be aiming a little over your head."

"You don't know anything about it and you wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"Petey's a good man, Jack. He helps people."

"At what price?"

"Does everything come with a price tag?"

"Usually does."

"I got a kid to think of, Jack. I want better for him and Petey can do that for me. How do you think Bill got his promotion? He'll be Chief someday. How do you think I send my son to private school? I could never afford it on my own. Try to see it my way. Talk to Petey. Listen to him."

"He can't buy me, not like he bought you."

"You think I like it? You think I like sneaking in and out the back door, like I'm keeping some big secret, when everyone knows what's going on anyway. I do it for my son, Jack, for our son."

"What are you talking about?"

"The boy is your son, Jack. I wanted to tell you while you were in prison, but I couldn't. Things were going so well with Bill. He's a good father to the boy, and with Petey's help, our future was set. I didn't know what the right thing to do was."

He pushed her harder than he wanted to, pinning her shoulders against the van.

"If you're lying to me..."

"I'm not, Jack. I swear."

* * * * *

Petey Johnstone's office was big. His desk was big. Leaning back in a padded leather chair, barking into the phone, Petey Johnstone was big.

He thrust a thick finger in Jack's direction, pointed at an empty chair. Jack sunk into the padded leather. A cigar smoldered in a crystal ashtray on the desk.

"I know you've already lost a lot of time, Mr. Sullivan, so I won't waste any more of it. It seems that you and I have some things in common. That's why I sent for you."

"If Monica set this up, I don't want anything to do with it."

"Listen first and think before you open your mouth. I do things for people. I also get things in return. It pays to get along with me, son."

"What do you want?"

"I want you to take care of a little problem, a problem for you, really, as much as for me."

"What are you talking about?"

"Not what...who. It's Trevor Kranick. He's out of control. He needs to be stopped."

"By stopped, you mean killed."

"I didn't say that, Jack."

"But you meant it. I'm not a murderer, Mr. Johnstone."

"What would you say, Jack, if someone betrayed you, someone close to you? And that someone was so bad, did things to little kids and old ladies, behaved like an animal, like a rabid dog, pure fucking evil? Tell me, Jack. What would you do? Even if that dog was once your pet, obedient, part of the family, and suddenly went crazy, turned on you, bit your fucking kid. Tell me, what would you do?"

"I don't know."

"I'll tell you what you'd do. You'd put him down."

"I don't know, Mr. Johnstone."

"You wouldn't just be doing me a favor. You'd be helping yourself. Shit, you'd be doing everyone a favor, the whole fucking human race."

He pointed that thick finger at him again, squinted up his hazy, bloodshot eyes. His dark eyebrows came together, forming a dense ridge across his brow.

"And if something should happen to Trevor, there'd be an opportunity for the right man."

"You know, Mr. Johnstone, my mother took me to church every Sunday. She prayed and cried and begged for God to save my poor soul. It never stuck, though. I was never much of a believer. But when I was locked up, I'll tell you, I said my prayers every night. Every fucking night, I sat on that cold steel bench, behind those iron bars, and prayed. I looked into that blackness, at all those cold, dead faces and prayed like I was back in church with my mother at my side.

"For a guy who had nothing, I asked for a lot of things. I wanted revenge mostly. And I kept hoping someone would come around, a guy like you, and give me a chance, a shot at making something of myself. Now, I'm staring at it in the face and I don't know what to say."

Petey pulled the dead cigar out of the ashtray and puffed it to life. The heavy blue smoke lay like a cloud over the cluttered desk.

"Think about it, Jack. You'd step right into Trevor's shoes." He shook his head in disgust. "Kid would have had it made if he kept his nose clean, kept his dick in his pants."

"Does Monica know about this?"

"Not exactly. She told me what Trevor did to her, his own fucking sister. She wouldn't have told me and not expected me to do something about it. All things considered, he's getting off easy."

"You'll hear from me, Mr. Johnstone."

"Jack...make it soon."

* * * * *

Jack stopped at Chet's, grabbed the shotgun from the bottom shelf. He broke it open, slid a shell into each barrel and snapped it shut. He didn't tell Chet where he was going and Chet didn't ask.

Trevor's motorcycle was at Sanko's. Jack pushed through the front door, the shotgun low behind his leg. Dickie was behind the bar and Goldie sat opposite him, nursing a bottle of beer. Trevor was leaning over the pool table with a stick in his hand.

Jack raised the shotgun. Trevor straightened up and pointed the pool cue at him.

"What are you going to do with that?" he asked.

"It's not for shooting pool, Trevor."

"Wait a second, Jack. Let's talk about this. If it's money you're after, you got it coming to you."

"It's not about money, Trevor. It's about you."

Trevor stepped to the edge of the table. His movements were slow and controlled.

"How about a drink first, for old times sake? A condemned man deserves one last drink."

Jack kept the gun at his back as they moved around the bar. Dickie and Goldie had disappeared. Jack pulled a bottle of Jack Daniels off the shelf and poured two shots.

Trevor raised his glass and Jack raised his.

"To good whiskey and good women...both taste better with age."

He swallowed the brown liquid in one quick gulp. Jack put the glass to his lips and drained it slowly. He never took his eyes off Trevor.

The whiskey wasn't even warm in his stomach when the door opened behind him. Jack turned and Trevor made his move.

He pulled a pistol and fired before Jack could bring the shotgun back on target. Jack dove behind the bar, the deafening blasts ringing in his ears.

Monica stood in the doorway, holding her son's hand, her eyes searching, desperate. A moment later, she was clutching her chest, as if she could dig the hot lead from her flesh.

Jack spun around with the shotgun, gave Trevor both barrels in the face. His head opened up like a smashed pumpkin.

Jack ran to Monica. He touched the side of her face. Her mascara ran in black, tear-streaked lines. He ran his hand through her hair, pushing it gently off her forehead. Bright red blood trickled from her open mouth.

That's when he heard the click, the sound of a hammer locking back. The boy had Trevor's gun, held it trembling in both hands. His face was a frozen mask of fear and hate. He stared in silence at the stranger in front of him, at the dark brooding eyes, not unlike his own.

He pulled the trigger, short choppy strokes with the same gun that had just killed his mother. He fired three times, each bullet finding its target.

Sergeant Bill Lasher was only seconds behind, seconds too late, coming through the door in his policeman's uniform, out of breath, as though he'd run

all the way. He saw the boy, the gun dangling in his fingertips, looking at it as if it was attached to him, some useless appendage with power he couldn't control.

Bill took the gun. He put his hand on the boy's head, gently mussed his hair as though he was petting a lost dog. He took the boy under his wing and led him outside. A gray, windy dusk had settled in. The boy went along with him, past the mutilated body of Trevor Kranick, past the bloody corpse of Jack Sullivan, past his mother, dead in the doorway of Sanko's Tavern.

END

A Good Enough Man For Any World: The 19th Century Roots of Hardboiled Detective Fiction

by

JESS NEVINS

Jess Nevins is fascinated with pop culture. He has written a history of Timely Comics - the progenitor of Marvel Comics. No less than Ed Gorman and Martin Greenburg - in their anthology ***The Deadly Bride and 21 of the Year's Finest Crime and Mystery Stories: Volume II*** *- have claimed that, "Jess Nevins's remarkable* ***The Encyclopedia of Fantastic Victoriana*** *(MonkeyBrain) had a wide scope but included more intelligent, knowledgeable, and sometimes iconoclastic history and criticism of 19th-century detective fiction than any book in memory." 'Nuff said.*

Like many genres, hardboiled detective fiction did not spring from one central source, but from many. Although it is largely accurate to say that hardboiled fiction arose as a reaction to both the devastation of World War One and the more cozy and artificial detective fiction of the early 20th century, this view slights the deeper literary roots of the genre.

Poe is usually credited with having created the detective story with his stories of C. Auguste Dupin, but the beginnings of the genre predate both Dupin and Poe. The beginnings of mystery fiction in America lie in the Gothic novel. The Gothic, which essentially began with Horace Walpole's ***The Castle of Otranto*** (1765), was extremely popular in the United Kingdom and Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The Gothic was a synthesis of a variety of elements, including the rise in Jacobinism, the philosophy of the rights of the individual, an increasing scholarly and popular interest in antiquity, and German popular literature. Gothic novels had a variety of common motifs and themes: one recurring plot device was of a protagonist (often female) pursuing a secret and uncovering its explanation—in other words, acting as an investigator. This

can be seen in Ann Radcliffe's ***The Mysteries of Udolpho*** (1794), among others, and particularly in William Godwin's ***The Adventures of Caleb Williams*** (1794), in which the novel's protagonist must discover the true identity of a murderer. The Gothic was both popular and influential, and numerous American Gothics were written in imitation, including Charles Brockden Brown's ***Wieland: The Transformation*** (1798). Poe was among those writers influenced by the Gothic, as can be seen in "***The Fall of the House of Usher***" and in the figure of Dupin himself.

The Gothic's decline in the 1820s coincided with the rise in prominence of the French policeman Eugène François Vidocq. Vidocq (1775-1857) was a French soldier who spent time in jail for various crimes as a young man. In 1809 he volunteered himself to the police as a plainclothes agent. In less than two years he was training new agents, and in 1812 he was put in command of the Brigade de La Sûreté, the security police of Paris. By 1824 Vidocq commanded dozens of detectives, and was responsible for several important reforms in French police work. His work for the police earned him a reputation in France, but what created his international reputation was the publication in 1828 and 1829 of his "autobiography," ***Mémoires de Vidocq*** (***Memoirs of Vidocq***, *or* ***Vidocq, the Police Spy***). The *Memoirs* is at least partially fictional and greatly exaggerated, but despite (or perhaps because) of this it was hugely successful. Vidocq presents himself as the all-knowing master of every situation, intimately familiar with the customs of the underworld, and surrounded by fools but nonetheless triumphing over criminals and seeing that justice is done. Vidocq's character in the ***Memoirs*** is self-congratulatory, boastful, and vain, but the French public was eager to believe that the Vidocq of the ***Memoirs*** was real, and Vidocq's name quickly became synonymous with brilliant police-work (and later, after his background was revealed, with the brilliant crook posing as a policeman).

Vidocq is usually credited with having an influence on the Great Detective tradition, most directly on Edgar Allan Poe's creation of C. Auguste Dupin. Vidocq provided the model for several fictional policemen, including Honoré de Balzac's Monsieur Vautrin, in ***Père Goriot*** (1834), and Lord Bulwer-Lytton's Monsieur Favart, in ***Night and Morning*** (1841), the novel which Poe reviewed in the same issue of *Graham's Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine* in which the

first Dupin story, "***The Murders in the Rue Morgue***," appeared. But Vidocq's influence on the hardboiled tradition, not just the Great Detective, should not be understated. The majority of the Great Detective characters are either armchair detectives, like Nero Wolfe, or perform as little hands-on investigation as possible, like Dupin and like Sherlock Holmes. This is not the case with Vidocq. While the ***Memoirs*** shows him to be brilliant and capable of inspired deductions, he is ultimately a creature of the streets of Paris, and so directly involves himself with criminals in the milieu of the streets in a way that Dupin or Holmes would not have been comfortable with. The streets Vidocq works are hard, unforgiving ones, with brutal and merciless criminals who require Vidocq to be as hard as the enemies he fights. And, like the hardboiled detectives of the 20th century, the Vidocq of the ***Memoirs*** is a hard man but one whose moral compass never wavers.

It was eventually proven that the *Memoirs* was less than completely accurate, and that Vidocq was as much a criminal as a policeman, but the image of the fictional Vidocq, of the brilliant detective of the streets, had staying power, and inspired authors as different as Balzac and William Burrows, Andrew Forrester Jr., and the other casebook authors. Some of these authors published detective fiction in American magazines before Poe. The first appearances of the professional crime-solver in American mystery fiction appeared in the 1830s in magazines like *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* and *Graham's Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine*. Dupin was preceded by characters like Mr. and Mrs. L_____, a policeman and his wife, in William Burton's "***The Secret Cell***" (*Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, September, 1837). These stories cannot accurately be described as mysteries, as they lack many of the elements which make up the mystery story proper, including a focus on the solving of the crime, a focus on the crime solver, and a plot designed to keep the reader unsure about the identity of the criminal. But these stories do portray (usually as part of a larger story) a law enforcement official investigating a crime and apprehending the criminal. The law enforcement official is portrayed as a Vidocq-like character, pursuing criminals and the solution to a crime through an urban milieu fraught with conflicts based on class, race, ethnicity, religion, sex and economics. Although these portrayals of urban life were considerably sanitized, they nonetheless were accurate in their portrayals of the cities, and predate by a decade the more wide-ranging, graphic, and

better-publicized social critiques of the 1840s, including Eugène Sue's ***The Mysteries of Paris*** (1842-1843) and George Lippard's ***The Quaker City*** (1844-1845).

