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THE
*mysterious
traveler*
MAGAZINE

*Five
New
Tales!*

WILLIAM A. HALL

CHARLES MORGAN

MICHAEL D. COOPER

STEPHEN O'SULLIVAN

ROBERT FORBES

GREAT STORIES OF MYSTERY, TERROR AND SUSPENSE

THIS is The Mysterious Traveler, inviting you to join me on yet another journey into the realm of mystery and suspense. Tonight's trip is to be made within the pages of a magazine, rather than on the air as with my radio program from the 1950's.

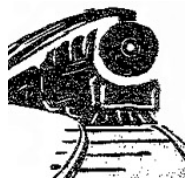
For those of you who remember the radio program and long for the same type of chilling tales you used to hear, this magazine is the answer. I would suggest you get a good grip on your nerves, for the stories gathered here are written by some of the world's most talented artisans of mystery and the macabre – each guaranteed to startle.

The stories in this issue of THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER MAGAZINE are of the highest quality I can collect for your reading pleasure. They have suspense, chills, thrills – and above all they are good reading, just as I strived to make The Mysterious Traveler on the air good listening.

I hope you will enjoy this online magazine, now on your computer for the first time in over fifty years. I also hope that if you find it satisfying, you will tell others of it. Spread the word to your family and friends that The Mysterious Traveler is back, and his tales of intrigue and terror are more fantastic than ever before!

And now I invite you to begin our trip together with one of the most entertaining short stories in my collection by my old friend William A. Hall, which begins on page 2. Good reading!

Sincerely,
The Mysterious Traveler



WINTER 2005

THE *mysterious traveler*

MAGAZINE

GREAT STORIES OF MYSTERY, DETECTION, AND SUSPENSE

SUSPENSE

DOCTORS APPOINTMENTWilliam A. Hall 2

MYSTERY

LEMON DROP WITH A TWISTCharles Morgan 7

THE MACABRE

THE WOMAN ON THE BEDRobert Forbes 15

STRANGE STORIES

THE BEST IN THE WESTStephen O'Sullivan 25

SCIENCE FICTION

THE INFESTATION AT SULPHUR CREEK .Michael D. Cooper 36

MINI MYSTERY

COP & ROBBERThe Mysterious Traveler 45

SPECIAL FEATURES

THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER SUGGESTS48

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SETH T. SMOLINSKE, Publisher

MARK ZAHN, Managing Editor

Dedicated to Robert Arthur & David P. Kogan

It is human nature to seek revenge... yet there are few who act upon such devilish compulsions. Somewhere in the bitter cold of winter, a man draws warmth from the fires of revenge that burn inside him. What tragedy could cause such a frenzied passion? And, once face to face with his adversary, will he act upon his rage?

DOCTORS APPOINTMENT

By WILLIAM A. HALL

The wind was dreadfully cold blowing in short gusts with endless fury from the north. Even while sitting in the confines of the automobile the man felt it seeping through the crevices of the doors and windows. He sat back in the seat and tried to stretch his aching legs while straining to see the doorway across the street. He knew that Dr. Abrahms would be inside comfortably seated in his study in front of the warm fireplace. He was probably having brandy while relaxing with his family, oblivious to the man outside, the man who waited to kill him.

In spite of the discomfort caused by the weather the man

was patient. He suddenly smiled and gave a short pensive laugh that echoed inside the car. After all, he had been waiting almost forty years to kill Dr. Abrahms, and another few hours in the cold darkness wouldn't make much difference to either one of them.

With one gnarled hand he reached inside the breast pocket of his well-worn overcoat and removed a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He held a match in his other hand and deftly struck it on the thumbnail. It quickly blazed into life and while touching it to the end of his cigarette his eyes fell on the revolver in the seat beside him. He lowered the window only enough to toss the matchstick outside before slowly pulling the gun into his lap. He sat very still while massaging the smooth shiny pearl of the handle. The muzzle was also smooth and smelled faintly of oil as he had taken special care to clean it while waiting during the afternoon hours. Inside the chambers were six .38 caliber bullets. He leaned his head back against the seat of the car and closed his eyes while thinking what those

bullets would do to Dr. Abrahms. He could imagine himself standing before the doctor and swinging the gun up, watching the dawning fear in the doctor's eyes as he suddenly knew that the man was there to kill him, just as the good doctor had killed Jessica so many years before.

The sudden thought of his wife, Jessica, warmed him inside as though the wintry night had unexpectedly been transformed into a summer evening. He could see her standing before him even now as though he were staring at a photograph, the long flow of her auburn hair surrounding the perfect roundness of her face, aglow with the radiance of youth. He could still feel her delicate touch, still hear the quick laughter that had filled their lives so long ago. The endless years had done nothing to erase the love he had felt for her, had carried inside of him like a living thing. In past times the remembered image would have brought tears to his eyes. But tonight that grief had been replaced by the finality of what he was about to do. Tonight there would at last be

closure.

He was pulled from his reverie as a glimmer passed across his eyes. As he blinked he saw that a light had been turned on flooding the entrance of the doctor's home. The garage door silently slid upward and a dark shape backed out over the smooth concrete driveway. The brake lights momentarily blinded him before the car made its way along the street toward the business section of town. The man hurriedly fumbled for the key ring in the ignition and after two false starts the engine reluctantly sputtered to life. He guided the car into the dark street and followed at a discreet distance.

He noticed the car he followed was a new, expensive model, and this in itself served to fill him with rage. He knew the doctor was very successful not only in material wealth but in every facet of his life. He had a beautiful wife as well as two young healthy sons. Back in his own tiny house the man kept a scrapbook full of newspaper clippings citing the doctor's many accomplishments in civic organizations

around the community. His was a good life full of the blessings and material riches he and Jessica had never had the opportunity to share together. He was more determined than ever it was a life that would soon be ended.

A short time later the black car slowed before pulling into a small shopping mall off the main street and settled into a parking space in front of a sporting goods store. The man noted with satisfaction the doctor was alone. He parked his own car a few spaces behind and watched while the doctor carefully locked his door before pulling his coat tightly around himself and hurrying in out of the biting wind.

For a moment the man sat in silence not moving. He knew with point blank certainty that the wait was now over. The ledgers of life and death would at last be balanced and his tortured mind would at last be at peace. The thought gave way to movement as he climbed from his car and made his way toward the brightly lit doorway of the store. Looking neither left or right he strode in a determined and sin-

gle-minded manner in the direction of the entrance. Both the owner and doctor, who were standing together at the counter, turned toward the sound of the approaching customer. The man stood like a statue silhouetted in the arc of the entry. In a hoarse demanding voice he called the doctor by name and with one sweeping motion pulled the revolver from his overcoat pocket and fired until the gun was smoking and empty.

Two hours later the man sat erect and still across from the desk occupied by Lieutenant Wendall Nelson of the Lewisburg police department. His hands were cuffed and clasped tightly in front of him while his eyes were steady and unblinking. The lieutenant, after reading the arrest report, had demanded the man be brought from his cell upstairs down to his office. He now sat and viewed the old man with a mixture of hate and disgust, but also there was fear. In his fourteen years on the police force he had been involved in at least a hundred homicides, yet he

was still appalled at how men could kill with such ease and lack of conscience. Murder always left him with a sense of emptiness and a fear that could never be completely pushed aside. The lieutenant leaned across the desk. His own eyes met the sightless gaze of the man across from him. When he opened his mouth to speak his voice was cold and toneless.

“We know your name is Jacob Hollis and that you are a retired Army officer. We managed to find out that much from your car registration. Later in the evening we will have a complete record on you from the F.B.I. office in Washington and with what ever else the Veterans Administration can send us we’ll know every damn thing there is to know about you. In another half hour or so someone from the prosecuting attorney’s office will be here to take you downtown and file formal charges against you for capital murder.”

He paused to study the man who seemed not to hear. “Dr. Abrahms was a close personal friend of mine and before you

leave this room tonight I want to know why, Mr. Hollis.” A rasp of sharp emotion suddenly came to his voice and he resisted the urge to slap the sullen man across the face. “Listen you old fool. I’m sure some smart mouth lawyer will have a nice pat insanity plea all worked up for you but if we have to sit here all night I want to know why!”

Outwardly the old man lost some of his composure seeming to tremble from deep within. His breathing was now ragged and his voice deep and broken. “Very well, sir. I suppose it doesn’t matter now that justice has been served.”

He took a long deep breath as though to collect himself. “In 1966 I was married to Jessica Dodson. She was the most all-consuming part of my life, the one and only person I have ever loved. Two years later she was pregnant and I was drafted into the Army. After basic training I was scheduled to receive a state-side assignment but at the last minute several of us were re-assigned and they sent us to Vietnam. They had trained us to

kill and I suppose they wanted to get their money's worth. While on patrol there I was captured by the Viet Cong and remained a prisoner of war for nearly three years. I found out later I had been listed by the Army as killed in action and I suppose no one would have ever known the difference if we hadn't been released by an American platoon that stumbled over the village where we were being held."

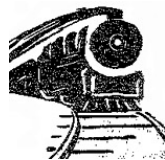
He stopped talking and for a moment simply stared as though seeing those events from long ago. "After I made it back to the states I searched everywhere for Jessica. I learned she had given birth to a child in an Army hospital outside of Washington and several hours later she had died. With my Jessica gone and myself listed as dead the baby had been give up for adoption. That man, your so-called friend, Dr. Abrahms, was responsible for her death, lieutenant. He brought death to that young beautiful woman and destroyed my own life in the process. My only thought, the one burning obsession that has haunted me all these

years, was to bring vengeance against the man responsible for her death." He stopped and stared at the policeman with burning eyes. "Do with me what you want. Now it's finished."

With a sudden and sickening realization lieutenant Nelson stood up from his chair so violently that it turned over and crashed behind him on the tile floor.

"But that's impossible, Hollis! Don't you see! Bob Abrahms was still a young man, not even 40 years old. He couldn't have possibly been the doctor responsible for your wife's death!"

Jacob Hollis turned cold empty eyes on the policeman. "Don't you understand? My wife, my sweet Jessica, died in pain and anguish while giving birth to our child." He bowed his head and continued in a low voice. "Doctor Bob Abrahms was my son."



Mysteries can be found in the strangest of places... sometimes they are just around the corner if we would only care to look. Gary Stone has been trained to do just that. When a mystery presents itself, he tears into it and won't let go until it's been solved. Here's a sweet little case in point, called...

LEMON DROP WITH A TWIST

By CHARLES MORGAN

The middle-aged man moved down the pavement behind the shopping center like a freight train. The steady fall of his footsteps kept perfect time like a metronome. He was tall with a muscular physique that belied his true age. His huge arms stretched his tee-shirt sleeves out to the point of tautness. His short cropped dark hair stood straight up. His square jaw and blue eyes were fixed straight ahead. As always, Gary Stone was off in his own little world when he ran. It was his time. His time to think, his time to remember, his time to get lost from the real world.

It was evening and the sun had started to set, giving way its watch of the planet to the night. Shadows

fell in pools across the land like black ink. The cool night air slapped at Gary's face in an invigorating rush. Sweat evaporated off his bare skin, the sensation making him feel alive and exhilarated.

In the distance he heard a choked cry. Gary lightly came to a halt; his former military trained senses were instantly alive and alert. His puffing breath became soundless as his ears zeroed in on the sound like radar.

It was sobbing. Someone, a female, was crying. Gary slowly and stealthily walked toward the sound. It came from an alleyway that was cloaked in gray and hidden behind a couple of half-painted, half-rusted dumpsters.

It wasn't in Gary's nature to be nosy, even though he was a private investigator; however, it was in his nature to help people if they needed it.

The ex-Navy Seal made his way to the edge of the alleyway and listened. He would make a reconnaissance of the situation to see if the person was in trouble and in need of help. As he listened, he became aware of a second presence in the alley. Reflexively his muscles tensed as he readied himself for

action.

“It’ll be all right...”

The reassuring words came from a male voice and were followed by a cough. His statement was only answered with more sobs.

“Okay, I’ll leave you alone. Take this as your break and come back in when you’re ready.”

Gary heard the sound of footsteps walking away and then the rusty squeak of a door opening and closing. After that, the only sounds coming from the alleyway were gentle sobs and the occasional sniffing of a nose.

He listened for a few more seconds. The crying continued at the same pace. He turned to leave, but something made him do an about face.

“Are you okay?” he called out from behind the corner trying to respect the crying woman’s privacy.

“Yes,” the answer was croaked back.

Gary stuck his head and shoulders into the alley, unsure if he should pursue this any further. After a moment’s pause, he turned and continued his run.

In the dull light perched over the back door, he had seen the person

who had been crying. She was a young woman who appeared to be Asian. She had long straight black hair that covered most of her face as her head tilted down in sorrow. She was slender and petite, clad in an open collared white blouse and low slung jeans. She wore a small dark apron tied around her shapely waist.

She’s either a waitress or bartender, Gary thought. He was aware that he had been behind a bar and dance club called ‘Passions.’ It was a popular place, a meat market for the young.

Picking up the pace, he tried his best to forget about the incident. The girl had said she was okay, after all.

Gary headed home and hit the showers. As much as he tried, he couldn’t put the girl out of his mind. He looked for an excuse to see her again. He hadn’t really figured out what he was doing for dinner that night, and he had to eat. He reasoned that maybe he should head back to ‘Passions’ for a quick bite. He knew from experience that they made a great Philly Cheese Steak.

It wasn’t long before Gary was driving up to the nightclub in his Corvette. He was single and without a family and because of that he was

able to afford some pretty nice things. He pushed open the front door and stepped into a world of jukebox music, neon lights, and cigarette smoke. There was already a good-sized crowd of young professionals who had come in after work for happy hour.

It didn't take Gary long to spot the woman. She was standing behind the bar talking to a customer. He saw a few open barstools near her and headed for one.

"Hi, what can I get you?" she asked.

The question had come in a robotic way, as if it had been asked a million times before. Her voice was low and melancholy. Gary looked into her blue eyes. They were red rimmed, puffy.

Blue? he thought, startled for a minute. Then he realized that she must have been wearing blue contact lens.

"A bottle of beer and a cheese steak with lettuce, tomato and mayonnaise. Hold the onions."

She jotted the order down on her order pad as he looked at her nametag. It said her name was Tiffany. She's definitely a very American Asian, he thought. He

watched her as she disappeared behind the bar. He couldn't help but notice the little wiggle in her step.

Despite the busy crowd, Gary was able to engage Tiffany in some on and off conversation. He finally asked her if she was doing all right. She didn't reveal any details, but she did let on that something very bad had happened.

"Here," Gary started as he fished into his shirt pocket and pulled out a business card. "I'm a private investigator. If there's anything that I can do for you, let me know."

Tiffany looked blankly at the card.

"And if you just need to talk," he continued, "I'm a good listener."

She looked up into his eyes in a questioning way.

"Look, in my line of work I wind up being a shrink, a minister, a friend, all types of different things that I'm not qualified to be. So, if you need any of the three..." he let his voice trail off.

She smiled at his subtle joke. It was the first time he had seen her do that and he was taken aback by her beauty.

She shot a quick look at her watch. "I'm off in a bit. I wouldn't

mind just talking. You can be the shrink.” She paused awkwardly as if she wanted to say something else. “Well – if that’s okay with you?”

“That will be fine.” He gave her a broad smile. “Just call me Dr. Gary.”

“Tiffany, you’ve got to do your short-shift duties.” The voice was scratchy but had a nasty edge to it.

Gary turned. The man who had spoken was eyeing him. He met the man’s gaze with a firm stare. The private investigator’s eyes, cold as steel, locked into the man’s brown eyes. Gary didn’t like his tone and felt a flush of anger rise up in him and burn.

He had immediately recognized the man’s voice as belonging to the guy who had been in the alleyway with Tiffany earlier.

The man broke the stare and walked off. As he did Tiffany leaned in and whispered, “He’s the head bartender, my boss. He’s actually okay. He just sometimes gets a little carried away with himself. He’s also not feeling real well. I think he’s got a sore throat.”

Gary nodded and dismissed the incident. A couple of minutes later Tiffany ushered him to a small

booth off to the side.

“I’ll get you another beer and then join you when my shift is over,” she said, still rather distracted.

Gary sat there for a while and busied himself watching the nightclub. Tiffany was off to the side restocking the bar with bottles of different brands of beer. Another girl had come in and had started taking orders behind the bar. A waitress had also checked in on Gary and he explained that he was waiting for Tiffany

After a while, Tiffany joined Gary in the booth carrying an Appletini in one hand, and a salad in the other.

“Light dinner,” Gary mused.

“I’m not really hungry,” she answered. “I’m just having the salad to try and keep my drink from going to my head.”

It was then that Tiffany related her tale.

“About six months ago I met a guy. He was a regular customer here and one night he asked me out. I don’t usually go out with customers, but with my hours here where else am I gonna meet a man? Anyway, we hit it off right away. Before long,

we started dating and fell in love.”

Tiffany paused for a minute fingering the lip of her martini glass with her slender, tapered finger – lost in her memories.

“So my boyfriend,” she said continuing, “was, umm, like an up and coming star where he worked. In fact he became the youngest vice president in the company’s history.”

“That’s terrific,” Gary said.

“Well, yes it was. Except three days ago he died.” The words came from her lips with all of the hopelessness of a tomb. “At first they thought that he died from a heart attack.”

“From the pressure of the job?” Gary asked, trying to help her fill in the blanks.

“No,” came her flat reply. “I just found out today that he was poisoned. It’s bad enough that my boyfriend’s dead, but to know that someone murdered him... it’s almost more than I can bear.”

Tiffany had spoken the last sentence so softly that Gary barely heard her over music. A tear slipped down her cheek, cutting through her makeup.

“I’m so sorry,” Gary said sympathetically. He reached out and put

his large hand over her small shaking one.

Over the next half-hour and another drink, she slowly told Gary all that she had learned that day. It appeared that her boyfriend had been poisoned with arsenic, but an autopsy was needed to know for sure. His secretary had been brought in that very afternoon and was still being held by the police. She had originally been the secretary to his chief archrival. But when Tiffany’s boyfriend had gotten the promotion, she had transferred over and become his personal secretary. The police investigation had found out that she was still having an affair with her ex-boss and the motive seemed obvious. Kill her boss, and help her ex-boss and current lover secure the promotion. Maybe he would even divorce his wife and make his ex-secretary his new wealthy wife.

Tiffany finally ended her story by commenting, “A police officer said: ‘Look for the person who benefits the most from the crime, and you usually have the perpetrator.’”

She looked up into Gary’s eyes and smiled feebly. For the moment she was done crying and seemed to feel a little bit better in being able to

talk about it.

"I'm so sorry," Gary said again.