Dupin's influence was gradual and diffuse rather than direct and immediate, and there were relatively few American detective stories or novels published in the decades after Poe's death. In England this was not the case. A common perception of English detective fiction is that the years between 1845, the last appearance of Poe's Dupin, and 1887, when Sherlock Holmes debuted, were fallow ones, enlivened mainly by the appearances of Charles Dickens' Inspector Bucket (in ***Bleak House,*** 1852-1853) and Wilkie Collins' Sergeant Cuff (***The Moonstone***, 1868). But there was actually a substantial amount of detective fiction published during these decades. The dominant form of mystery fiction was the "casebook" story, stories originally appearing in magazines which were then published in collections known as "casebooks."

The casebook mysteries can be thought of as precursors to modern police procedurals. The casebooks are partially or entirely fictional portrayals of police work, usually told in the first person, with a significant amount of accurate details of contemporary policing and a focus on realistic plots and characters. More significantly for later writers, the casebook detectives were street-oriented characters. There was little if anything of the Great Detective in them, none of the superhuman deductive skills of a Dupin or the mastery of the underworld of a Vidocq. The casebook detectives were policemen with realistic skills and backgrounds, living in an environment which the contemporary reading audience could identify as existing outside their windows. Too, because the casebook mysteries were written for a lower-class audience and were neither seen as literature nor expected to abide by the proprieties applied to more respectable genres, the casebook detectives were allowed to have attitudes which would not have been acceptable in more elevated fiction. The casebook authors were also allowed to include in their fiction the harsher realities of life usually left out of mainstream fiction or referred to only obliquely. The casebook detectives were hardened, cynical men and women who were continuously exposed to the worst of Victorian society and who knew that whatever victories they won over crime would be short-lived. These attitudes develop over time. The first casebook detective, William Russell's Thomas

Waters, is more of a middle-class creation than later casebook detectives, but there was a continuity of attitudes across the genre that today are identified with the hardboiled detectives. Similarly, the casebook mysteries more openly display their awareness of the tragic realities of street-level life during the Victorian era. While the casebook detectives could never become completely hardboiled in the modern sense, because of their essentially Victorian origins and because of the Victorian restrictions on what could and could not be published, the casebook detectives come close. There are the mean streets down which the detectives must go. There is the detective him- or herself, the only light of goodness, however dim and tarnished, in an otherwise heartless world. There is corruption, both on the street and in "society." There is the detective's code of honor, which cannot be bought and is never sold. And there is always violence, directed to and by the detective.

Like the hard-boiled detectives, the casebook detectives are not respectable by middle-class standards, and if necessary are willing to sacrifice legality for justice. The world of the casebook detectives is at least as corrupt and blighted as the hard-boiled detectives. The atmosphere of the casebook mysteries is one of violence, corrupt behavior by those in power, and a barely-contained breakdown in the social order. The casebook detectives are policemen, not private detectives, but their alienation from society because of their lowered social standing is almost as severe as that of the hard-boiled detective, and when the casebook detectives are on a case they generally work by themselves, like the hard-boiled detectives.

The casebook genre began in 1849, when William Russell's "***Recollections of a Police Officer***" series began in *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*. This series was immediately popular, and numerous imitators followed, both in England and in America, where the casebook collections were popular and frequently reprinted. The casebook mysteries flourished over the next two decades, acting as a lower-class counterpart to the sensation novel, and did not disappear until after the demise of the sensation genre in the early 1870s. By the early 1870s the casebook audience's tastes and expectations had changed. Casebook mysteries were intended for the lower classes but were consumed by the middle class, who enjoyed the casebooks' portrayal of street crime and street policing. But the sensation novels had conditioned the middle-class reading audience to accept

that crime was a part of bourgeois life, and that the police who investigated those crimes were safe and respectable. During the 1870s detectives and mysteries appeared in many popular novels and middle-class magazines, nearly all better written than the casebook mysteries. The casebook writers found their market dwindling and began writing other genres. In the farther reaches of the Empire, however, the casebook genre lingered, so that as late as 1885 a casebook collection, ***Revelations of an Indian Detective***, by "R. Reid, Superintendent, Calcutta Detective Dept," could appear and sell well in Calcutta.

The casebooks' effect on American writers was mixed. By the 1860s the casebook genre was the dominant one among American mystery writers. Even after the dime novel replaced the casebook (or "novelette") as the primary location for mystery stories, the effects of the casebook genre lingered. The names "Waters" (William Russell's pseudonym) and "Tom Fox" (the pseudonym of another popular casebook author) were used as pseudonyms by dime novel detective authors, with the expectation on the publishers' and authors' part that their audience would be aware of the casebook characters and would associate the dime novel detectives with those characters. However, the content and tone of American dime novel mysteries was not as consistent as that of the casebooks and in fact varied significantly.

During the 1860s, following the appearance of the first true dime novel, Mrs. Ann S. Stephens' "***Maleaska, the Indian Wife of the White Hunt***" (*Beadle's Dime Novels*, June 9, 1860), the dime novel detectives began to vary in type. Some were close to Vidocq and the casebook detectives, while others were the clean, chivalrous, and middle class detectives who would later become the stereotype of the dime novel detectives. The societal (if not legal) restrictions on the dime novels were greater than those on the casebooks, and the dime novels could never duplicate the casebooks' portrayal of the realities of poverty and street-level crime. The dime novel publishers paid less than the casebook publishers and attracted less talented writers who were less capable of expressing moral outrage and less interested in doing so. But some of the dime novel mysteries of these years do approach the casebooks in their content and tone. Matters became much more complicated in the 1870s and 1880s, when a

number of competing versions of private detectives, hardboiled and not, were offered to readers.

Although there were independent private detectives not aligned with or employed by a larger company in England beginning in the 1850s, they had no American counterparts until after the end of the American Civil War. While the Pinkerton National Detective Agency had been active as a corporate agency since 1850, independent private detectives began appearing in 1866 and became increasingly common in the 1870s. These men and women were common in cities along the eastern seaboard and as far west as Chicago, and were written about in the newspapers of the time. Both writers and readers of mystery and detective fiction were exposed to the realities of private detectives and detecting. As is the case today, there was a degree of societal disapproval of private detectives, especially female private detectives, but they were also respected for their ability to apprehend criminals and to survive, and thrive, while operating in the criminal milieu. Too, private detectives were described by newspapers and by attorneys in a variety of ways from seedy to courageous, but at all times as real people, rather than one- or two-dimensional characters. In the 1880s, as private detectives became more common their appearance in newspapers became correspondingly more frequent, so that by the 1890s private detectives, including female private detectives, were no longer unusual or even remarkable.

However, as this was taking place another version of the private detective was being offered to the reading public. The Pinkerton Agency had been active under varying names since 1850, but they came to the attention of the public at large in the 1870s. Allan Pinkerton, the founder of the Agency, published three books about the Pinkerton detectives**:** ***The Gypsies and the Detectives*** (1872), ***The Expressman and the Detective*** (1875), and ***The Molly Maguires and the Detectives*** (1877). These sold well and brought the Agency a great deal of attention. The version of the detective which Pinkerton and the newspapers portrayed was of men braver than the ordinary private detective, more moral, and above all more efficient, with Pinkerton himself being portrayed as a brilliant, Great Detective-like figure. Like ordinary private detectives, the Pinkerton detectives were portrayed as walking mean streets and holding onto a set of morals, but they were also portrayed as larger than life figures, quite unlike the way independent real private detectives were portrayed.

Although the independent private detectives were familiar figures in newspapers, if not personally familiar to most Americans, the version of the private detective which Americans chose to embrace, and which became the dominant one in fiction, was Pinkerton's. Part of this was due to the impulse of genre readers to embrace the heroic over the mundane, an impulse no less common today. But a larger part of it was undoubtedly due to the class and regional conflicts being played out in the American west.

The 1870s were a time of significant social unrest. The conflicts between workers and management turned vicious, with strikes by Pennsylvania coal miners in 1873 and 1874 and by railway workers in 1877, both of which led to violent and bloody repressions by management. Labor conflicts in the Reconstruction South were even more charged, tied in as they were with ongoing racial and political conflicts. Relations between labor and capital were extremely bitter. Conservative defenders of the establishment used newspapers to claim that criminals like Frank and Jesse James were caused by labor unrest, while liberal newspapers portrayed criminals as heroes of folklore, with the James brothers specifically compared to Robin Hood's men. Likewise, the Pinkerton detectives who broke strikes, assaulted and helped imprison strikers, and worked on behalf of management were portrayed heroically in conservative newspapers and as villains in the liberal press.

The general public was more persuaded by the conservative than the liberal press, and the conservative press' portrayals became the ones accepted by the public. Detective writers adopted this position, so that the majority of the detectives of the 1870s and 1880s, in both dime novels and mainstream mystery fiction, followed the model of the Pinkertons rather than the casebooks. The first recurring dime novel detective was Harlan P. Halsey's Old Sleuth, who debuted in *The Fireside Companion* in 1872. The Old Sleuth is well-educated, chivalrous, married with children, and lives in a posh section of New York City—in other words, he is a middle-class fantasy of a detective, rather than the casebooks' imagining of a lower-class detective. The major dime novel detectives who followed Old Sleuth, including William I. James, Jr.'s Old Cap. Collier, and Francis Worcester Doughty's Old King Brady, imitated Old Sleuth in being idealized creations meant for a middle class audience and emulating the

uncomplicated Pinkertons' portrayal. These detectives were highly moral and lacked the hardboiled attitude of the casebook detectives, and inhabited cleaner, brighter, and more hopeful worlds than those of the casebook detectives. As detective fiction became more common in mainstream publishing, this approach was adopted, with Mrs. Metta Victoria Fuller Victor's ***The Dead Letter*** (1866) and Anna Katherine Green's ***The Leavenworth Case*** (1878) leading the way.

But dime novels also hosted a response to this trend. The Robin Hood-like outlaw hero character began appearing and became surprisingly popular. These characters, including Deadwood Dick and Frank and Jesse James, were the heroes of their own series of dime novels. In these stories they were portrayed as outlaws who robbed and deliberately broke the law but who also fought corrupt businessmen and financiers and were supported in their fight by the residents of frontier communities. These stories were explicit in their opposition to representatives of capital and the establishment and in their support for the working classes, including striking coal miners. The worlds these characters inhabited, usually rural and frontier but more than occasionally urban, were simple in the dime novel fashion but also more inclined to portray the more unpleasant realities than were mainstream detective novels. And when dime novel detectives appeared in these stories, as Old King Brady did in his thirty-one stories in pursuit of the James Brothers, the detectives are forced to confront concepts like corruption in government and society—concepts which never appeared in the dime novel detectives' own stories.

The popularity of the outlaw hero characters led to what literary and cultural critics have called a "moral panic" on the part of the establishment, including numerous alarmist articles in the Eastern press. In 1883 the Postmaster General, Walter Gresham, ordered the cancellation of the dime novel in which the Frank and Jesse James stories appeared. This action caused the dime novel publishers to change the content of their stories, so that the outlaw heroes became more conventional, part of the middle class, and suddenly lacking awareness of labor issues and sympathies for the producing classes.

Only a few years later Nick Carter (1886) appeared, and then Sherlock Holmes (1887), and they set the model for the heroes who followed them. The casebook's portrayal of the more grim aspects of urban life continued to appear,

in a much diminished and even sanitized form, in dime novel stories, but in most other respects the realism of the casebooks disappeared. In mainstream detective fiction Anna Katherine Green was the model to be imitated. ***The Leavenworth Case*** was one of American fiction's first bestsellers, and made Green's career and won for her the (technically inaccurate) title of "the Mother of Detective Fiction.." It also provided the model for mainstream American detective fiction in the 1880s. Green was influenced by the Monsieur Lecoq novels of Emile Gaboriau, and in turn influenced American authors and was the primary model for mainstream detective fiction until the appearance of Sherlock Holmes. After the appearance of Holmes both dime novels and mainstream mysteries reached the mannered, artificial fossilization which Chandler decried in "*The Simple Art of Murder*" and which the hardboiled detectives of the pulps were a movement against. Chandler and the other hardboiled authors drew inspiration for their style and content from many sources, even those, like the casebooks, which they were unaware of.