"You going to be able to get home okay Tiffany?"

Startled, Tiffany jumped. During her talk with Gary she had become oblivious to her surroundings. The alcohol had helped too, numbing her brain and making her talk from behind a foggy haze. It seemed to Tiffany that Rich, her boss, had just appeared out of thin air to ask her the question.

"I'll be fine, thanks," she said.

"Okay, just let me know. I can always run you home real quick if you need me to."

Rich turned to Gary. "Sorry if I came on a bit strong earlier. I just got to make sure that these girls get their work done on time."

He stuck his hand out. Gary reached out and shook it. He noted the firm handshake and Rich's rough hands. His fingers even appeared a bit swollen and red.

The hands of a working man, Gary thought before he answered, "No sweat."

This time as he left, Gary paid special attention to the man. Rich appeared to be in his mid-thirties, short and stocky. From the girth of

the muscle beneath his rolled up shirtsleeve it was obvious that he worked out. His brown hair was long and in need of a trim.

"Well that was nice of him to apologize," Gary said trying to pick the conversation back up. But it was over. Tiffany was staring absently into her third drink. He could see she wanted to climb into it and get lost.

Gary was soon heading for home. Something about Tiffany's words was haunting him – so much so that he began to reconsider the situation.

On a hunch he sat down at his desk and made some calls. After a few dead-ends he found what he wanted. His blood ran cold.

Could it be?

He wanted to go out right then and there and find out. His first thought was to confront the situation head on, using force if necessary. But he calmed himself down. He would not fly off the handle. Not this time. He realized that what had made him a great fighting soldier, a fierce warrior, was also the reason he was alone in his life. He had been trained to be violent, to kill. There was no place for those skills in a

society of civilized people. For the millionth time he cursed both his strength and weakness.

He decided that he needed to use his head and be patient. He needed to learn more. For the next few weeks he went to Passions every night that he could. He ate there, he drank there, and he talked to Tiffany as much as he could there. He got to know the others who worked at the nightclub. He could feel that he was becoming a part of the scene. Others would wait on him, but everyone knew that he was Tiffany's customer.

During this time he knew that he and Tiffany were becoming closer. At times she looked at him in a longing, romantic way. But Gary knew better, and he tried his best not to lead her on.

His favorite place to sit was at the bar so that he was near her. He also got to know Rich. He seemed okay although he had a temper. One night Gary had broken up a fight between a customer and the bartender. Rich seemed like he wanted to bash the drunk's head in and was truly disappointed when Gary had ushered the guy outside.

Gary and Rich would talk, usual-

ly about sports. But it was Tiffany that Gary concentrated on.

One evening, Gary was in there for dinner as usual.

"Hey Gary," Tiffany smiled. "Want to have something different to drink with your dinner tonight?"

"Oh yeah, what's that?"

"Rich makes a terrific Lemon Drop Martini. It's sort of his specialty and it's really good."

"Sure," Gary shrugged casually. "I'll be right back. I have to go outside and make a phone call."

Tiffany went over to Rich and told him to make his specialty. Rich looked over at Gary and gave a thumbs up.

Gary immediately stepped outside and made a call to his friend, Detective Joe Wilson. It wasn't long before Wilson was at the club where Gary met him outside.

Wilson was older than Gary, and not far from retiring from the force. He had gray hair and, in his suit, looked rather dapper for a cop.

They walked into the bar together. "Joe, take that drink and have it analyzed for me," Gary said pointing to the drink that Rich had made.

Rich tensed. "Why?" he asked, involuntarily clearing his throat.

“You know why,” came Gary’s cold reply. His voice was low and firm. “There’s arsenic in it. You murdered Tiffany’s boyfriend.

For a long moment time seemed to freeze. Tiffany looked on in horror. Suddenly Rich made a lunge for the martini glass, but Gary had anticipated his move and got there first. Rich started to run. Gary sprang into action, doing a side vault over the bar like a gymnast on a pommel horse – his feet kicking beer glasses into the air. The mugs crashed into the wall, the pieces falling like rain onto the floor. He was instantly on the other side.

Gary took one long stride, reached out with a firm arm, and grabbed Rich by the back of the collar. He flung the man back like a rag doll. Rich started to fight back, but when Gary grabbed him by the throat, twisted it, and pinned him up against the wall, he stopped.

Wilson quickly moved around the bar. “I’ve got him now, Stone. But tell me – how did you know?”

“Tiffany gave me the clues.”

“What? How?” she uttered in disbelief.

“You reminded me that the person who has the most to gain is usu-

ally the perp. Well, Rich here is in love with you. He would have a lot to gain if your boyfriend was out of the picture,” said Gary confidently.

“You can’t prove a thing. You’re lying!” hissed Rich.

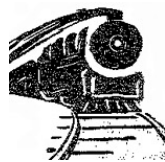
“Well, then there’s the evidence, besides what’s in the glass. Breathing inorganic arsenic can give you a sore throat or irritate your lungs. Rich had a sore throat when I first met him, and that was right around the time of the murder. Also, coincidentally, since I have been around paying attention to Tiffany, the symptoms have reappeared.”

“So what? I have allergies!” he screamed.

”Look at his hands. Note the swelling and redness around his fingernails. Skin contact with inorganic arsenic can cause redness and swelling.”

Wilson examined Rich’s hand. It appeared Gary was right.

“Okay buddy, we’ve got some tests to run on you,” Wilson growled as he led Rich away.



Children will often have an irrational fear of the dark, but what about adults? Could there be something out there, something evil, to make a grown man sleep with the light on? It's been twenty years since Frank Beamer slept with the light on, but that is about to change...

THE WOMAN ON THE BED

By ROBERT FORBES

Frank Beamer wasn't the type to scare easily. Still, the woman on the bed was enough to unnerve anyone. The first time it happened he laughed at himself for acting like a child, and then decided it was tangible evidence as to what a deep-crust pizza and six beers will do to a man's sleep.

The second time it happened was harder to explain.

The Beamer's had just moved into their small ranch-style house in May. Naturally, the first thing they had asked the real estate agent was why the house, just over twenty years old, was on the market for practically nothing. Yes, the agent had said, two people had died in the house a year after it was built. Yes, it was the Brewster murder-

suicide. No, there had been no complaints of ghosts, hauntings or the like. In fact, he assured them, the little old lady that bought the house after the Brewster tragedy lived there until the day she died. Yes, she too died in the house.

Frank recalled the deaths of George and Ellen Brewster making the news on every channel when it happened eighteen years ago. He had been ten years old at the time and living with his aunt and uncle in Newcastle; a town twenty miles west. It had easily been the biggest thing to happen in the uneventful history of Pine Island up until that time. Since then, he noted, history had not been kind to the little town. There had been three grisly, and apparently random, murders – each six years apart – since George Brewster ended the life of his wife with a shotgun, and then exited stage-left the same way.

This fact had not escaped the residents of Pine Island, nor had the fact that six years had passed since the last murder. The town was on edge, and so was Frank. He openly admitted to Judy that he was uneasy moving into the Brewster house, although he could-

n't explain why. Judy, on the other hand, had no problems with the home whatsoever. She chided Frank for being a Nervous Nellie, and then chattered excitedly about her ideas for the baby's room.

The house itself was pretty standard. So standard, in fact, that it looked like every other house on the block. Three bedrooms, two baths, walk-in closets, two car garage, deck. It was the type of house that would fit into any middle-class neighborhood in North America. The type of house that was perfect for a married couple of two years to begin a family in. The type of house that was the exact opposite of what a haunted house was supposed to look like.

And now six months had passed and the Beamers were comfortably moved in. Their belongings were out of the boxes and arranged just so by Judy, and work on the baby's room was progressing nicely. Frank counted himself lucky. For a house that had seen three deaths, there hadn't been a single moan in the night, nor the ghostly sound of dragging chains in the attic.

That was until three weeks ago. Three weeks ago, Frank Beamer

looked like he had seen a ghost.

Work at the washing machine plant, Pine Island's cornerstone business and employer of half the town, was wearisome labor. Everyone there talked about the upcoming weekend even as they punched the timeclock on Monday morning. Frank was no different; although he couldn't help thinking that he worked harder on the weekends than he did at the plant.

The house definitely kept them busy. The workload seemed to increase in proportion to Judy's belly – it just kept getting bigger and bigger. Wallpaper, trim, and blinds had to be torn off the walls in the spare bedroom. Then there was primer, paint, a new light fixture, and new carpet. On top of it all were the cute details Judy had dreamed up for the birth of their baby boy. The kid had Frank exhausted, and the hardest part was yet to come!

Perhaps it was the long hours at the plant and the hard work at home that brought on the dreams, or visions, or whatever they were. Either way, Frank couldn't recall the last time he had felt so tired.

When his head finally hit the pillow each night, there was no tossing or turning; his eyes closed and he was immediately in a deep, dreamless slumber.

Maybe that is why the first time it happened was so alarming, so unexpected. It was almost like a dream within a dream – in which one is awakened from a nightmare only to realize what they thought was wakefulness was really only another part of the same dream.

It started as a faint tittering sound. Something far off that was unrecognizable. The kind of odd sound that Frank's mind couldn't associate with the usual pops, creaks, and groans of a house settling at night. It set off alarms in his head and slowly brought him up from his sleep to investigate. Better safe than sorry, his brain assured him. Especially if the sound was an electrical circuit that had sparked, or a carbon monoxide detector that was beeping. And so, half awake and slightly annoyed, Frank rolled over onto his back, eyes still closed, and listened.

Titter.

What the hell is that? Frank wondered, coming fully awake

now. *I've never heard that sound before. It almost sounds like someone giggling...*

Titter... hee hee...

Frank's eyes opened – his pupils made immediate adjustments to the murky darkness. He had yet to put blinds and curtains up on their bedroom window – the kind Judy wanted were on back order. And so the soft glow of moonlight filtered in, illuminating the old woman sitting on the mattress at the foot of Frank Beamer's bed. She turned and looked at him, a ghastly smile spreading across her face.

Titter... hm hmm hee hee...

And then she was gone. Or had she been there in the first place? His heart thumping wildly, Frank rubbed his eyes and shook his head in an effort to wake himself up. His mind, startled by the apparition, only seemed capable of processing two words: *I'm dreaming*. After saying it a dozen times, he blinked rapidly and stared at the foot of the bed.

What in God's name was that?

He turned to look at Judy. She was breathing softly, completely undisturbed. That was surprising as she was normally a light sleeper –

and even more so now. Her body, preparing itself for the nightly feedings that were to come when the baby was born, had been snapping to attention at the slightest sound for the last couple of weeks. Frank snuggled up beside his wife and held her close; marveling at the vivid clarity in which he had seen the old woman.

No. He mentally corrected himself. *I did not see her – I dreamed her.*

But what a dream... the woman had been as clear as day! At the foot of the bed, just inches from his feet, an old woman sat and smiled at him. She was small in stature, quite skinny; and wore a black dress with white lace around the collar that, to Frank at least, seemed old fashioned. Her white hair was pulled back tightly in a neat bun. She sat primly, knees together and bony, skeletal hands laced primly on her lap. Frank had not see her eyes. They appeared to be black. But he did see the reflection of the moonlight in them, and that was almost more horrible than the giggling.

Calm down, he insisted. *It was only a dream...*"

But sleep did not come for Frank Beamer. He held his wife close and did not look at the foot of the bed until morning.

A week passed before the old woman returned. It was, in fact, just enough time for Frank Beamer to put the whole thing out of his mind. It was a dream, of course. A very real and powerful dream, but a dream nonetheless. He was not going into hysterics over something that was brought on by light beer and a medium supreme pizza from Rocky's Tap.

When the next Saturday rolled around, Frank was in fine spirits. It was a beautiful autumn day – the sun was shining, leaves were changing color, and football was on the radio. They worked on the baby's room for much of the day, and then went to a movie with some friends from work. When they returned home they fell asleep in each other's arms.

Titter.

Frank's brain processed the sound and brought him up from the depths of sleep much faster than the first time. And there was something else. Something that smelled

old... rotten.

Hee hee...

His eyes snapped open. The old woman, dressed the same, sat on the edge of the bed. She was closer this time – by his knees. Frank’s heart leapt, thumping and pounding like he had just completed a marathon. Black eyes twinkling in the moonlight, the woman exposed a row of crooked, yellowing teeth in a demonic smile. And then she was gone – vanishing in the blink of an eye. Frank was left with gooseflesh from head to toe, his forehead and the palms of his hands wet with perspiration. He looked down at Judy and noticed he was holding her close to him in a tight, smothering hug. She didn’t appear to mind.

His thoughts consumed by the woman, Frank went through the motions at work. He sat by himself in the cafeteria over the lunch hour and pushed his food around. Thinking of the old woman and her cruel smile made eating impossible. Instead, he found himself gazing at the employee’s smoking lounge and longing for a cigarette; a habit he had kicked when he met

Judy three years ago.

Judy – he thought about telling her of his recurring dream and wondered what her response would be. He was trying to decide how he could bring it up without sounding crazy when the buzzer sounded. He threw his food out, put his safety glasses on, and walked silently back to his post.

Frank Beamer never had a chance to put the most recent incident out of his mind.

Three days later she was back.

In the nights following the old woman’s second visit, Frank stayed awake until eleven o’clock, then midnight. He swallowed sleeping pills to ensure that he slept the night through with no interruptions, explaining to Judy that he’d strained his back at work and needed the pills to get through the night.

There was no giggling on the evening of the third night. On her side, Judy breathed deeply while Frank fought sleep. His eyelids grew heavy, and when he could resist no longer, they drooped. It seemed he was only asleep for a second when he smelled it. It was a rank, rotten smell. The smell of decaying flesh. His brain fought off

the sleeping pills, sending out a cry of alarm. Not sure if he was dreaming, Frank recalled a vague, foul odor the last time the woman paid him a visit.

His eyes opened and she was there. Frank let out a cry and shrank back into his pillow. His fingers, white at the knuckles, pulled the sheets up to his chin. The old woman in the black dress was closer still – at his hip this time. The smell of rot was overwhelming. She turned her head, smiled greedily, and then was gone; leaving nothing but the smell of dead skin lingering in the air. His breath coming out in choked gasps, Frank looked at Judy, sure that his cry must have awakened her. But she remained still, her breathing soft and even.

Frank padded out to the pantry, turning on every lightswitch he passed. With shaking hands he poured himself a large shot of bourbon, downed it, and had another. Leaving the lights on, he gargled and returned to bed.

Ten days passed. Dark circles had formed under Frank's eyes. His hair was unkempt – a growth of

whiskers sprouted on his chin. At the plant he was short tempered and moody, his mind distracted by visions of an old woman with her hair in a tight bun.

He laughed it off to his co-workers as nothing more than anxiety over the upcoming birth. Judy was not so sure. She insisted that Frank see a doctor and get a physical examination. He humored her and, except for a mild case of insomnia, was given a clean bill of health. The doctor sent him home with a sedative prescription and a warning that heart attacks were caused by stress as much as they were by a poor diet or lack of exercise.

None of this mattered to Frank. He walked around in a daze, consumed with thoughts of the next spectral visit. How close would she be the next time she appeared? On top of him? And then what? What did she want? He found himself at the library researching the woman who had previously lived in their home. There was nothing. She was in bake-offs, bridge clubs, and church fundraisers. Her obituary noted that she had no siblings, no children, and was never married. A

quiet, God-fearing woman who was, by all outward appearances, charitable and kind.

A thick bank of thunderclouds rolled in Friday afternoon, and a rare Autumn thunderstorm threatened to postpone the high school football game Frank and Judy had planned to attend. Frank looked skyward as he punched out from the plant, his heart heavy with what he knew to be true.

She would come for him tonight.

He didn't know how he knew this, and really, what did it matter? She would come, stinking of the grave, smiling wickedly – feeding off his fear. And Frank Beamer would be powerless. He would cringe and moan, unable to look away from the malicious glee on the old woman's face.

He stopped at the liquor store on his way home and replenished his supply of bourbon. He would have to steel his nerves for tonight in order to do the unthinkable. Tonight he would talk to her. He didn't worry about Judy waking up since she had slept soundly through every visit. It wasn't a great plan, but it was all he could think to do –

he had to sleep. With a rosary in his hand and bourbon in his blood, he would confront the giggling woman in the black dress.

The rain held off and the football game went on as scheduled. Frank made frequent trips to the restroom and concession stand, where he nipped at the flask he kept buried inside his coat. When they returned home, Judy went straight to bed. She had smelled the whiskey on his breath and was not pleased. His mind already soft from the booze in his flask, Frank swallowed another shot before brushing his teeth and climbing in beside her.

The hours crawled by. Frank hovered in a surreal world somewhere between waking and sleep. *She will come*, he assured himself, clutching the rosary over his heart. *You'll know it when she's here – you'll smell it.*

On each visit from the woman in black, the moonlight that streamed through the window had become more faint. Frank thanked God for this. He knew she would be further up the bed this time; but there was no way he could prepare himself for just how close she was

going to be.

A rotting stink and a giggle.

Frank opened his eyes slowly.

He had tried to mentally prepare himself for this moment, but when it came his head involuntarily pulled back into his pillow and he had to look away.

Every hair on his body stood on end.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed, her bony hip touching his left bicep. The odor of decomposing flesh was overpowering. Frank's stomach clenched and he resisted the urge to vomit. There wasn't much moonlight, but there was enough. Combined with the glow of the bedroom's alarm clocks and the small light from the humidifier, it was more than enough. The old woman's cracked lips drew back in a hungry smile.

Titter.

Trembling, Frank clutched the rosary in his right hand. He brought it up close to his chin.

"What do you want?"

The woman's smile grew wider. Frank was horrified to see that she was leaning in close, as if to whisper in his ear. He turned his head away and clamped his eyes shut.

The old woman's foul breath blew against his cheek, smelling of worms.

It's me, Frank.

Air whistled between Frank's clenched teeth.

"Who?"

The old woman giggled and leaned in even closer – the tip of her nose brushing against Frank's ear.

You don't know? Why, it's me – George Brewster.

"Brewster?"

That's right, Frank. It took an awful lot of energy to come back to my old house. Six long years. Imagine how disappointed I was when I found out there was only a little old lady living here.

Eyes still shut tight, tears streamed onto Frank's pillow.

"What do you mean?" he sobbed.

The woman giggled and continued speaking, ignoring Frank's question.

But imagine my surprise when old lady Havermeyer turned out to be a more than willing host. She was so very lonely, Frank. I think she rather enjoyed my company. And if killing a few people is the

price you pay for a little bit of companionship – well, so be it. Am I right?

Frank shook his head, unbelieving.