McTEAGUE

BY

FRANK NORRIS

Classic Noir

Frank Norris was a naturalistic writer of the very late nineteenth century, who produced some of the darkest, hardest-edged prose of his day. ***McTeague*** *is, perhaps, his best-known work, if only because it was the foundation for the infamous Erich von Stroheim silent film* ***Greed****. Largely inspired by the novels of Emile Zola and the scientific work of Charles Darwin, much of Norris's literary work focused on the efforts of ordinary men to conquer - or at least control - the raging beast within. McTeague, the story of an ill-fated love triangle in nineteenth century San Francisco, is still considered to be one of the great American classics, ranking up there with the works of Theodore Dreiser and William Faulkner. How great an author Norris might have become in the fullness of time we will never know, as he died in 1902, just three years after publishing* ***McTeague****, at the very young age of thirty-two.*

The Back Alley *will serialize* ***McTeague*** *over the next seven issues, and will include articles by scholars who focus on the work of Frank Norris to help the reader understand and appreciate this very early example of naturalistically noir fiction.*

CHAPTER ONE

It was Sunday, and, according to his custom on that day, McTeague took his dinner at two in the afternoon at the car conductors' coffee-joint on Polk Street. He had a thick gray soup; heavy, underdone meat, very hot, on a cold plate; two kinds of vegetables; and a sort of suet pudding, full of strong butter and sugar. On his way back to his office, one block above, he stopped at Joe Frenna's saloon and bought a pitcher of steam beer. It was his habit to leave the pitcher there on his way to dinner.

Once in his office, or, as he called it on his signboard, "Dental Parlors," he took off his coat and shoes, unbuttoned his vest, and, having crammed his little stove full of coke, lay back in his operating chair at the bay window, reading the paper, drinking his beer, and smoking his huge porcelain pipe while his food digested; crop-full, stupid, and warm. By and by, gorged with steam beer, and overcome by the heat of the room, the cheap tobacco, and the effects of his heavy meal, he dropped off to sleep. Late in the afternoon his canary bird, in its gilt cage just over his head, began to sing. He woke slowly, finished the rest of his beer -- very flat and stale by this time -- and taking down his concertina from the bookcase, where in week days it kept the company of seven volumes of "Allen's Practical Dentist," played upon it some half-dozen very mournful airs.

McTeague looked forward to these Sunday afternoons as a period of relaxation and enjoyment. He invariably spent them in the same fashion. These were his only pleasures -- to eat, to smoke, to sleep, and to play upon his concertina.

The six lugubrious airs that he knew, always carried him back to the time when he was a car-boy at the Big Dipper Mine in Placer County, ten years before. He remembered the years he had spent there trundling the heavy cars of ore in and out of the tunnel under the direction of his father. For thirteen days of each fortnight his father was a steady, hard-working shift-boss of the mine. Every other Sunday he became an irresponsible animal, a beast, a brute, crazy with alcohol.

McTeague remembered his mother, too, who, with the help of the Chinaman, cooked for forty miners. She was an overworked drudge, fiery and energetic for all that, filled with the one idea of having her son rise in life and enter a profession. The chance had come at last when the father died, corroded with alcohol, collapsing in a few hours. Two or three years later a travelling dentist visited the mine and put up his tent near the bunk-house. He was more or less of a charlatan, but he fired Mrs. McTeague's ambition, and young McTeague went away with him to learn his profession. He had learnt it after a fashion, mostly by watching the charlatan operate. He had read many of the necessary books, but he was too hopelessly stupid to get much benefit from them.

Then one day at San Francisco had come the news of his mother's death; she had left him some money -- not much, but enough to set him up in business; so he had cut loose from the charlatan and had opened his "Dental Parlors" on Polk Street, an "accommodation street" of small shops in the residence quarter of the

town. Here he had slowly collected a clientele of butcher boys, shop girls, drug clerks, and car conductors. He made but few acquaintances. Polk Street called him the "Doctor" and spoke of his enormous strength. For McTeague was a young giant, carrying his huge shock of blond hair six feet three inches from the ground; moving his immense limbs, heavy with ropes of muscle, slowly, ponderously. His hands were enormous, red, and covered with a fell of stiff yellow hair; they were hard as wooden mallets, strong as vises, the hands of the old-time car-boy. Often he dispensed with forceps and extracted a refractory tooth with his thumb and finger. His head was square-cut, angular; the jaw salient, like that of the carnivora.

McTeague's mind was as his body, heavy, slow to act, sluggish. Yet there was nothing vicious about the man. Altogether he suggested the draught horse, immensely strong, stupid, docile, obedient.

When he opened his "Dental Parlors," he felt that his life was a success, that he could hope for nothing better. In spite of the name, there was but one room. It was a corner room on the second floor over the branch post-office, and faced the street. McTeague made it do for a bedroom as well, sleeping on the big bed-lounge against the wall opposite the window. There was a washstand behind the screen in the corner where he manufactured his moulds. In the round bay window were his operating chair, his dental engine, and the movable rack on which he laid out his instruments. Three chairs, a bargain at the second-hand store, ranged themselves against the wall with military precision underneath a steel engraving of the court of Lorenzo de' Medici, which he had bought because there were a great many figures in it for the money. Over the bed-lounge hung a rifle manufacturer's advertisement calendar which he never used. The other ornaments were a small marble-topped centre table covered with back numbers of "The American System of Dentistry," a stone pug dog sitting before the little stove, and a thermometer. A stand of shelves occupied one corner, filled with the seven volumes of "Allen's Practical Dentist." On the top shelf McTeague kept his concertina and a bag of bird seed for the canary. The whole place exhaled a mingled odor of bedding, creosote, and ether.

But for one thing, McTeague would have been perfectly contented. Just outside his window was his signboard -- a modest affair -- that read: "Doctor McTeague. Dental Parlors. Gas Given"; but that was all. It was his ambition, his dream, to have projecting from that corner window a huge gilded tooth, a molar with enormous prongs, something gorgeous and attractive. He would have it

some day, on that he was resolved; but as yet such a thing was far beyond his means.

When he had finished the last of his beer, McTeague slowly wiped his lips and huge yellow mustache with the side of his hand. Bull-like, he heaved himself laboriously up, and, going to the window, stood looking down into the street.

The street never failed to interest him. It was one of those cross streets peculiar to Western cities, situated in the heart of the residence quarter, but occupied by small tradespeople who lived in the rooms above their shops. There were corner drug stores with huge jars of red, yellow, and green liquids in their windows, very brave and gay; stationers' stores, where illustrated weeklies were tacked upon bulletin boards; barber shops with cigar stands in their vestibules; sad-looking plumbers' offices; cheap restaurants, in whose windows one saw piles of unopened oysters weighted down by cubes of ice, and china pigs and cows knee deep in layers of white beans. At one end of the street McTeague could see the huge power-house of the cable line. Immediately opposite him was a great market; while farther on, over the chimney stacks of the intervening houses, the glass roof of some huge public baths glittered like crystal in the afternoon sun. Underneath him the branch post-office was opening its doors, as was its custom between two and three o'clock on Sunday afternoons. An acrid odor of ink rose upward to him. Occasionally a cable car passed, trundling heavily, with a strident whirring of jostled glass windows.

On week days the street was very lively. It woke to its work about seven o'clock, at the time when the newsboys made their appearance together with the day laborers. The laborers went trudging past in a straggling file -- plumbers' apprentices, their pockets stuffed with sections of lead pipe, tweezers, and pliers; carpenters, carrying nothing but their little pasteboard lunch baskets painted to imitate leather; gangs of street workers, their overalls soiled with yellow clay, their picks and long-handled shovels over their shoulders; plasterers, spotted with lime from head to foot. This little army of workers, tramping steadily in one direction, met and mingled with other toilers of a different description -- conductors and "swing men" of the cable company going on duty; heavy-eyed night clerks from the drug stores on their way home to sleep; roundsmen returning to the precinct police station to make their night report, and Chinese market gardeners teetering past under their heavy baskets. The cable cars began

to fill up; all along the street could be seen the shopkeepers taking down their shutters.

Between seven and eight the street breakfasted. Now and then a waiter from one of the cheap restaurants crossed from one sidewalk to the other, balancing on one palm a tray covered with a napkin. Everywhere was the smell of coffee and of frying steaks. A little later, following in the path of the day laborers, came the clerks and shop girls, dressed with a certain cheap smartness, always in a hurry, glancing apprehensively at the power-house clock. Their employers followed an hour or so later -- on the cable cars for the most part whiskered gentlemen with huge stomachs, reading the morning papers with great gravity; bank cashiers and insurance clerks with flowers in their buttonholes.

At the same time the school children invaded the street, filling the air with a clamor of shrill voices, stopping at the stationers' shops, or idling a moment in the doorways of the candy stores. For over half an hour they held possession of the sidewalks, then suddenly disappeared, leaving behind one or two stragglers who hurried along with great strides of their little thin legs, very anxious and preoccupied.

Towards eleven o'clock the ladies from the great avenue a block above Polk Street made their appearance, promenading the sidewalks leisurely, deliberately. They were at their morning's marketing. They were handsome women, beautifully dressed. They knew by name their butchers and grocers and vegetable men. From his window McTeague saw them in front of the stalls, gloved and veiled and daintily shod, the subservient provision men at their elbows, scribbling hastily in the order books. They all seemed to know one another, these grand ladies from the fashionable avenue. Meetings took place here and there; a conversation was begun; others arrived; groups were formed; little impromptu receptions were held before the chopping blocks of butchers' stalls, or on the sidewalk, around boxes of berries and fruit.

From noon to evening the population of the street was of a mixed character. The street was busiest at that time; a vast and prolonged murmur arose -- the mingled shuffling of feet, the rattle of wheels, the heavy trundling of cable cars. At four o'clock the school children once more swarmed the sidewalks, again disappearing with surprising suddenness. At six the great homeward march commenced; the cars were crowded, the laborers thronged the sidewalks, the newsboys chanted the evening papers. Then all at once the street fell quiet; hardly a soul was in sight; the sidewalks were deserted. It was supper hour.

Evening began; and one by one a multitude of lights, from the demoniac glare of the druggists' windows to the dazzling blue whiteness of the electric globes, grew thick from street corner to street corner. Once more the street was crowded. Now there was no thought but for amusement. The cable cars were loaded with theatre-goers -- men in high hats and young girls in furred opera cloaks. On the sidewalks were groups and couples -- the plumbers' apprentices, the girls of the ribbon counters, the little families that lived on the second stories over their shops, the dressmakers, the small doctors, the harness-makers -- all the various inhabitants of the street were abroad, strolling idly from shop window to shop window, taking the air after the day's work. Groups of girls collected on the corners, talking and laughing very loud, making remarks upon the young men that passed them. The tamale men appeared. A band of Salvationists began to sing before a saloon.

Then, little by little, Polk Street dropped back to solitude. Eleven o'clock struck from the power-house clock. Lights were extinguished. At one o'clock the cable stopped, leaving an abrupt silence in the air. All at once it seemed very still. The ugly noises were the occasional footfalls of a policeman and the persistent calling of ducks and geese in the closed market. The street was asleep.

Day after day, McTeague saw the same panorama unroll itself. The bay window of his "Dental Parlors" was for him a point of vantage from which he watched the world go past.

On Sundays, however, all was changed. As he stood in the bay window, after finishing his beer, wiping his lips, and looking out into the street, McTeague was conscious of the difference. Nearly all the stores were closed. No wagons passed. A few people hurried up and down the sidewalks, dressed in cheap Sunday finery. A cable car went by; on the outside seats were a party of returning picnickers. The mother, the father, a young man, and a young girl, and three children. The two older people held empty lunch baskets in their laps, while the bands of the children's hats were stuck full of oak leaves. The girl carried a huge bunch of wilting poppies and wild flowers.

As the car approached McTeague's window the young man got up and swung himself off the platform, waving goodby to the party. Suddenly McTeague recognized him.

"There's Marcus Schouler," he muttered behind his mustache.

Marcus Schouler was the dentist's one intimate friend. The acquaintance had begun at the car conductors' coffee-joint, where the two occupied the same table

and met at every meal. Then they made the discovery that they both lived in the same flat, Marcus occupying a room on the floor above McTeague. On different occasions McTeague had treated Marcus for an ulcerated tooth and had refused to accept payment. Soon it came to be an understood thing between them. They were "pals."

McTeague, listening, heard Marcus go up-stairs to his room above. In a few minutes his door opened again. McTeague knew that he had come out into the hall and was leaning over the banisters.

"Oh, Mac!" he called. McTeague came to his door.

"Hullo! 'sthat you, Mark?"

"Sure," answered Marcus. "Come on up."

"You come on down."

"No, come on up."

"Oh, you come on down."

"Oh, you lazy duck!" retorted Marcus, coming down the stairs.

"Been out to the Cliff House on a picnic," he explained as he sat down on the bed-lounge, "with my uncle and his people -- the Sieppes, you know. By damn! it was hot," he suddenly vociferated. "Just look at that! Just look at that!" he cried, dragging at his limp collar. "That's the third one since morning; it is -- it is, for a fact -- and you got your stove going." He began to tell about the picnic, talking very loud and fast, gesturing furiously, very excited over trivial details. Marcus could not talk without getting excited.