Oh, but it's true, Frank. We made a fine team, old lady Havermeyer and me. But then she up and died on me, Frank. Of course I was upset. Who wouldn't be? But then I began to wonder who would be moving into my house next? Surely not another old woman! You see, I needed someone passive. Someone who wouldn't fight me when I wanted to borrow their body. And then you moved in Frank, and I realized I had the perfect vessel for my return. You understand, don't you Frank?

Frank's eyes opened and he looked over at the sleeping figure of his wife beside him.

“Not Judy. Dear God... not Judy!”

The old woman chuckled cruelly.

No, Frank. Not Judy. That foul stench you smell? That's not me, Frank. Oh, no. I've been busy. That's the baby growing inside your wife's belly. That's not the smell of decay, Frank old boy. No-

siree – that's the smell of rebirth! Do you believe in reincarnation, Frank? I'm not sure if I do either. But that's not going to stop us from having some fun! It took a lot of return trips, a lot of killing to figure this out. When that baby is delivered, I'll be inside. It'll be me, Frank. I'll be your boy!

Frank let out a choked sob.

The old woman giggled gleefully. Frank watched as she stood up from the bed and looked down at him, her gnarled hands clasped before her. *It's time, Frank. I'm sorry to have to do this, but you've really got to go.*

The old woman suddenly leapt on top of him – into him! Frank felt a nauseating coldness envelope his body, his blood, his organs. It raced through all parts of his frame before settling on his heart. An intense pressure gripped the muscle and squeezed it like a frozen vice. Frank wanted to battle the energy – had to, but he didn't know where to start. It was like being kicked from all sides.

His heart leapt wildly, pulsing in erratic bursts. Frank felt his energy fading and willed himself to hold on – to fight to the last. He thought

of his unborn child, his baby boy.

He couldn't let it end this way.

He would fight.

Fight...

Fight...

"Son of a gun, Frank – you gave us quite a scare!"

Frank opened his eyes a fraction, but the white light was blinding. He closed them and tried to speak.

"Wh... am I..."

"You're at St. Mary's, Frank. You've been out for almost four days!"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Doctor Kellogg. You're some kind of miracle, Frank. I can tell you – I've never seen anything like it. I mean, the odds are a million to one!"

"What?"

"You mean you don't remember?"

"What?" Frank said again.

"You're wife's water broke. That's the only thing that saved you! She said she would have slept right through your heart attack if not for that. She said you were tossing about like you were being attacked or something. Doctor

Sampson said you were fighting like a damn tiger in one room while your baby was being born in another. You mean you really don't remember?"

Frank licked his lips. "Judy?"

Doctor Kellogg smiled and patted his hand.

"She's fine, Frank. In fact, it was the fastest delivery I've ever seen!" He stood up and walked to the door. "If you're up to it, there's someone I'd like you to meet."

He nodded weakly. "Up to it."

"Then I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere."

Frank Beamer rested in his hospital bed, a multitude of wires protruding from his body. The various monitors beside his bed beeped out a heart rate that was steady and even.

"I won," Frank whispered lowly. "Brewster was trapped inside me when the baby was born. I beat him."

Didn't I?



During the course of my life, I've been to the four corners of the globe and traveled thousands of miles. If there is one constant I've found in my travels – whether it be in a crude hut in the Amazon or a honkey-tonk in Texas – it is this... Be careful what you wish for... you just might get it!

THE BEST IN THE WEST

By STEPHEN O'SULLIVAN

The swing doors of the Bar-X banged open, and in walked Virgil, the silver tips of his boots glinting in the bar's sepulchral light. Deke gave silent thanks that business was slack; the lack of daytime customers meant no one would mention Virgil's footwear and thus prompt his eulogy to "the finest pair of boots this side of the Mississippi". The saddler's anecdotes creaked like the tasselled and gleaming leather jacket he wore as though it was a passport to the Old West, and Deke wasn't sure if he could bear any more.

"Gimme a cold one."

Virgil always, but always, drank from the bottle. Deke slid a beer across the bar, fighting the temptation to rasp: "We got nothing but whisky, stranger."

Virgil picked up his drink, banged it back down on the counter and prised his palm from the bottle. "God almighty, Deke! I said cold, not frozen. What'd you do, import it from Alaska?"

Deke pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "New icebox – state of the art. Keeps things colder than an Eskimo's butt."

Virgil braved a swig, and grimaced. "Damn, that's cold. Stick a lime in it – let my lips know they're still around."

"You got it." Deke took a lime and began to cut it in half. His knife failed to make much headway, forcing him to press down hard. The lime slipped out of his hand and the blade scythed into the chopping board. He counted his fingers and thumbs and was relieved to make it to double figures.

Virgil sucked in his breath. "You know, the most dangerous thing in a kitchen – "

"– don't say it," Deke smiled.

“Yeah, I know.”

Virgil laughed. Deke watched him grab a handful of potato chips from the bar bowl and chow down, another drinker prepared to enter the drinkers’ pact with the bar-owners of America: you provide me with free, salty snacks, and I work up a thirst. Deke, whose time behind the bar had furnished him with a fund of stories and jokes to keep the mood going and the suds flowing, declined to sample the fare, knowing as he did that a forensic analysis of bar snacks had once found more than thirty different samples of urine in the one bowl of bar peanuts; and Deke, knowing as he did the average Houston beer-drinking male’s eagerness to return from the washroom to the fray as quickly as possible, wouldn’t mind wagering that the Bar-X could break that record on any given night of the week.

Virgil nodded towards Deke’s knife. “You got nothing sharper than that?”

“My girlfriend’s tongue, but she’s busy right now.”

“You’re gonna have an acci-

dent with that thing. Hey, I’ll show you something that’s really state of the art. It’s in my wheels.”

“Virgil, it’s okay. Really.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not trying to sell you nothing – but I just got a new piece of kit and I’m busting to show it to someone.”

Virgil slid off his stool and creaked out through the door. Deke knew the score. He had lost count of the number of times someone had tried to rope him in on a “real sweet deal” or sell him some hare-brained franchise that would make him a millionaire without having to lift a finger. To most drinkers, barmen were confidantes and confessors and, when times were tough and the liquor raw, easy marks, priests with wallets, and ultimately good men who would surely help out a friend in need.

“Gentlemen, start your engines,” came an amused voice from the shadows.

“Not funny, Josh,” replied Deke. “Virgil could bore for Texas.”

The only other customer in Bar-X that afternoon was Josh, a

regular who sat at his accustomed berth at the far end of the bar, nursing his beer. He was one of those San Diego slackers who had perfected the art of not working for a living. Deke suspected that he had woken up in Houston after a particularly heavy weekend, and simply couldn't muster the effort to go home.

"There's plenty of competition for that post," smiled Josh. "He's probably gonna sell you a spittoon."

"If he does, I'll make sure to put your next drink in it."

Virgil returned, carrying a tiny, square briefcase. He carefully lifted it onto the bar top, where Deke could see that it was a heavily reinforced steel box, like one of those carry-cases that housed an expensive camera.

"That looks heavy duty."

"You'd better believe it."

"Virgil, no offense – but whatever it is, I'm not buying."

"Don't worry. Your money's safe. I wouldn't sell this puppy for half the state." He patted the case. "There's a story about this."

Deke groaned inwardly. Until the Bar-X became the Bar-Xtra Busy later that night, drinking etiquette demanded that he provided an attentive audience for his customer's ramblings.

"You know I'm always saying how steel is no good nowadays?"

"Yes, Virge, I know."

"My blades used to last, but now I get through them like they were smokes. You can sharpen them, sure, but the steel is such poor quality that they can only take so much. They get brittle, and that's when they notch and dig and ruin a day's work.

"Well, last week I was finishing off a pair of alligator-skin boots for one of those Vegas high-rollers who likes to wear his winnings. I'd almost finished one boot when the blade snagged, took off a tassel and damn near my finger with it. That's it, I said. I'm sick of tools that can't do the job. So I looked through all the suppliers' catalogues, and I visited every hardware shop, every jeweller and every medical supplies company in town – every one and every one, if you get my drift. And I

got the same old trash offered every time, until my doctor, who owes me a favor since I made a beautiful belt for him last Thanksgiving, put me on to a surgeon friend of his. Long story short – this surgeon gets his equipment from a back-street supplies shop and keeps the rest of his equipment budget – but you didn't hear that from me.”

“I never listen to a word you say, Virge.”

“Huh. So I find this shop, just a regular gun shop off the interstate, and I ask the owner about knives. I told him I was looking for the sharpest blade he had, and the jackass tells me the sharpest blade is the one that's been sharpened, that I'd be better off buying a grinder or a leather strop. As if I didn't know that.”

“Yeah,” ventured Josh, “but he could've just tried to sell you a knife, man. It was good advice.”

Virgil's jacket creaked like an old ship as he turned to look down the bar. “Advice I get plenty of, Josh. When you come in here you want a beer, am I right?”

Josh raised his glass. “More often than not.”

“Right, and when I go into a shop I want to buy something.” He turned back to face Deke. “So anyway, once I put him straight he tries to give me the usual bull – this here is Swiss-made, this one's German, lifetime guarantee, yeah, yeah, yeah – hell, even tried to sell me some Korean crap. By this time I'm losing my patience. I want a damn good knife, you know? So I tell him, ‘I make saddles. I make the best in the West.’”

Deke raised an eyebrow.

“Well, the mid-West.”

Deke's eyebrow stayed in place.

“Okay, the panhandle. Happy?”

“Ecstatic.”

“Right. So I tell him what I need is a blade that will cut through leather one time, no snagging; like a scalpel, only bigger and tougher. Let me tell you, good calf leather is like silk – it can crumple at the burred edge – so I need good tools. But even the best knife snags sometimes. I keep in work because

I'm good at what I do." Virgil leaned back and held his arms open the better to display his jacket and boots.

"Nice threads," said Josh.

"You're not kidding. So I tell this guy I earn good money, only now I'm in a position to afford the best I find the best isn't good enough. I use my blades for dough, not show." Virgil swigged his beer. "Once he knew he was dealing with a professional he changed his tune. Said he had something that might be good enough for a real pro."

Deke looked at the case. "All this for a knife? You sure this ain't your lunchbox, Virge?"

"Laugh if you like, this here is the best you can get, the sharpest blade in the world. You might call it," he smiled, pleased with his flash of inspiration, "you might call it cutting-edge technology."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. He called it a Gordian Knife."

"A what?"

"Gordian. Hell, I don't know. I figured it was the brand name or something – like a Bowie."

At this, the slumped figure of Josh slid along the bar and sat next to Virgil.

"Gordian, man."

Deke and Virgil exchanged blank looks.

Josh sighed. "You heard of Alexander the Great?"

"You mean the – the Russian guy?" asked Virgil.

"No, man, the Greek guy. Conqueror of the known world?"

"You got me."

"Man, and with a name like yours..."

"I don't get it."

"Never mind. Anyway – hey, Deke, can I get a brewski? – this Alexander guy had to undo a big knot, and if he could do it he was the rightful king of Greece."

"Those damned Europeans," growled Virgil.

"Yeah," said Deke, winking as he handed Josh a beer, "those Europeans. That's no basis for a system of government."

Josh giggled. "I gotcha. I mean, where's the legislative body? Who's gonna form the judiciary and regulate the –"

"What's this got to do with my knife?"

Josh wiped the froth from his straggly beard. "Sorry, man. Anyway he had to untie this big screw-you Gordian knot - "

"Why Gordian?"

"Huh?"

"Why's it called a Gordian knot?"

"It just is, okay? Maybe it's Greek for screw-you."

"Whatever. So Alexander unties this big knot."

"Uh-uh. Couldn't do it. So he takes out his sword and chops it in half."

"Kinda unsporting," said Deke.

"That's kings for you, man. Righteous dudes."

"So that's it? That's your story?" said Virgil.

"That's it, and I bet that's why your blade is called a Gordian knife. You got any pine nuts, Deke?"

"Sure," said Deke, fetching over a full bowl from the far end of the bar. "So, Virge, did this 'guy' make the blade himself?"

"Nope. It turns out he's tight with a technician at Rice University."

"Rice?" said Josh in a low

voice. "That place gives me chills, man. They've been making some real freaky stuff up there. One or two uniforms about the place, if you see what I'm saying."

Deke nodded. Houston had suffered from brownouts lately, and there had been complaints in the newspapers about the university draining the grid.

"Lemme tell you, Deke, some of our taxes," said Virgil, glancing at Josh, "are being spent at Rice on what they call 'R&D' - the very latest stuff. This gun guy says he might persuade his technician friend to let one of their samples go if I spend a few tax dollars myself."

"So how much was it?"

"Enough."

Enough had been plenty, thought Virgil, and then some. A phone call late one Sunday night had summoned him to the shop on the edge of a decrepit industrial estate. He had almost walked straight back out when the gun guy had first whispered the price in the back office, and he had laughed at the "once in a lifetime" offer until he saw that

the man wasn't smiling with him. The man said that he wouldn't offer it to just anybody; most folks would put a knife like this in a display case and never touch it again, but someone like Virgil, a man with the West in his bones and dust in his throat – a cowboy – well, he knew the knife would be going to a good home.

Similarly, Virgil knew a salesman's spiel when he heard it, but it still pushed a button. A cowboy: that gave the ears a treat. He had waited a long time to hear it. The proprietor and sole employee of Virgil Hunter's saddlery was known, but only to his long-dead parents, as Arnold Vasari; Arnie from the Bronx, a boy who loved Westerns. After puberty he became Arnold from N.Y.; then Mr Vasari from New York; and then, daringly, Virgil Vasari from the East Coast; and finally, as he had moved across the continent in search of men who chewed tobacco, and perfume-soaked women who wore garters and kept the best hotel in town, he had left his name by the roadside and swapped it for his new moniker, like a man changing

horses out on the trail. Soon he had lost the accent too, as though his imaginary horse had kicked a troublesome shoe loose.

Virgil decided he needed something special in his life, something that proved once and for all that he'd done the right thing in coming out West. He had always loved the saying "The best in the West", but this knife was even better than that; this was batting with the big boys: this was the best in the world. It had taken just a few seconds to ease the bulge in his goatskin wallet (he nearly always paid in cash, for how else could folks see what a marvellous job he had made of the stitching?), and then the knife was his and no one else's. He had placed the case in the back of his Ford with all the reverence a good workman could give to a good tool.

"C'mon man, let's see it," pleaded Josh.

"Okay, okay, wait a minute now. I asked the guy just how sharp this super-duper knife really was. He gets all philosophical on me. You can work on a blade, he says, yet it can always be just

that little bit sharper. It's like what kids always ask in school when the math teacher tells them about infinity. They always ask how big it is. The teacher tells them to think of the biggest possible number, and no matter what they come up with he just adds a one to it. That's it, says the guy, that's how sharp a knife can be – infinity plus one. It's like if the steel is good enough and you sharpen it enough it could split an atom – hell, split the air." Virgil laughed to himself. "Hogwash - but good hogwash."

Virgil flipped the case's lock and eased the top open. Deke expected to see a fancy carved handle and polished blade resting in a velvet-lined cradle, but instead he saw a thick, black handle ending in a dull, disappointingly small blade. The two white plastic clips that held the knife in place were the only splash of colour in the case's drab, grey interior.

"You have to keep it in this," said Virgil quickly in an attempt to combat Deke's skeptical expression. "The clips hold the handle so the blade doesn't touch

anything. The case is lined with some complex graphite solution, so if you should graze it there's a chance the blade won't cut through it. But the guy said it wouldn't really make much difference."

Virgil carefully wrapped his fingers around the handle and levered the knife out of the box. With a smile, he waved the blade from side to side.

Deke cocked an ear. "Can I hear humming?"

"You can. Feller says it's the friction from the neutrons as the blade slots between them. He said he couldn't begin to imagine how the lab rats made it. I tell you, I can't wait to try it out on some of my longhorn skins. Let me cut that lime for you." Virgil seemed to wave the knife at the green globe, and it fell apart as if it had given up the ghost. Deke examined the lime. No juice oozed from the pulp. The division was so sharp it seemed as though more than surface tension was holding the liquid back; it was like the lime hadn't noticed.

Virgil's voice grew in volume along with his confidence. "The

grip's made from a special rubber that warms to the touch and holds firmer as it warms up – like them Nascar tires, you know? It's the best knife handle in the world too, because it wouldn't be pretty if a knife this sharp slipped in your hands."

"Can I try?" asked Josh.

"Okay – careful now."

"I got it. Man, that feels good."

"Yeah, and the longer you hold it the better the grip gets."

"That's what I tell my old lady, man," said Josh, giggling so hard that both Deke and Virgil leaned away from the blade that wagged up and down in his shaking hand. Josh grabbed a pine nut from the bowl in front of him, took aim, and brushed the knife's tip against the nut. It split with an audible crack. He looked open-mouthed at the nut, at the blade, and then at a visibly happy Virgil, who pointed to his pride and joy.

"That is a real knife, my friends. It may not look much, but it'll get you there."

Deke decided to stem the John Fordisms. "We got happy hour

coming up, Virge. Mind if I try it on a pineapple?"

"Be my guest."

Deke gingerly took the knife from Josh. The rubber handle was already pleasantly warm to the touch and seemed to mould itself to his palm. A long-dormant memory came to him of finding his Uncle Dan's old baseball bat and knowing at once it was made for him. He cut through the pineapple without having to saw at all. He simply pushed through it like it wasn't there.

"Whoa, my girlfriend's tongue has nothing on this." Excited, he lined up six limes and counted up to six, waving the knife with each count. By the time he'd cut the last lime, the two halves of the first were still wobbling back and forth like an executive toy. He hadn't felt a thing. It was like cutting air.

"Holy crap, this is so sharp you could shave a baby. Say, Virge, how much did you really pay for this? Can I get one?"

"One time only, my friend. Said he couldn't risk another one getting out."

“C’mon, you know I’m good for it.”

“I’m telling you the truth. It’s the only one not under lock and key.” Virgil smiled serenely, safe in the knowledge that his money had been well spent. He thought Deke looked thirstier than a parched coyote.

Deke reluctantly tried to put the knife down, but couldn’t. The handle had stuck to his palm. He splayed out his fingers, expecting the knife to drop, but it refused to move. Annoyed and alarmed, he shook his wrist to dislodge the knife. It bounced handle-first onto the counter and then somersaulted between Virgil and Josh and onto the floor.

“Hell, Deke, that’s my new knife!” Virgil bent down and took a while to find the knife in the darkness below him, during which time Deke placed a fresh bottle of beer on the counter.

“On the house.”

“Obliged,” smiled Virgil, carefully clipping the knife back in its slot and closing the box with a thick click. He settled on his stool, weaved his hips from

side to side and, with a sigh, finally settled his rump into an acceptable spot, like a dog circling a blanket before finding the most comfortable position. Deke privately called it the Drinkers’ Rumba, and knew Virgil was just getting started.