"You ought t'have seen, y'ought t'have seen. I tell you, it was outa sight. It was; it was, for a fact."

"Yes, yes," answered McTeague, bewildered, trying to follow. "Yes, that's so."

In recounting a certain dispute with an awkward bicyclist, in which it appeared he had become involved, Marcus quivered with rage. "'Say that again,' says I to um. 'Just say that once more, and'" -- here a rolling explosion of oaths -- "'you'll go back to the city in the Morgue wagon. Ain't I got a right to cross a street even, I'd like to know, without being run down -- what?' I say it's outrageous. I'd a knifed him in another minute. It was an outrage. I say it was an OUTRAGE."

"Sure it was," McTeague hastened to reply. "Sure, sure."

"Oh, and we had an accident," shouted the other, suddenly off on another tack. "It was awful. Trina was in the swing there -- that's my cousin Trina, you

know who I mean -- and she fell out. By damn! I thought she'd killed herself; struck her face on a rock and knocked out a front tooth. It's a wonder she didn't kill herself. It IS a wonder; it is, for a fact. Ain't it, now? Huh? Ain't it? Y'ought t'have seen."

McTeague had a vague idea that Marcus Schouler was stuck on his cousin Trina. They "kept company" a good deal; Marcus took dinner with the Sieppes every Saturday evening at their home at B Street station, across the bay, and Sunday afternoons he and the family usually made little excursions into the suburbs. McTeague began to wonder dimly how it was that on this occasion Marcus had not gone home with his cousin. As sometimes happens, Marcus furnished the explanation upon the instant.

"I promised a duck up here on the avenue I'd call for his dog at four this afternoon."

Marcus was Old Grannis's assistant in a little dog hospital that the latter had opened in a sort of alley just off Polk Street, some four blocks above Old Grannis lived in one of the back rooms of McTeague's flat. He was an Englishman and an expert dog surgeon, but Marcus Schouler was a bungler in the profession. His father had been a veterinary surgeon who had kept a livery stable near by, on California Street, and Marcus's knowledge of the diseases of domestic animals had been picked up in a haphazard way, much after the manner of McTeague's education. Somehow he managed to impress Old Grannis, a gentle, simple-minded old man, with a sense of his fitness, bewildering him with a torrent of empty phrases that he delivered with fierce gestures and with a manner of the greatest conviction.

"You'd better come along with me, Mac," observed Marcus. "We'll get the duck's dog, and then we'll take a little walk, huh? You got nothun to do. Come along."

McTeague went out with him, and the two friends proceeded up to the avenue to the house where the dog was to be found. It was a huge mansion-like place, set in an enormous garden that occupied a whole third of the block; and while Marcus tramped up the front steps and rang the doorbell boldly, to show his independence, McTeague remained below on the sidewalk, gazing stupidly at the curtained windows, the marble steps, and the bronze griffins, troubled and a little confused by all this massive luxury.

After they had taken the dog to the hospital and had left him to whimper behind the wire netting, they returned to Polk Street and had a glass of beer in the back room of Joe Frenna's corner grocery.

Ever since they had left the huge mansion on the avenue, Marcus had been attacking the capitalists, a class which he pretended to execrate. It was a pose which he often assumed, certain of impressing the dentist. Marcus had picked up a few half-truths of political economy -- it was impossible to say where -- and as soon as the two had settled themselves to their beer in Frenna's back room he took up the theme of the labor question. He discussed it at the top of his voice, vociferating, shaking his fists, exciting himself with his own noise. He was continually making use of the stock phrases of the professional politician -- phrases he had caught at some of the ward "rallies" and "ratification meetings." These rolled off his tongue with incredible emphasis, appearing at every turn of his conversation -- "Outraged constituencies," "cause of labor," "wage earners," "opinions biased by personal interests," "eyes blinded by party prejudice." McTeague listened to him, awestruck.

"There's where the evil lies," Marcus would cry. "The masses must learn self-control; it stands to reason. Look at the figures, look at the figures. Decrease the number of wage earners and you increase wages, don't you? don't you?"

Absolutely stupid, and understanding never a word, McTeague would answer:

"Yes, yes, that's it -- self-control -- that's the word."

"It's the capitalists that's ruining the cause of labor," shouted Marcus, banging the table with his fist till the beer glasses danced; "white-livered drones, traitors, with their livers white as snow, eatun the bread of widows and orphuns; there's where the evil lies."

Stupefied with his clamor, McTeague answered, wagging his head:

"Yes, that's it; I think it's their livers."

Suddenly Marcus fell calm again, forgetting his pose all in an instant.

"Say, Mac, I told my cousin Trina to come round and see you about that tooth of her's. She'll be in to-morrow, I guess."

CHAPTER TWO

After his breakfast the following Monday morning, McTeague looked over the appointments he had written down in the book-slate that hung against the screen. His writing was immense, very clumsy, and very round, with huge, full-bellied l's and h's. He saw that he had made an appointment at one o'clock for Miss Baker, the retired dressmaker, a little old maid who had a tiny room a few doors down the hall. It adjoined that of Old Grannis.

Quite an affair had arisen from this circumstance. Miss Baker and Old Grannis were both over sixty, and yet it was current talk amongst the lodgers of the flat that the two were in love with each other . Singularly enough, they were not even acquaintances; never a word had passed between them. At intervals they met on the stairway; he on his way to his little dog hospital, she returning from a bit of marketing in the street. At such times they passed each other with averted eyes, pretending a certain pre-occupation, suddenly seized with a great embarrassment, the timidity of a second childhood. He went on about his business, disturbed and thoughtful. She hurried up to her tiny room, her curious little false curls shaking with her agitation, the faintest suggestion of a flush coming and going in her withered cheeks. The emotion of one of these chance meetings remained with them during all the rest of the day.

Was it the first romance in the lives of each? Did Old Grannis ever remember a certain face amongst those that he had known when he was young Grannis -- the face of some pale-haired girl, such as one sees in the old cathedral towns of England? Did Miss Baker still treasure up in a seldom opened drawer or box some faded daguerreotype, some strange old-fashioned likeness, with its curling hair and high stock? It was impossible to say.

Maria Macapa, the Mexican woman who took care of the lodgers' rooms, had been the first to call the flat's attention to the affair, spreading the news of it from room to room, from floor to floor. Of late she had made a great discovery; all the women folk of the flat were yet vibrant with it. Old Grannis came home from his work at four o'clock, and between that time and six Miss Baker would sit in her room, her hands idle in her lap, doing nothing, listening, waiting. Old Grannis did the same, drawing his arm-chair near to the wall, knowing that Miss Baker was upon the other side, conscious, perhaps, that she was thinking of him; and there the two would sit through the hours of the afternoon, listening and waiting, they did not know exactly for what, but near to each other, separated

only by the thin partition of their rooms. They had come to know each other's habits. Old Grannis knew that at quarter of five precisely Miss Baker made a cup of tea over the oil stove on the stand between the bureau and the window. Miss Baker felt instinctively the exact moment when Old Grannis took down his little binding apparatus from the second shelf of his clothes closet and began his favorite occupation of binding pamphlets -- pamphlets that he never read, for all that.

In his "Parlors" McTeague began his week's work. He glanced in the glass saucer in which he kept his sponge-gold, and noticing that he had used up all his pellets, set about making some more. In examining Miss Baker's teeth at the preliminary sitting he had found a cavity in one of the incisors. Miss Baker had decided to have it filled with gold. McTeague remembered now that it was what is called a "proximate case," where there is not sufficient room to fill with large pieces of gold. He told himself that he should have to use "mats" in the filling. He made some dozen of these "mats" from his tape of non-cohesive gold, cutting it transversely into small pieces that could be inserted edgewise between the teeth and consolidated by packing. After he had made his "mats" he continued with the other kind of gold fillings, such as he would have occasion to use during the week; "blocks" to be used in large proximal cavities, made by folding the tape on itself a number of times and then shaping it with the soldering pliers; "cylinders" for commencing fillings, which he formed by rolling the tape around a needle called a "broach," cutting it afterwards into different lengths. He worked slowly, mechanically, turning the foil between his fingers with the manual dexterity that one sometimes sees in stupid persons. His head was quite empty of all thought, and he did not whistle over his work as another man might have done. The canary made up for his silence, trilling and chittering continually, splashing about in its morning bath, keeping up an incessant noise and movement that would have been maddening to any one but McTeague, who seemed to have no nerves at all.

After he had finished his fillings, he made a hook broach from a bit of piano wire to replace an old one that he had lost. It was time for his dinner then, and when he returned from the car conductors' coffee-joint, he found Miss Baker waiting for him.

The ancient little dressmaker was at all times willing to talk of Old Grannis to anybody that would listen, quite unconscious of the gossip of the flat. McTeague found her all a-flutter with excitement. Something extraordinary had

happened. She had found out that the wall-paper in Old Grannis's room was the same as that in hers.

"It has led me to thinking, Doctor McTeague," she exclaimed, shaking her little false curls at him. "You know my room is so small, anyhow, and the wall-paper being the same -- the pattern from my room continues right into his -- I declare, I believe at one time that was all one room. Think of it, do you suppose it was? It almost amounts to our occupying the same room. I don't know -- why, really -- do you think I should speak to the landlady about it? He bound pamphlets last night until half-past nine. They say that he's the younger son of a baronet; that there are reasons for his not coming to the title; his stepfather wronged him cruelly."

No one had ever said such a thing. It was preposterous to imagine any mystery connected with Old Grannis. Miss Baker had chosen to invent the little fiction, had created the title and the unjust stepfather from some dim memories of the novels of her girlhood.

She took her place in the operating chair. McTeague began the filling. There was a long silence. It was impossible for McTeague to work and talk at the same time.

He was just burnishing the last "mat" in Miss Baker's tooth, when the door of the "Parlors" opened, jangling the bell which he had hung over it, and which was absolutely unnecessary. McTeague turned, one foot on the pedal of his dental engine, the corundum disk whirling between his fingers.

It was Marcus Schouler who came in, ushering a young girl of about twenty.

"Hello, Mac," exclaimed Marcus; "busy? Brought my cousin round about that broken tooth."

McTeague nodded his head gravely.

"In a minute," he answered.

Marcus and his cousin Trina sat down in the rigid chairs underneath the steel engraving of the Court of Lorenzo de' Medici. They began talking in low tones. The girl looked about the room, noticing the stone pug dog, the rifle manufacturer's calendar, the canary in its little gilt prison, and the tumbled blankets on the unmade bed-lounge against the wall. Marcus began telling her about McTeague. "We're pals," he explained, just above a whisper. "Ah, Mac's all right, you bet. Say, Trina, he's the strongest duck you ever saw. What do you suppose? He can pull out your teeth with his fingers; yes, he can. What do you

think of that? With his fingers, mind you; he can, for a fact. Get on to the size of him, anyhow. Ah, Mac's all right!"

Maria Macapa had come into the room while he had been speaking. She was making up McTeague's bed. Suddenly Marcus exclaimed under his breath: "Now we'll have some fun. It's the girl that takes care of the rooms. She's a greaser, and she's queer in the head. She ain't regularly crazy, but I don't know, she's queer. Y'ought to hear her go on about a gold dinner service she says her folks used to own. Ask her what her name is and see what she'll say." Trina shrank back, a little frightened.

"No, you ask," she whispered.

"Ah, go on; what you 'fraid of?" urged Marcus. Trina shook her head energetically, shutting her lips together.

"Well, listen here," answered Marcus, nudging her; then raising his voice, he said:

"How do, Maria?" Maria nodded to him over her shoulder as she bent over the lounge.

"Workun hard nowadays, Maria?"

"Pretty hard."

"Didunt always have to work for your living, though, did you, when you ate offa gold dishes?" Maria didn't answer, except by putting her chin in the air and shutting her eyes, as though to say she knew a long story about that if she had a mind to talk. All Marcus's efforts to draw her out on the subject were unavailing. She only responded by movements of her head.

"Can't always start her going," Marcus told his cousin.

"What does she do, though, when you ask her about her name?"

"Oh, sure," said Marcus, who had forgotten. "Say, Maria, what's your name?"

"Huh?" asked Maria, straightening up, her hands on he hips.

"Tell us your name," repeated Marcus.

"Name is Maria -- Miranda -- Macapa." Then, after a pause, she added, as though she had but that moment thought of it, "Had a flying squirrel an' let him go."

Invariably Maria Macapa made this answer. It was not always she would talk about the famous service of gold plate, but a question as to her name never failed to elicit the same strange answer, delivered in a rapid undertone: "Name is

Maria -- Miranda -- Macapa." Then, as if struck with an after thought, "Had a flying squirrel an' let him go."