A few hours later, by which time Stetsons and baseball caps were floating on a rowdy sea of heads in a packed Bar-X, Virgil was just getting finished. He waved a bleary goodbye to Deke, nearly forgot to take his precious case with him, and leaned heavily on Josh’s shoulder as they tottered out into a cold, clear night. Deke had grinned to see how Josh, a champion beer-wrangler, had roped a few drinks out of Virgil’s glossy wallet, but his smile soon vanished as he concentrated on hearing the next order over a thumping jukebox and the tinny baseball commentary droning from the bar’s tiny TV.

Near midnight the phone next to the cash register began ringing off the hook. Deke eventually managed to put the phone out of its misery when a home run dis-

tracted some of his patrons.

“Bar-X. Say what? Virge, is that you? You’ll have to speak up, I got a bunch of folks in here watching the Yankees game. Yeah, I’m listening. Huh? Virge, you’re drunk. Who’s coming here? Calm down, Virge. What? What? Your – no way. God almighty. Okay, gimme a minute.”

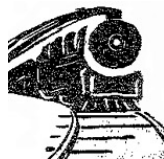
Everyone seemed to be looking at the TV. Deke walked quickly round to the front of the counter, his eyes scanning the floor. Swearing under his breath, he found what he was looking for among the discarded cigarette butts and crushed potato chips, picked it up and ducked back behind the counter. He picked up the phone.

“Yo, Virge? I got it. Hell of a thing. They’ll be here in ten minutes? Yeah, I know what to do.”

Under the fluorescent lamp used to check for fake twenties, Deke studied the chased silver leaf mounted on polished leather. Now he looked at it, he had to admit that Virgil really was a superb craftsman, maybe the best in the state, perhaps even the

best in the West. He slowly turned the boot tip until he could see the back of Virgil’s big toe like it was a cross-section diagram in an anatomy book. A pink-and-red ring of flesh and undisturbed blood cells surrounded the white disk of bone. Deke decided it would be best not to remove it from the boot’s tip. A paramedic would arrive soon to take it to a waiting micro-surgeon; apparently there had been a few similar cases of late at the university hospital. From what Deke had managed to decipher from the drunken, panicked phone call, Virgil had only noticed his problem when he put his feet up to watch the ballgame and, instead of the usual silhouetted twin peaks, saw only half a mountain range.

Deke decided that the Bar-X’s new icebox would come in handy to preserve the saddler’s big toe. After all, he reflected, it was state of the art.



Our universe is filled with many wonders, but planet Earth isn't the only place where trouble can be found. Starman Mark Seaton, a highly trained space explorer, is about to step into the unknown... where a madman and his hive of killers are lurking, and trouble is only a sting away...

THE INFESTATION AT SULPHUR CREEK

By MICHAEL D. COOPER

June 1, 2153

Starman Mark Seaton stepped carefully along the sandy floor of the arroyo, his ears alert for the ominous buzzing noise he was seeking, his eyes probing recesses in the canyon wall. The sound detectors inside his heavy-duty spacesuit were set on their most sensitive setting. In his hands he held a heat rifle, ready for instant use.

The sunlight of mid to late morning poured into the arroyo, lighting up the grainy magenta sand and casting sparkles into his eyes. The very brightness made the shadows darker, where they

lay behind outcroppings of baked sandstone that had not known the flow of water for thousands of years. Walls of stone lifted up to the Starman's right and left, reaching to the plateau about fifty feet above him. Rough scrub grew in patches, subsisting on the scanty dewfall and fogs that appeared only seasonally this far south of the Martian equator.

Suddenly the Starman tensed and gripped his rifle a little tighter. There was the buzz, like the growl of a small machine. Firewasps! If the swarm detected his presence, they would attack. In his spacesuit he knew that they couldn't harm him, but eliminating the colony would be far more difficult if he couldn't catch the firewasps unaware and fry the hive with a single blast.

Mark calmed himself inside. Firewasps could sense human emotions, perhaps even through the spacesuit. He slowed his breathing and then began to step gingerly along the path.

There it was! The nest was in a slot canyon that curled off to his left. Some small but hardy tree had eked out an existence in

a crack, and the firewasps had built their nest behind the tree, wedged into the crack. The hive was covered with crawling insects.

Slowly the Starman raised the rifle and released the beam. Instantly the top of the tree burst into flame. Behind it the stone seared, cracked, and flaked. The firewasps crisped into dark ash.

For a full minute, Mark maintained the withering heat ray as he approached the site. Then he shut off the beam, ready to restore it in a split-second. The rock wall behind the smoking stump radiated heat waves. Inside the crack where the hive had been there was only black dust.

Confident that there were no more firewasps in that location, Mark looked upward to make sure his course was clear. Then he ignited his jet pack and lifted up over the rim of the arroyo and flew back toward the village of Sulphur Creek where he had landed his shuttlecraft less than an hour earlier.

Five minutes later he passed through the personnel airlock of the domed village and dropped

gently next to the home of Major Jett, a retired officer formerly of Space Command. Mark walked up to the front door and removed his jet pack. He flipped open his helmet and knocked on the door.

“Come in!” cried a deep voice from inside.

Mark opened the door and stepped into the foyer of a comfortable home.

“C’mon in, Starman!” called the voice. “I heard you coming. I’m on the back patio. You’ll meet LaTanya in the kitchen—my daughter, visiting from Relcon.”

A woman in her early forties appeared around the corner. Black hair was drawn back into a ponytail from a well-shaped forehead. Her skin, nearly as black as ebony, glowed with health.

“Welcome, Starman Seaton!” she said, extending her hand and grasping his in a firm handshake. “My father’s out this way.”

“Thank you,” said Mark as he followed the woman into the back part of the house. She stepped into the covered patio then let him pass.

“Glad you could come so

quickly!” exclaimed the man the Starman had come to see. “Sorry I can’t get up.”

The man was seated in a wicker chair with his left leg elevated and resting on a pillow. It was bare from mid-thigh downward and swollen more than twice its normal size. Gauze was plentifully wrapped around the thigh.

“Sit down over there,” said the Major, indicating another chair nearby with a generous sweep of his hand. He was almost completely bald. Although he had been retired for about ten years, he appeared solid without too much extra fat.

“LaTanya, some lemonade or something.”

“Of course, father. I’m almost finished making it already.” The woman left the men together.

“How did you get away from the swarm, Major?” asked Mark. “I can’t imagine anyone surviving a firewasp attack.”

“Hmmp!” snorted the man. “I was lucky. I admit it—I was lucky. The swarm didn’t find me—just the one wasp that got me in the leg. I was taking a walk this morning, wearing only an

atmosphere suit. Got to the mouth of that arroyo and one of those blamed things skewered me. Felt like a spike, it did! Oh, it hurt! I slammed my hand down without even thinking and crushed the devil before it got away. Soon as I saw what it was, I ran. My adrenaline took me probably a quarter of a mile before I collapsed. I’d put in an emergency call to the medic and probably hollered at him all the way. I don’t usually lose my composure, Starman, I assure you, but these firewasps – these firewasps especially – are no laughing matter.” He gave Mark a shrewd look.

“Anyway, they found me and brought me home. You know the rest. An urgent call to you at Eagle City, and here you are. Here’s the lemonade, too.”

LaTanya had brought in three tall glasses and joined the two men. Mark took a sip and smiled his thanks.

“What do you mean by saying ‘these firewasps’, Major Jett?”

The man smacked his lips as he put his own glass down, and then leaned forward a little.

“Now that it’s over, it would be easy to laugh at the picture of a seventy-year-old man leaping across the desert as if his pants were on fire, hollering at the top of his voice.” He snorted again. “But this devil has been genetically engineered.” He unwrapped a white cloth that was lying on the table, revealing a repulsive, dead insect. “This is no ordinary firewasp. This,” he paused for emphasis, “is a weapon.”

Mark felt his skin crawl as he bent over the cloth and stared at the vicious insect.

“That was why I called Starlight instead of Pest Control. This was designed to kill.”

“If this strain was engineered,” Mark said, “what was the swarm doing in the wild?”

“Can’t answer that,” said Major Jett, leaning back. “An experiment gone awry, an escaped queen, I don’t know.” He looked sharply at the Starman. “But I do know that it was manufactured. The swarm you eliminated this morning was not the danger. The danger is in the main colony. You’ve got to find it and who’s responsible for it.”

“Sulphur Creek is an isolated community, Major,” said Mark. He sipped his lemonade. “I doubt that a hive of these firewasps could have traveled far. It must have come from somewhere in this village. The guilty party must be one of the many hidden followers of Andrew Forge, whom we apprehended just a month or so ago. Are there any residents who could be responsible for this infestation?”

“There are several who have the skill, Starman Seaton,” said LaTanya, speaking for the first time since she had sat down. “But only one likely suspect.” Her words came with conviction. Her father didn’t say anything, but his nostrils flared.

Mark gave her his full attention and raised his eyebrows a little. The woman looked away, her expression stern.

Finally Major Jett spoke up. “There are three scientists in our little community, Starman, who have the skill and probably the contacts necessary to create this menace. There are an archeologist, a botanist, and a genetic engineer. The geneticist is the

obvious suspect—not just because of his field but because he’s got the orneriness to do it!” The Major spoke with emphasis. Then he groaned and rubbed his leg.