Why Maria should associate the release of the mythical squirrel with her name could not be said. About Maria the flat knew absolutely nothing further than that she was Spanish-American. Miss Baker was the oldest lodger in the flat, and Maria was a fixture there as maid of all work when she had come. There was a legend to the effect that Maria's people had been at one time immensely wealthy in Central America.

Maria turned again to her work. Trina and Marcus watched her curiously. There was a silence. The corundum burr in McTeague's engine hummed in a prolonged monotone. The canary bird chittered occasionally. The room was warm, and the breathing of the five people in the narrow space made the air close and thick. At long intervals an acrid odor of ink floated up from the branch post-office immediately below.

Maria Macapa finished her work and started to leave. As she passed near Marcus and his cousin she stopped, and drew a bunch of blue tickets furtively from her pocket. "Buy a ticket in the lottery?" she inquired, looking at the girl. "Just a dollar."

"Go along with you, Maria," said Marcus, who had but thirty cents in his pocket. "Go along; it's against the law."

"Buy a ticket," urged Maria, thrusting the bundle toward Trina. "Try your luck. The butcher on the next block won twenty dollars the last drawing."

Very uneasy, Trina bought a ticket for the sake of being rid of her. Maria disappeared.

"Ain't she a queer bird?" muttered Marcus. He was much embarrassed and disturbed because he had not bought the ticket for Trina.

But there was a sudden movement. McTeague had just finished with Miss Baker.

"You should notice," the dressmaker said to the dentist, in a low voice, "he always leaves the door a little ajar in the afternoon." When she had gone out, Marcus Schouler brought Trina forward.

"Say, Mac, this is my cousin, Trina Sieppe." The two shook hands dumbly, McTeague slowly nodding his huge head with its great shock of yellow hair. Trina was very small and prettily made. Her face was round and rather pale; her eyes long and narrow and blue, like the half-open eyes of a little baby; her lips and the lobes of her tiny ears were pale, a little suggestive of anaemia; while

across the bridge of her nose ran an adorable little line of freckles. But it was to her hair that one's attention was most attracted. Heaps and heaps of blue-black coils and braids, a royal crown of swarthy bands, a veritable sable tiara, heavy, abundant, odorous. All the vitality that should have given color to her face seemed to have been absorbed by this marvellous hair. It was the coiffure of a queen that shadowed the pale temples of this little bourgeoise. So heavy was it that it tipped her head backward, and the position thrust her chin out a little. It was a charming poise, innocent, confiding, almost infantile.

She was dressed all in black, very modest and plain. The effect of her pale face in all this contrasting black was almost monastic.

"Well," exclaimed Marcus suddenly, "I got to go. Must get back to work. Don't hurt her too much, Mac. S'long, Trina."

McTeague and Trina were left alone. He was embarrassed, troubled. These young girls disturbed and perplexed him. He did not like them, obstinately cherishing that intuitive suspicion of all things feminine -- the perverse dislike of an overgrown boy. On the other hand, she was perfectly at her ease; doubtless the woman in her was not yet awakened; she was yet, as one might say, without sex. She was almost like a boy, frank, candid, unreserved.

She took her place in the operating chair and told him what was the matter, looking squarely into his face. She had fallen out of a swing the afternoon of the preceding day; one of her teeth had been knocked loose and the other altogether broken out.

McTeague listened to her with apparent stolidity, nodding his head from time to time as she spoke. The keenness of his dislike of her as a woman began to be blunted. He thought she was rather pretty, that he even liked her because she was so small, so prettily made, so good natured and straightforward.

"Let's have a look at your teeth," he said, picking up his mirror. "You better take your hat off." She leaned back in her chair and opened her mouth, showing the rows of little round teeth, as white and even as the kernels on an ear of green corn, except where an ugly gap came at the side.

McTeague put the mirror into her mouth, touching one and another of her teeth with the handle of an excavator. By and by he straightened up, wiping the moisture from the mirror on his coat-sleeve.

"Well, Doctor," said the girl, anxiously, "it's a dreadful disfigurement, isn't it?" adding, "What can you do about it?"

"Well," answered McTeague, slowly, looking vaguely about on the floor of the room, "the roots of the broken tooth are still in the gum; they'll have to come out, and I guess I'll have to pull that other bicuspid. Let me look again. Yes," he went on in a moment, peering into her mouth with the mirror, "I guess that'll have to come out, too." The tooth was loose, discolored, and evidently dead. "It's a curious case," McTeague went on. "I don't know as I ever had a tooth like that before. It's what's called necrosis. It don't often happen. It'll have to come out sure."

Then a discussion was opened on the subject, Trina sitting up in the chair, holding her hat in her lap; McTeague leaning against the window frame his hands in his pockets, his eyes wandering about on the floor. Trina did not want the other tooth removed; one hole like that was bad enough; but two -- ah, no, it was not to be thought of.

But McTeague reasoned with her, tried in vain to make her understand that there was no vascular connection between the root and the gum. Trina was blindly persistent, with the persistency of a girl who has made up her mind.

McTeague began to like her better and better, and after a while commenced himself to feel that it would be a pity to disfigure such a pretty mouth. He became interested; perhaps he could do something, something in the way of a crown or bridge. "Let's look at that again," he said, picking up his mirror. He began to study the situation very carefully, really desiring to remedy the blemish.

It was the first bicuspid that was missing, and though part of the root of the second (the loose one) would remain after its extraction, he was sure it would not be strong enough to sustain a crown. All at once he grew obstinate, resolving, with all the strength of a crude and primitive man, to conquer the difficulty in spite of everything. He turned over in his mind the technicalities of the case. No, evidently the root was not strong enough to sustain a crown; besides that, it was placed a little irregularly in the arch. But, fortunately, there were cavities in the two teeth on either side of the gap -- one in the first molar and one in the palatine surface of the cuspid; might he not drill a socket in the remaining root and sockets in the molar and cuspid, and, partly by bridging, partly by crowning, fill in the gap? He made up his mind to do it.

Why he should pledge himself to this hazardous case McTeague was puzzled to know. With most of his clients he would have contented himself with the

extraction of the loose tooth and the roots of the broken one. Why should he risk his reputation in this case? He could not say why.

It was the most difficult operation he had ever performed. He bungled it considerably, but in the end he succeeded passably well. He extracted the loose tooth with his bayonet forceps and prepared the roots of the broken one as if for filling, fitting into them a flattened piece of platinum wire to serve as a dowel. But this was only the beginning; altogether it was a fortnight's work. Trina came nearly every other day, and passed two, and even three, hours in the chair.

By degrees McTeague's first awkwardness and suspicion vanished entirely. The two became good friends. McTeague even arrived at that point where he could work and talk to her at the same time -- a thing that had never before been possible for him.

Never until then had McTeague become so well acquainted with a girl of Trina's age. The younger women of Polk Street -- the shop girls, the young women of the soda fountains, the waitresses in the cheap restaurants -- preferred another dentist, a young fellow just graduated from the college, a poser, a rider of bicycles, a man about town, who wore astonishing waistcoats and bet money on greyhound coursing. Trina was McTeague's first experience. With her the feminine element suddenly entered his little world. It was not only her that he saw and felt, it was the woman, the whole sex, an entire new humanity, strange and alluring, that he seemed to have discovered. How had he ignored it so long? It was dazzling, delicious, charming beyond all words. His narrow point of view was at once enlarged and confused, and all at once he saw that there was something else in life besides concertinas and steam beer. Everything had to be made over again. His whole rude idea of life had to be changed. The male virile desire in him tardily awakened, aroused itself, strong and brutal. It was resistless, untrained, a thing not to be held in leash an instant.

Little by little, by gradual, almost imperceptible degrees, the thought of Trina Sieppe occupied his mind from day to day, from hour to hour. He found himself thinking of her constantly; at every instant he saw her round, pale face; her narrow, milk-blue eyes; her little out-thrust chin; her heavy, huge tiara of black hair. At night he lay awake for hours under the thick blankets of the bed-lounge, staring upward into the darkness, tormented with the idea of her, exasperated at the delicate, subtle mesh in which he found himself entangled. During the forenoons, while he went about his work, he thought of her. As he made his plaster-of-paris moulds at the washstand in the corner behind the

screen he turned over in his mind all that had happened, all that had been said at the previous sitting. Her little tooth that he had extracted he kept wrapped in a bit of newspaper in his vest pocket. Often he took it out and held it in the palm of his immense, horny hand, seized with some strange elephantine sentiment, wagging his head at it, heaving tremendous sighs. What a folly!

At two o'clock on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays Trina arrived and took her place in the operating chair. While at his work McTeague was every minute obliged to bend closely over her; his hands touched her face, her cheeks, her adorable little chin; her lips pressed against his fingers. She breathed warmly on his forehead and on his eyelids, while the odor of her hair, a charming feminine perfume, sweet, heavy, enervating, came to his nostrils, so penetrating, so delicious, that his flesh pricked and tingled with it; a veritable sensation of faintness passed over this huge, callous fellow, with his enormous bones and corded muscles. He drew a short breath through his nose; his jaws suddenly gripped together vise-like.

But this was only at times -- a strange, vexing spasm, that subsided almost immediately. For the most part, McTeague enjoyed the pleasure of these sittings with Trina with a certain strong calmness, blindly happy that she was there. This poor crude dentist of Polk Street, stupid, ignorant, vulgar, with his sham education and plebeian tastes, whose only relaxations were to eat, to drink steam beer, and to play upon his concertina, was living through his first romance, his first idyl. It was delightful. The long hours he passed alone with Trina in the "Dental Parlors," silent, only for the scraping of the instruments and the pouring of bud-burrs in the engine, in the foul atmosphere, overheated by the little stove and heavy with the smell of ether, creosote, and stale bedding, had all the charm of secret appointments and stolen meetings under the moon.

By degrees the operation progressed. One day, just after McTeague had put in the temporary gutta-percha fillings and nothing more could be done at that sitting, Trina asked him to examine the rest of her teeth. They were perfect, with one exception -- a spot of white caries on the lateral surface of an incisor. McTeague filled it with gold, enlarging the cavity with hard-bits and hoe-excavators, and burring in afterward with half-cone burrs. The cavity was deep, and Trina began to wince and moan. To hurt Trina was a positive anguish for McTeague, yet an anguish which he was obliged to endure at every hour of the sitting. It was harrowing -- he sweated under it -- to be forced to torture her, of all women in the world; could anything be worse than that?

"Hurt?" he inquired, anxiously.

She answered by frowning, with a sharp intake of breath, putting her fingers over her closed lips and nodding her head.

McTeague sprayed the tooth with glycerite of tannin, but without effect. Rather than hurt her he found himself forced to the use of anaesthesia, which he hated. He had a notion that the nitrous oxide gas was dangerous, so on this occasion, as on all others, used ether.

He put the sponge a half dozen times to Trina's face, more nervous than he had ever been before, watching the symptoms closely. Her breathing became short and irregular; there was a slight twitching of the muscles. When her thumbs turned inward toward the palms, he took the sponge away. She passed off very quickly, and, with a long sigh, sank back into the chair.

McTeague straightened up, putting the sponge upon the rack behind him, his eyes fixed upon Trina's face. For some time he stood watching her as she lay there, unconscious and helpless, and very pretty. He was alone with her, and she was absolutely without defense.

Suddenly the animal in the man stirred and woke; the evil instincts that in him were so close to the surface leaped to life, shouting and clamoring.

It was a crisis -- a crisis that had arisen all in an instant; a crisis for which he was totally unprepared. Blindly, and without knowing why, McTeague fought against it, moved by an unreasoned instinct of resistance. Within him, a certain second self, another better McTeague rose with the brute; both were strong, with the huge crude strength of the man himself. The two were at grapples. There in that cheap and shabby "Dental Parlor" a dreaded struggle began. It was the old battle, old as the world, wide as the world -- the sudden panther leap of the animal, lips drawn, fangs aflash, hideous, monstrous, not to be resisted, and the simultaneous arousing of the other man, the better self that cries, "Down, down," without knowing why; that grips the monster; that fights to strangle it, to thrust it down and back.

Dizzied and bewildered with the shock, the like of which he had never known before, McTeague turned from Trina, gazing bewilderedly about the room. The struggle was bitter; his teeth ground themselves together with a little rasping sound; the blood sang in his ears; his face flushed scarlet; his hands twisted themselves together like the knotting of cables. The fury in him was as the fury of a young bull in the heat of high summer. But for all that he shook his huge head from time to time, muttering:

"No, by God! No, by God!"

Dimly he seemed to realize that should he yield now he would never be able to care for Trina again. She would never be the same to him, never so radiant, so sweet, so adorable; her charm for him would vanish in an instant. Across her forehead, her little pale forehead, under the shadow of her royal hair, he would surely see the smudge of a foul ordure, the footprint of the monster. It would be a sacrilege, an abomination. He recoiled from it, banding all his strength to the issue.

"No, by God! No, by God!"

He turned to his work, as if seeking a refuge in it. But as he drew near to her again, the charm of her innocence and helplessness came over him afresh. It was a final protest against his resolution. Suddenly he leaned over and kissed her, grossly, full on the mouth. The thing was done before he knew it. Terrified at his weakness at the very moment he believed himself strong, he threw himself once more into his work with desperate energy. By the time he was fastening the sheet of rubber upon the tooth, he had himself once more in hand. He was disturbed, still trembling, still vibrating with the throes of the crisis, but he was the master; the animal was downed, was cowed for this time, at least.

But for all that, the brute was there. Long dormant, it was now at last alive, awake. From now on he would feel its presence continually; would feel it tugging at its chain, watching its opportunity. Ah, the pity of it! Why could he not always love her purely, cleanly? What was this perverse, vicious thing that lived within him, knitted to his flesh?

Below the fine fabric of all that was good in him ran the foul stream of hereditary evil, like a sewer. The vices and sins of his father and of his father's father, to the third and fourth and five hundredth generation, tainted him. The evil of an entire race flowed in his veins. Why should it be? He did not desire it. Was he to blame?

But McTeague could not understand this thing. It had faced him, as sooner or later it faces every child of man; but its significance was not for him. To reason with it was beyond him. He could only oppose to it an instinctive stubborn resistance, blind, inert.

McTeague went on with his work. As he was rapping in the little blocks and cylinders with the mallet, Trina slowly came back to herself with a long sigh. She still felt a little confused, and lay quiet in the chair. There was a long silence, broken only by the uneven tapping of the hardwood mallet. By and by

she said, "I never felt a thing," and then she smiled at him very prettily beneath the rubber dam. McTeague turned to her suddenly, his mallet in one hand, his pliers holding a pellet of sponge-gold in the other. All at once he said, with the unreasoned simplicity and directness of a child: "Listen here, Miss Trina, I like you better than any one else; what's the matter with us getting married?"

Trina sat up in the chair quickly, and then drew back from him, frightened and bewildered.

"Will you? Will you?" said McTeague. "Say, Miss Trina, will you?"

"What is it? What do you mean?" she cried, confusedly, her words muffled beneath the rubber.

"Will you?" repeated McTeague.

"No, no," she exclaimed, refusing without knowing why, suddenly seized with a fear of him, the intuitive feminine fear of the male. McTeague could only repeat the same thing over and over again. Trina, more and more frightened at his huge hands -- the hands of the old-time car-boy -- his immense square-cut head and his enormous brute strength, cried out: "No, no," behind the rubber dam, shaking her head violently, holding out her hands, and shrinking down before him in the operating chair. McTeague came nearer to her, repeating the same question. "No, no," she cried, terrified. Then, as she exclaimed, "Oh, I am sick," was suddenly taken with a fit of vomiting. It was the not unusual after effect of the ether, aided now by her excitement and nervousness. McTeague was checked. He poured some bromide of potassium into a graduated glass and held it to her lips.

"Here, swallow this," he said.

CHAPTER THREE

Once every two months Maria Macapa set the entire flat in commotion. She roamed the building from garret to cellar, searching each corner, ferreting through every old box and trunk and barrel, groping about on the top shelves of closets, peering into rag-bags, exasperating the lodgers with her persistence and importunity. She was collecting junks, bits of iron, stone jugs, glass bottles, old sacks, and cast-off garments. It was one of her perquisites. She sold the junk to Zerkow, the rags-bottles-sacks man, who lived in a filthy den in the alley just back of the flat, and who sometimes paid her as much as three cents a pound.

The stone jugs, however, were worth a nickel. The money that Zerkow paid her, Maria spent on shirt waists and dotted blue neckties, trying to dress like the girls who tended the soda-water fountain in the candy store on the corner. She was sick with envy of these young women. They were in the world, they were elegant, they were debonair, they had their "young men."

On this occasion she presented herself at the door of Old Grannis's room late in the afternoon. His door stood a little open. That of Miss Baker was ajar a few inches. The two old people were "keeping company" after their fashion.

"Got any junk, Mister Grannis?" inquired Maria, standing in the door, a very dirty, half-filled pillowcase over one arm.

"No, nothing -- nothing that I can think of, Maria," replied Old Grannis, terribly vexed at the interruption, yet not wishing to be unkind. "Nothing I think of. Yet, however -- perhaps -- if you wish to look."

He sat in the middle of the room before a small pine table. His little binding apparatus was before him. In his fingers was a huge upholsterer's needle threaded with twine, a brad-awl lay at his elbow, on the floor beside him was a great pile of pamphlets, the pages uncut. Old Grannis bought the "Nation" and the "Breeder and Sportsman." In the latter he occasionally found articles on dogs which interested him. The former he seldom read. He could not afford to subscribe regularly to either of the publications, but purchased their back numbers by the score, almost solely for the pleasure he took in binding them.

"What you alus sewing up them books for, Mister Grannis?" asked Maria, as she began rummaging about in Old Grannis's closet shelves. "There's just hundreds of 'em in here on yer shelves; they ain't no good to you."

"Well, well," answered Old Grannis, timidly, rubbing his chin, "I -- I'm sure I can't quite say; a little habit, you know; a diversion, a -- a -- it occupies one, you know. I don't smoke; it takes the place of a pipe, perhaps."

"Here's this old yellow pitcher," said Maria, coming out of the closet with it in her hand. "The handle's cracked; you don't want it; better give me it."

Old Grannis did want the pitcher; true, he never used it now, but he had kept it a long time, and somehow he held to it as old people hold to trivial, worthless things that they have had for many years.

"Oh, that pitcher -- well, Maria, I -- I don't know. I'm afraid -- you see, that pitcher -- -- "

"Ah, go 'long," interrupted Maria Macapa, "what's the good of it?"

"If you insist, Maria, but I would much rather -- " he rubbed his chin, perplexed and annoyed, hating to refuse, and wishing that Maria were gone.

"Why, what's the good of it?" persisted Maria. He could give no sufficient answer. "That's all right," she asserted, carrying the pitcher out.

"Ah -- Maria -- I say, you -- you might leave the door -- ah, don't quite shut it -- it's a bit close in here at times." Maria grinned, and swung the door wide. Old Grannis was horribly embarrassed; positively, Maria was becoming unbearable.

"Got any junk?" cried Maria at Miss Baker's door. The little old lady was sitting close to the wall in her rocking-chair; her hands resting idly in her lap.

"Now, Maria," she said plaintively, "you are always after junk; you know I never have anything laying 'round like that."

It was true. The retired dressmaker's tiny room was a marvel of neatness, from the little red table, with its three Gorham spoons laid in exact parallels, to the decorous geraniums and mignonettes growing in the starch box at the window, underneath the fish globe with its one venerable gold fish. That day Miss Baker had been doing a bit of washing; two pocket handkerchiefs, still moist, adhered to the window panes, drying in the sun.

"Oh, I guess you got something you don't want," Maria went on, peering into the corners of the room. "Look-a-here what Mister Grannis gi' me," and she held out the yellow pitcher. Instantly Miss Baker was in a quiver of confusion. Every word spoken aloud could be perfectly heard in the next room. What a stupid drab was this Maria! Could anything be more trying than this position?

"Ain't that right, Mister Grannis?" called Maria; "didn't you gi' me this pitcher?" Old Grannis affected not to hear; perspiration stood on his forehead; his timidity overcame him as if he were a ten-year-old schoolboy. He half rose from his chair, his fingers dancing nervously upon his chin.

Maria opened Miss Baker's closet unconcernedly. "What's the matter with these old shoes?" she exclaimed, turning about with a pair of half-worn silk gaiters in her hand. They were by no means old enough to throw away, but Miss Baker was almost beside herself. There was no telling what might happen next. Her only thought was to be rid of Maria.

"Yes, yes, anything. You can have them; but go, go. There's nothing else, not a thing."

Maria went out into the hall, leaving Miss Baker's door wide open, as if maliciously. She had left the dirty pillow-case on the floor in the hall, and she

stood outside, between the two open doors, stowing away the old pitcher and the half-worn silk shoes. She made remarks at the top of her voice, calling now to Miss Baker, now to Old Grannis. In a way she brought the two old people face to face. Each time they were forced to answer her questions it was as if they were talking directly to each other.

"These here are first-rate shoes, Miss Baker. Look here, Mister Grannis, get on to the shoes Miss Baker gi' me. You ain't got a pair you don't want, have you? You two people have less junk than any one else in the flat. How do you manage, Mister Grannis? You old bachelors are just like old maids, just as neat as pins. You two are just alike -- you and Mister Grannis -- ain't you, Miss Baker?"

Nothing could have been more horribly constrained, more awkward. The two old people suffered veritable torture. When Maria had gone, each heaved a sigh of unspeakable relief. Softly they pushed to their doors, leaving open a space of half a dozen inches. Old Grannis went back to his binding. Miss Baker brewed a cup of tea to quiet her nerves. Each tried to regain their composure, but in vain. Old Grannis's fingers trembled so that he pricked them with his needle. Miss Baker dropped her spoon twice. Their nervousness would not wear off. They were perturbed, upset. In a word, the afternoon was spoiled.

Maria went on about the flat from room to room. She had already paid Marcus Schouler a visit early that morning before he had gone out. Marcus had sworn at her, excitedly vociferating; "No, by damn! No, he hadn't a thing for her; he hadn't, for a fact. It was a positive persecution. Every day his privacy was invaded. He would complain to the landlady, he would. He'd move out of the place." In the end he had given Maria seven empty whiskey flasks, an iron grate, and ten cents -- the latter because he said she wore her hair like a girl he used to know.

After coming from Miss Baker's room Maria knocked at McTeague's door. The dentist was lying on the bed-lounge in his stocking feet, doing nothing apparently, gazing up at the ceiling, lost in thought.

Since he had spoken to Trina Sieppe, asking her so abruptly to marry him, McTeague had passed a week of torment. For him there was no going back. It was Trina now, and none other. It was all one with him that his best friend, Marcus, might be in love with the same girl. He must have Trina in spite of everything; he would have her even in spite of herself. He did not stop to reflect about the matter; he followed his desire blindly, recklessly, furious and raging at

every obstacle. And she had cried "No, no!" back at him; he could not forget that. She, so small and pale and delicate, had held him at bay, who was so huge, so immensely strong.

Besides that, all the charm of their intimacy was gone. After that unhappy sitting, Trina was no longer frank and straight-forward. Now she was circumspect, reserved, distant. He could no longer open his mouth; words failed him. At one sitting in particular they had said but good-day and good-by to each other. He felt that he was clumsy and ungainly. He told himself that she despised him.

But the memory of her was with him constantly. Night after night he lay broad awake thinking of Trina, wondering about her, racked with the infinite desire of her. His head burnt and throbbed. The palms of his hands were dry. He dozed and woke, and walked aimlessly about the dark room, bruising himself against the three chairs drawn up "at attention" under the steel engraving, and stumbling over the stone pug dog that sat in front of the little stove.

Besides this, the jealousy of Marcus Schouler harassed him. Maria Macapa, coming into his "Parlor" to ask for junk, found him flung at length upon the bed-lounge, gnawing at his fingers in an excess of silent fury. At lunch that day Marcus had told him of an excursion that was planned for the next Sunday afternoon. Mr. Sieppe, Trina's father, belonged to a rifle club that was to hold a meet at Schuetzen Park across the bay. All the Sieppes were going; there was to be a basket picnic. Marcus, as usual, was invited to be one of the party. McTeague was in agony. It was his first experience, and he suffered all the worse for it because he was totally unprepared. What miserable complication was this in which he found himself involved? It seemed so simple to him since he loved Trina to take her straight to himself, stopping at nothing, asking no questions, to have her, and by main strength to carry her far away somewhere, he did not know exactly where, to some vague country, some undiscovered place where every day was Sunday.

"Got any junk?"

"Huh? What? What is it?" exclaimed McTeague, suddenly rousing up from the lounge. Often Maria did very well in the "Dental Parlors." McTeague was continually breaking things which he was too stupid to have mended; for him anything that was broken was lost. Now it was a cuspidor, now a fire-shovel for the little stove, now a China shaving mug.

"Got any junk?"

"I don't know -- I don't remember," muttered McTeague. Maria roamed about the room, McTeague following her in his huge stockinged feet. All at once she pounced upon a sheaf of old hand instruments in a coverless cigar-box, pluggers, hard bits, and excavators. Maria had long coveted such a find in McTeague's "Parlor," knowing it should be somewhere about. The instruments were of the finest tempered steel and really valuable.

"Say, Doctor, I can have these, can't I?" exclaimed Maria. "You got no more use for them." McTeague was not at all sure of this. There were many in the sheaf that might be repaired, reshaped.

"No, no," he said, wagging his head. But Maria Macapa, knowing with whom she had to deal, at once let loose a torrent of words. She made the dentist believe that he had no right to withhold them, that he had promised to save them for her. She affected a great indignation, pursing her lips and putting her chin in the air as though wounded in some finer sense, changing so rapidly from one mood to another, filling the room with such shrill clamor, that McTeague was dazed and benumbed.

"Yes, all right, all right," he said, trying to make himself heard. "It WOULD be mean. I don't want 'em." As he turned from her to pick up the box, Maria took advantage of the moment to steal three "mats" of sponge-gold out of the glass saucer. Often she stole McTeague's gold, almost under his very eyes; indeed, it was so easy to do so that there was but little pleasure in the theft. Then Maria took herself off. McTeague returned to the sofa and flung himself upon it face downward.

A little before supper time Maria completed her search. The flat was cleaned of its junk from top to bottom. The dirty pillow-case was full to bursting. She took advantage of the supper hour to carry her bundle around the corner and up into the alley where Zerkow lived.

When Maria entered his shop, Zerkow had just come in from his daily rounds. His decrepit wagon stood in front of his door like a stranded wreck; the miserable horse, with its lamentable swollen joints, fed greedily upon an armful of spoiled hay in a shed at the back.

The interior of the junk shop was dark and damp, and foul with all manner of choking odors. On the walls, on the floor, and hanging from the rafters was a world of debris, dust-blackened, rust-corroded. Everything was there, every trade was represented, every class of society; things of iron and cloth and wood; all the detritus that a great city sloughs off in its daily life. Zerkow's junk shop

was the last abiding-place, the almshouse, of such articles as had outlived their usefulness.

Maria found Zerkow himself in the back room, cooking some sort of a meal over an alcohol stove. Zerkow was a Polish Jew -- curiously enough his hair was fiery red. He was a dry, shrivelled old man of sixty odd. He had the thin, eager, cat-like lips of the covetous; eyes that had grown keen as those of a lynx from long

searching amidst muck and debris; and claw-like, prehensile fingers -- the fingers of a man who accumulates, but never disburses. It was impossible to look at Zerkow and not know instantly that greed -- inordinate, insatiable greed -- was the dominant passion of the man. He was the Man with the Rake, groping hourly in the muck-heap of the city for gold, for gold, for gold. It was his dream, his passion; at every instant he seemed to feel the generous solid weight of the crude fat metal in his palms. The glint of it was constantly in his eyes; the jangle of it sang forever in his ears as the jangling of cymbals.

"Who is it? Who is it?" exclaimed Zerkow, as he heard Maria's footsteps in the outer room. His voice was faint, husky, reduced almost to a whisper by his prolonged habit of street crying.

"Oh, it's you again, is it?" he added, peering through the gloom of the shop. "Let's see; you've been here before, ain't you? You're the Mexican woman from Polk Street. Macapa's your name, hey?"

Maria nodded. "Had a flying squirrel an' let him go," she muttered, absently. Zerkow was puzzled; he looked at her sharply for a moment, then dismissed the matter with a movement of his head.

"Well, what you got for me?" he said. He left his supper to grow cold, absorbed at once in the affair.

Then a long wrangle began. Every bit of junk in Maria's pillow-case was discussed and weighed and disputed. They clamored into each other's faces over Old Grannis's cracked pitcher, over Miss Baker's silk gaiters, over Marcus Schouler's whiskey flasks, reaching the climax of disagreement when it came to McTeague's instruments.

"Ah, no, no!" shouted Maria. "Fifteen cents for the lot! I might as well make you a Christmas present! Besides, I got some gold fillings off him; look at um."

Zerkow drew a quick breath as the three pellets suddenly flashed in Maria's palm. There it was, the virgin metal, the pure, unalloyed ore, his dream, his

consuming desire. His fingers twitched and hooked themselves into his palms, his thin lips drew tight across his teeth.

"Ah, you got some gold," he muttered, reaching for it.

Maria shut her fist over the pellets. "The gold goes with the others," she declared. "You'll gi' me a fair price for the lot, or I'll take um back."

In the end a bargain was struck that satisfied Maria. Zerkow was not one who would let gold go out of his house. He counted out to her the price of all her junk, grudging each piece of money as if it had been the blood of his veins. The affair was concluded.

But Zerkow still had something to say. As Maria folded up the pillow-case and rose to go, the old Jew said:

"Well, see here a minute, we'll -- you'll have a drink before you go, won't you? Just to show that it's all right between us." Maria sat down again.

"Yes, I guess I'll have a drink," she answered.

Zerkow took down a whiskey bottle and a red glass tumbler with a broken base from a cupboard on the wall. The two drank together, Zerkow from the bottle, Maria from the broken tumbler. They wiped their lips slowly, drawing breath again. There was a moment's silence.

"Say," said Zerkow at last, "how about those gold dishes you told me about the last time you were here?"

"What gold dishes?" inquired Maria, puzzled.

"Ah, you know," returned the other. "The plate your father owned in Central America a long time ago. Don't you know, it rang like so many bells? Red gold, you know, like oranges?"

"Ah," said Maria, putting her chin in the air as if she knew a long story about that if she had a mind to tell it. "Ah, yes, that gold service."

"Tell us about it again," said Zerkow, his bloodless lower lip moving against the upper, his claw-like fingers feeling about his mouth and chin. "Tell us about it; go on."

He was breathing short, his limbs trembled a little. It was as if some hungry beast of prey had scented a quarry. Maria still refused, putting up her head, insisting that she had to be going.

"Let's have it," insisted the Jew. "Take another drink." Maria took another swallow of the whiskey. "Now, go on," repeated Zerkow; "let's have the story." Maria squared her elbows on the deal table, looking straight in front of her with eyes that saw nothing.

"Well, it was this way," she began. "It was when I was little. My folks must have been rich, oh, rich into the millions -- coffee, I guess -- and there was a large house, but I can only remember the plate. Oh, that service of plate! It was wonderful. There were more than a hundred pieces, and every one of them gold. You should have seen the sight when the leather trunk was opened. It fair dazzled your eyes. It was a yellow blaze like a fire, like a sunset; such a glory, all piled up together, one piece over the other. Why, if the room was dark you'd think you could see just the same with all that glitter there. There wa'n't a piece that was so much as scratched; every one was like a mirror, smooth and bright, just like a little pool when the sun shines into it. There was dinner dishes and soup tureens and pitchers; and great, big platters as long as that and wide too; and cream-jugs and bowls with carved handles, all vines and things; and drinking mugs, every one a different shape; and dishes for gravy and sauces; and then a great, big punch-bowl with a ladle, and the bowl was all carved out with figures and bunches of grapes. Why, just only that punch-bowl was worth a fortune, I guess. When all that plate was set out on a table, it was a sight for a king to look at. Such a service as that was! Each piece was heavy, oh, so heavy! and thick, you know; thick, fat gold, nothing but gold -- red, shining, pure gold, orange red -- and when you struck it with your knuckle, ah, you should have heard! No church bell ever rang sweeter or clearer. It was soft gold, too; you could bite into it, and leave the dent of your teeth. Oh, that gold plate! I can see it just as plain -- solid, solid, heavy, rich, pure gold; nothing but gold, gold, heaps and heaps of it. What a service that was!"

Maria paused, shaking her head, thinking over the vanished splendor. Illiterate enough, unimaginative enough on all other subjects, her distorted wits called up this picture with marvellous distinctness. It was plain she saw the plate clearly. Her description was accurate, was almost eloquent.

Did that wonderful service of gold plate ever exist outside of her diseased imagination? Was Maria actually remembering some reality of a childhood of barbaric luxury? Were her parents at one time possessed of an incalculable fortune derived from some Central American coffee plantation, a fortune long since confiscated by armies of insurrectionists, or squandered in the support of revolutionary governments?

It was not impossible. Of Maria Macapa's past prior to the time of her appearance at the "flat" absolutely nothing could be learned. She suddenly appeared from the unknown, a strange woman of a mixed race, sane on all

subjects but that of the famous service of gold plate; but unusual, complex, mysterious, even at her best.

But what misery Zerkow endured as he listened to her tale! For he chose to believe it, forced himself to believe it, lashed and harassed by a pitiless greed that checked at no tale of treasure, however preposterous. The story ravished him with delight. He was near someone who had possessed this wealth. He saw someone who had seen this pile of gold. He seemed near it; it was there, somewhere close by, under his eyes, under his fingers; it was red, gleaming, ponderous. He gazed about him wildly; nothing, nothing but the sordid junk shop and the rust-corroded tins. What exasperation, what positive misery, to be so near to it and yet to know that it was irrevocably, irretrievably lost! A spasm of anguish passed through him. He gnawed at his bloodless lips, at the hopelessness of it, the rage, the fury of it.

"Go on, go on," he whispered; "let's have it all over again. Polished like a mirror, hey, and heavy? Yes, I know, I know. A punch-bowl worth a fortune. Ah! and you saw it, you had it all!"

Maria rose to go. Zerkow accompanied her to the door, urging another drink upon her.

"Come again, come again," he croaked. "Don't wait till you've got junk; come any time you feel like it, and tell me more about the plate."

He followed her a step down the alley.

"How much do you think it was worth?" he inquired, anxiously.

"Oh, a million dollars," answered Maria, vaguely.

When Maria had gone, Zerkow returned to the back room of the shop, and stood in front of the alcohol stove, looking down into his cold dinner, preoccupied, thoughtful.

"A million dollars," he muttered in his rasping, guttural whisper, his finger-tips wandering over his thin, cat-like lips. "A golden service worth a million dollars; a punch-bowl worth a fortune; red gold plates, heaps and piles. God!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The days passed. McTeague had finished the operation on Trina's teeth. She did not come any more to the "Parlors." Matters had readjusted themselves a little between the two during the last sittings. Trina yet stood upon her reserve,

and McTeague still felt himself shambling and ungainly in her presence; but that constraint and embarrassment that had followed upon McTeague's blundering declaration broke up little by little. In spite of themselves they were gradually resuming the same relative positions they had occupied when they had first met.

But McTeague suffered miserably for all that. He never would have Trina, he saw that clearly. She was too good for him; too delicate, too refined, too prettily made for him, who was so coarse, so enormous, so stupid. She was for someone else -- Marcus, no doubt -- or at least for some finer-grained man. She should have gone to some other dentist; the young fellow on the corner, for instance, the poser, the rider of bicycles, the courser of grey-hounds. McTeague began to loathe and to envy this fellow. He spied upon him going in and out of his office, and noted his salmon-pink neckties and his astonishing waistcoats.

One Sunday, a few days after Trina's last sitting, McTeague met Marcus Schouler at his table in the car conductors' coffee-joint, next to the harness shop.

"What you got to do this afternoon, Mac?" inquired the other, as they ate their suet pudding.

"Nothing, nothing," replied McTeague, shaking his head. His mouth was full of pudding. It made him warm to eat, and little beads of perspiration stood across the bridge of his nose. He looked forward to an afternoon passed in his operating chair as usual. On leaving his "Parlors" he had put ten cents into his pitcher and had left it at Frenna's to be filled.

"What do you say we take a walk, huh?" said Marcus. "Ah, that's the thing -- a walk, a long walk, by damn! It'll be outa sight. I got to take three or four of the dogs out for exercise, anyhow. Old Grannis thinks they need ut. We'll walk out to the Presidio."

Of late it had become the custom of the two friends to take long walks from time to time. On holidays and on those Sunday afternoons when Marcus was not absent with the Sieppes they went out together, sometimes to the park, sometimes to the Presidio, sometimes even across the bay. They took a great pleasure in each other's company, but silently and with reservation, having the masculine horror of any demonstration of friendship.

They walked for upwards of five hours that afternoon, out the length of California Street, and across the Presidio Reservation to the Golden Gate. Then they turned, and, following the line of the shore, brought up at the Cliff House. Here they halted for beer, Marcus swearing that his mouth was as dry as a hay-

bin. Before starting on their walk they had gone around to the little dog hospital, and Marcus had let out four of the convalescents, crazed with joy at the release.

"Look at that dog," he cried to McTeague, showing him a finely-bred Irish setter. "That's the dog that belonged to the duck on the avenue, the dog we called for that day. I've bought 'um. The duck thought he had the distemper, and just threw 'um away. Nothun wrong with 'um but a little catarrh. Ain't he a bird? Say, ain't he a bird? Look at his flag; it's perfect; and see how he carries his tail on a line with his back. See how stiff and white his whiskers are. Oh, by damn! you can't fool me on a dog. That dog's a winner."

At the Cliff House the two sat down to their beer in a quiet corner of the billiard-room. There were but two players. Somewhere in another part of the building a mammoth music-box was jangling out a quickstep. From outside came the long, rhythmical rush of the surf and the sonorous barking of the seals upon the seal rocks. The four dogs curled themselves down upon the sanded floor.

"Here's how," said Marcus, half emptying his glass. "Ah-h!" he added, with a long breath, "that's good; it is, for a fact."

For the last hour of their walk Marcus had done nearly all the talking. McTeague merely answering him by uncertain movements of the head. For that matter, the dentist had been silent and preoccupied throughout the whole afternoon. At length Marcus noticed it. As he set down his glass with a bang he suddenly exclaimed:

"What's the matter with you these days, Mac? You got a bean about somethun, hey? Spit ut out."

"No, no," replied McTeague, looking about on the floor, rolling his eyes; "nothing, no, no."

"Ah, rats!" returned the other. McTeague kept silence. The two billiard players departed. The huge music-box struck into a fresh tune.

"Huh!" exclaimed Marcus, with a short laugh, "guess you're in love."

McTeague gasped, and shuffled his enormous feet under the table.

"Well, somethun's bitun you, anyhow," pursued Marcus. "Maybe I can help you. We're pals, you know. Better tell me what's up; guess we can straighten ut out. Ah, go on; spit ut out."

The situation was abominable. McTeague could not rise to it. Marcus was his best friend, his only friend. They were "pals" and McTeague was very fond of him. Yet they were both in love, presumably, with the same girl, and now

Marcus would try and force the secret out of him; would rush blindly at the rock upon which the two must split, stirred by the very best of motives, wishing only to be of service. Besides this, there was nobody to whom McTeague would have better preferred to tell his troubles than to Marcus, and yet about this trouble, the greatest trouble of his life, he must keep silent; must refrain from speaking of it to Marcus above everybody.

McTeague began dimly to feel that life was too much for him. How had it all come about? A month ago he was perfectly content; he was calm and peaceful, taking his little pleasures as he found them. His life had shaped itself; was, no doubt, to continue always along these same lines. A woman had entered his small world and instantly there was discord. The disturbing element had appeared. Wherever the woman had put her foot a score of distressing complications had sprung up, like the sudden growth of strange and puzzling flowers.

"Say, Mac, go on; let's have ut straight," urged Marcus, leaning toward him. "Has any duck been doing you dirt?" he cried, his face crimson on the instant.

"No," said McTeague, helplessly.

"Come along, old man," persisted Marcus; "let's have ut. What is the row? I'll do all I can to help you."

It was more than McTeague could bear. The situation had got beyond him. Stupidly he spoke, his hands deep in his pockets, his head rolled forward.

"It's -- it's Miss Sieppe," he said.

"Trina, my cousin? How do you mean?" inquired Marcus sharply.

"I -- I -- I don' know," stammered McTeague, hopelessly confounded.

"You mean," cried Marcus, suddenly enlightened, "that you are -- that you, too."

McTeague stirred in his chair, looking at the walls of the room, avoiding the other's glance. He nodded his head, then suddenly broke out:

"I can't help it. It ain't my fault, is it?"

Marcus was struck dumb; he dropped back in his chair breathless. Suddenly McTeague found his tongue.

"I tell you, Mark, I can't help it. I don't know how it happened. It came on so slow that I was, that -- that -- that it was done before I knew it, before I could help myself. I know we're pals, us two, and I knew how -- how you and Miss Sieppe were. I know now, I knew then; but that wouldn't have made any difference. Before I knew it -- it -- it -- there I was. I can't help it. I wouldn't 'a'

had ut happen for anything, if I could 'a' stopped it, but I don' know, it's something that's just stronger than you are, that's all. She came there -- Miss Sieppe came to the parlors there three or four times a week, and she was the first girl I had ever known, -- and you don' know! Why, I was so close to her I touched her face every minute, and her mouth, and smelt her hair and her breath -- oh, you don't know anything about it. I can't give you any idea. I don' know exactly myself; I only know how I'm fixed. I -- I -- it's been done; it's too late, there's no going back. Why, I can't think of anything else night and day. It's everything. It's -- it's -- oh, it's everything! I -- I -- why, Mark, it's everything -- I can't explain." He made a helpless movement with both hands.

Never had McTeague been so excited; never had he made so long a speech. His arms moved in fierce, uncertain gestures, his face flushed, his enormous jaws shut together with a sharp click at every pause. It was like some colossal brute trapped in a delicate, invisible mesh, raging, exasperated, powerless to extricate himself.

Marcus Schouler said nothing. There was a long silence. Marcus got up and walked to the window and stood looking out, but seeing nothing. "Well, who would have thought of this?" he muttered under his breath. Here was a fix. Marcus cared for Trina. There was no doubt in his mind about that. He looked forward eagerly to the Sunday afternoon excursions. He liked to be with Trina. He, too, felt the charm of the little girl -- the charm of the small, pale forehead; the little chin thrust out as if in confidence and innocence; the heavy, odorous crown of black hair. He liked her immensely. Some day he would speak; he would ask her to marry him. Marcus put off this matter of marriage to some future period; it would be some time -- a year, perhaps, or two. The thing did not take definite shape in his mind. Marcus "kept company" with his cousin Trina, but he knew plenty of other girls. For the matter of that, he liked all girls pretty well. Just now the singleness and strength of McTeague's passion startled him. McTeague would marry Trina that very afternoon if she would have him; but would he -- Marcus? No, he would not; if it came to that, no, he would not. Yet he knew he liked Trina. He could say -- yes, he could say -- he loved her. She was his "girl." The Sieppes acknowledged him as Trina's "young man." Marcus came back to the table and sat down sideways upon it.

"Well, what are we going to do about it, Mac?" he said.

"I don' know," answered McTeague, in great distress. "I don' want anything to -- to come between us, Mark."

"Well, nothun will, you bet!" vociferated the other. "No, sir; you bet not, Mac."

Marcus was thinking hard. He could see very clearly that McTeague loved Trina more than he did; that in some strange way this huge, brutal fellow was capable of a greater passion than himself, who was twice as clever. Suddenly Marcus jumped impetuously to a resolution.

"Well, say, Mac," he cried, striking the table with his fist, "go ahead. I guess you -- you want her pretty bad. I'll pull out; yes, I will. I'll give her up to you, old man."

The sense of his own magnanimity all at once overcame Marcus. He saw himself as another man, very noble, self-sacrificing; he stood apart and watched this second self with boundless admiration and with infinite pity. He was so good, so magnificent, so heroic, that he almost sobbed. Marcus made a sweeping gesture of resignation, throwing out both his arms, crying:

"Mac, I'll give her up to you. I won't stand between you." There were actually tears in Marcus's eyes as he spoke. There was no doubt he thought himself sincere. At that moment he almost believed he loved Trina conscientiously, that he was sacrificing himself for the sake of his friend. The two stood up and faced each other, gripping hands. It was a great moment; even McTeague felt the drama of it. What a fine thing was this friendship between men! the dentist treats his friend for an ulcerated tooth and refuses payment; the friend reciprocates by giving up his girl. This was nobility. Their mutual affection and esteem suddenly increased enormously. It was Damon and Pythias; it was David and Jonathan; nothing could ever estrange them. Now it was for life or death.

"I'm much obliged," murmured McTeague. He could think of nothing better to say. "I'm much obliged," he repeated; "much obliged, Mark."

"That's all right, that's all right," returned Marcus Schouler, bravely, and it occurred to him to add, "You'll be happy together. Tell her for me -- tell her -- -tell her -- -- " Marcus could not go on. He wrung the dentist's hand silently.

It had not appeared to either of them that Trina might refuse McTeague. McTeague's spirits rose at once. In Marcus's withdrawal he fancied he saw an end to all his difficulties. Everything would come right, after all. The strained, exalted state of Marcus's nerves ended by putting him into fine humor as well. His grief suddenly changed to an excess of gaiety. The afternoon was a success.

They slapped each other on the back with great blows of the open palms, and they drank each other's health in a third round of beer.

Ten minutes after his renunciation of Trina Sieppe, Marcus astounded McTeague with a tremendous feat.

"Looka here, Mac. I know somethun you can't do. I'll bet you two bits I'll stump you." They each put a quarter on the table.

"Now watch me," cried Marcus. He caught up a billiard ball from the rack, poised it a moment in front of his face, then with a sudden, horrifying distension of his jaws crammed it into his mouth, and shut his lips over it.

For an instant McTeague was stupefied, his eyes bulging. Then an enormous laugh shook him. He roared and shouted, swaying in his chair, slapping his knee. What a josher was this Marcus! Sure, you never could tell what he would do next. Marcus slipped the ball out, wiped it on the tablecloth, and passed it to McTeague.

"Now let's see you do it."

McTeague fell suddenly grave. The matter was serious. He parted his thick mustaches and opened his enormous jaws like an anaconda. The ball disappeared inside his mouth. Marcus applauded vociferously, shouting, "Good work!" McTeague reached for the money and put it in his vest pocket, nodding his head with a knowing air.

Then suddenly his face grew purple, his jaws moved convulsively, he pawed at his cheeks with both hands. The billiard ball had slipped into his mouth easily enough; now, however, he could not get it out again.

It was terrible. The dentist rose to his feet, stumbling about among the dogs, his face working, his eyes starting. Try as he would, he could not stretch his jaws wide enough to slip the ball out. Marcus lost his wits, swearing at the top of his voice. McTeague sweated with terror; inarticulate sounds came from his crammed mouth; he waved his arms wildly; all the four dogs caught the excitement and began to bark. A waiter rushed in, the two billiard players returned, a little crowd formed. There was a veritable scene.

All at once the ball slipped out of McTeague's jaws as easily as it had gone in. What a relief! He dropped into a chair, wiping his forehead, gasping for breath.

On the strength of the occasion Marcus Schouler invited the entire group to drink with him.

By the time the affair was over and the group dispersed it was after five. Marcus and McTeague decided they would ride home on the cars. But they soon found this impossible. The dogs would not follow. Only Alexander, Marcus's new setter, kept his place at the rear of the car. The other three lost their senses immediately, running wildly about the streets with their heads in the air, or suddenly starting off at a furious gallop directly away from the car. Marcus whistled and shouted and lathered with rage in vain. The two friends were obliged to walk. When they finally reached Polk Street, Marcus shut up the three dogs in the hospital. Alexander he brought back to the flat with him.

There was a minute back yard in the rear, where Marcus had made a kennel for Alexander out of an old water barrel. Before he thought of his own supper Marcus put Alexander to bed and fed him a couple of dog biscuits. McTeague had followed him to the yard to keep him company. Alexander settled to his supper at once, chewing vigorously at the biscuit, his head on one side.

"What you going to do about this -- about that -- about -- about my cousin now, Mac?" inquired Marcus.

McTeague shook his head helplessly. It was dark by now and cold. The little back yard was grimy and full of odors. McTeague was tired with their long walk. All his uneasiness about his affair with Trina had returned. No, surely she was not for him. Marcus or some other man would win her in the end. What could she ever see to desire in him -- in him, a clumsy giant, with hands like wooden mallets? She had told him once that she would not marry him. Was that not final?

"I don' know what to do, Mark," he said.

"Well, you must make up to her now," answered Marcus. "Go and call on her."

McTeague started. He had not thought of calling on her. The idea frightened him a little.

"Of course," persisted Marcus, "that's the proper caper. What did you expect? Did you think you was never going to see her again?"

"I don' know, I don' know," responded the dentist, looking stupidly at the dog.

"You know where they live," continued Marcus Schouler. "Over at B Street station, across the bay. I'll take you over there whenever you want to go. I tell you what, we'll go over there Washington's Birthday. That's this next Wednesday; sure, they'll be glad to see you." It was good of Marcus. All at once

McTeague rose to an appreciation of what his friend was doing for him. He stammered:

"Say, Mark -- you're -- you're all right, anyhow."

"Why, pshaw!" said Marcus. "That's all right, old man. I'd like to see you two fixed, that's all. We'll go over Wednesday, sure."

They turned back to the house. Alexander left off eating and watched them go away, first with one eye, then with the other. But he was too self-respecting to whimper. However, by the time the two friends had reached the second landing on the back stairs a terrible commotion was under way in the little yard. They rushed to an open window at the end of the hall and looked down.

A thin board fence separated the flat's back yard from that used by the branch post-office. In the latter place lived a collie dog. He and Alexander had smelt each other out, blowing through the cracks of the fence at each other. Suddenly the quarrel had exploded on either side of the fence. The dogs raged at each other, snarling and barking, frantic with hate. Their teeth gleamed. They tore at the fence with their front paws. They filled the whole night with their clamor.

"By damn!" cried Marcus, "they don't love each other. Just listen; wouldn't that make a fight if the two got together? Have to try it some day."

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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.