“Dr. Luke Hawks is a noted misanthrope, Starman Seaton,” explained LaTanya. “He lives outside of Sulphur Creek in his own self-contained settlement. You probably saw his dome when you arrived here this morning. Dr. Hawks has prosthetic hands and forearms, having lost his arms in an explosion a few years ago. The same accident also blinded him in one eye and badly scarred his face and chest. He was never very nice before, but now he has a real grudge against the world. He’s bound to be your man. It wouldn’t be too difficult for any firewasps to escape his dome.”

About half an hour later, Mark cut the lifters on his jet pack and drifted to the ground on the edge of Dr. Hawks’ property. He stepped up to the communication screen at the outer airlock and raised contact with the house. A

minute went by without an answer. He tried again.

While he waited he gazed through the dome at a spread of buildings apparently haphazardly strewn across the landscape inside. Further inspection indicated that the placement of the buildings was not haphazard at all, but rather matched the natural features of the land. The best use was made to incorporate the roll of the valley and sizable boulders into the construction. Mark was impressed in spite of himself.

He tried the communicator once again. The screen lit up and revealed the countenance of a man unmistakably more than irritated.

“You’re slow on the uptake, Starman!” said the man with undisguised animosity. “If I’d wanted to talk to you I’d have answered you the first time! What’s keeping you from getting the message? What must I do to get rid of you as fast as possible?”

The man’s face was scored with many ridges of scar tissue. There was a black patch over his left eye. A swath of smooth, total-

ly hairless skin swept up from the eye patch over his forehead and back nearly halfway over the top of his head. What hair grew on the rest of his pate was close-cropped.

Calmly, Mark asked whether the geneticist had been involved in any experiments with fire-wasps, and began to describe his experience in the arroyo.

“You don’t fool me, you meddler!” sneered the man in the screen. “There’s been some sort of incident and everybody’s pointed the finger at me! Well, no one’s getting into my property, no filthy Starman or anyone, not without a warrant! If you come back with one and force your way in, I’ll accompany you everywhere you go! No one gets a look at my experiments! And if you do get a warrant, maybe it’ll be worth it to prove that I’m innocent and keep you from coming back! Until then, get out and leave me alone!”

The screen shut down.

He’s innocent, thought Mark as he ignited the jet pack. Decidedly unpleasant, but there’s no hint of guilt there. Now what?

Minutes later, cruising about seventy feet off the ground, Mark passed by another domed residence with outbuildings, separate from the village itself. The dome was filled with a thin white fog. Dimly the Starman could see buildings and many trees through it. He also noticed a row of white boxes about two feet square, set in the middle of a field far from any building.

Beehives, he thought. Bees aren’t wasps, but this is worth investigating.

He dropped to the ground near the entrance to the complex. This time his contact was answered within seconds. The face of a young man in his late teens or early twenties appeared on the communicator screen.

“May I help you?”

Mark introduced himself and asked who lived inside.

“This is the home and laboratory of Dr. Henry Garvey,” the young man said. “He’s a botanist.”

The need for the beehives suddenly became evident to the Starman.

“May I come in and talk with him?” asked Mark.

The young man looked wary. “Well, he’s rather busy at the moment,” he said. “Maybe if you come back later...”

“I’m only in Sulphur Creek for a few hours,” explained Mark patiently but firmly. “The best time is now. I will not interrupt him for long.” The Starman set his jet pack and heat rifle down to indicate that he was not planning to leave anytime soon.

“I’ll... I’ll tell him you’re here.” The airlock opened and Mark stepped through. In less than a minute he was inside the dome and knocking on the front door of the residence. The world had altered from the bright sunlight of late morning to a dense, clammy, supermoist atmosphere. The young man who had spoken to him through the communicator admitted him to the house.

“Wait right here, please,” he said, and left Mark standing in the entrance while he disappeared into the back of the residence.

A few minutes later a middle-aged man came through the hall-

way and greeted Mark. He was wearing comfortable brown work clothes, slightly damp from the fog. An aroma of rich topsoil wafted from him.

“Welcome, welcome, sir!” said the man, shaking Mark’s hand. “I am Henry Garvey. Please forgive my delay. I had to wash my hands. I was delighted when Waldo said that we had a Starman at the door. How can I help you? Please, come in, sit down!” Dr. Garvey ushered Mark into a sitting room. Potted plants, airplants, and tanks of hydroponic flowers provided tasteful decor.

Mark explained his mission briefly.

“Ah, I see,” said Dr. Garvey, tenting his fingers and assuming a thoughtful expression. “I need the bees, as you have no doubt guessed, for my experiments in pollination. Wasps are no good for that purpose, and I don’t have any on the property. You are welcome to check, if you like.”

“Thank you, I’d like that,” said Mark. “I appreciate the offer, especially since your son said that you were busy at the

moment.”

“Oh, Waldo’s not my son. He’s my assistant. He came from Eagle City just a few months ago. Quite a capable young man,” explained Dr. Garvey as he opened the back door of the house to let Mark pass through into the fields beyond.

Gray silhouettes of trees appeared in the middle distance. Adjacent to the house were ordered plots with vegetables growing in profusion. The orchard began fifty yards or so away. A field rife with flowers lay off to the left. The two men strolled alongside a high hedge on their right, making their way toward the orchard.

“Waldo’s fascinated with botany,” continued Dr. Garvey. “He conducts his own experiments, I’m sure. Packages arrive for him from Eagle City rather frequently. He has his own workshop back in that direction. His living quarters are there too. He won’t stay in the house, even though I’ve got plenty of room. He’s probably out there right now. He went out that direction after he notified me you were

here. We’ll go over.”

“There he is,” pointed out the Starman. “He’s running!”

Dr. Garvey squinted as he strained to look ahead. “Now, that’s strange. He must have been behind this hedge while we were talking. What’s he doing? Why... where are you going?”

The Starman had left his host and begun to sprint across the field in pursuit of the botanist’s assistant. Frantically, Waldo opened the front door of the cottage, cast a look back toward Mark as he leaped through, and slammed it shut. Mark was only a few seconds away when an explosion shook the house from inside. Several windows blew out, and the front door flew open.

Mark skidded to a stop. He took his laser pistol in his hand and approached the house with caution. When he heard an angry buzzing sound, instantly he turned and dashed back toward the residence. Dr. Garvey was coming up the walk, confusion written across his features.

“What in the world...?” he began.

Mark grabbed the man in both

his arms and kept running.

“What’s going on?” gasped the botanist.

“Firewasps,” said Mark, grimly. “Waldo set them loose! We’ve got to get into the house and seal it up! It’s the only place you’ll be safe inside the dome! The fog will help us! They can’t fly very fast in it!”

“I... I don’t understand,” moaned Dr. Garvey.

Mark reached the back door and hurled himself through it. He put the botanist on his own feet and slammed the door.

“Shut the windows!” he ordered.

“The windows are all closed. I keep them shut whenever I fill the compound with fog. I can’t have the dampness get into the house.”

Mark sighed with relief. Just then the indicator showed that the front airlock was in use. Mark ran to the front of the house and saw Waldo fleeing across the fields toward the spaceport.

“Call the spaceport!” Mark ordered. “Tell them to prevent Waldo from taking off!”

“There’s no one to stop him,”

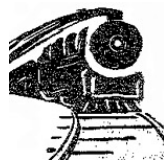
said Dr. Garvey, who had followed the Starman. “It’s a small port with only a single attendant. Waldo and anyone else can come and go as they wish. Surely you saw that when you landed.”

Mark had stopped paying attention to the botanist after the first sentence. He had activated his compad.

“Zip and Joe! Urgent! A small shuttlecraft will be taking off from Sulphur Creek in a few moments. The pilot is the man I’ve been looking for. You’ll have to trace him and apprehend him!”

“No problem, Mark!” responded Joe Taylor. “We can be airborne in five minutes. We’ll track him! See you for dinner, I assume?”

After Mark signed off, he turned to Dr. Garvey. “You’d better call Pest Control immediately. They’ll clear your dome of the firewasps without too much difficulty. While we’re waiting for them, I’ll tell you what’s going on.”



While taking a trip by train to San Francisco recently, I had the pleasure of sharing a compartment with a young man who said he had been solving mysteries his whole life. While I'm not sure if his boastful claim is true, this is one recent case he had to relate...

COP & ROBBER

By THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER

Detective Jones bit into a chocolate bar and breathed deeply, grateful for a night that had so far been quiet. He was an old hand on the force, ten years, but had requested the night owl shift that is normally given to the fresh-faced rookies. Despite the lack of sleep, it was nice having the daytime hours to spend with his favorite hobby – rebuilding old junk he found in pawnshops, salvage yards, and streetcorners. It was amazing what people threw away! He could practically live off the money he made refurbishing old junk.

He picked up the old desktop radio on the passenger seat and began to fiddle with it, thankful once more for the quiet night. Not that he wanted a quiet night – he

longed for some action, a real skullbuster of a case to show his mettle to the brass higher-ups. But with the intricate circuits and wiring of the radio to consider, a quiet night was okay, too.

He had stopped for a pack of chewing gum at a newspaper stand – his doctor had been riding him pretty hard about his weight and had advised him to stick to less fattening snacks. In a moment of weakness, Jones passed by the gum display and settled for a nice calorie-laden candy bar.

The diet could start tomorrow. Besides, he figured, what his doctor didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

Jones took a small screwdriver out of the glove box and, by the soft glow of the streetlamp, began to undo the screws on the back of the old radio. That's when the call came in.

A neighbor over on Castro Street had noticed strange lights inside the house across the street. Thinking there might be a burglary in progress, the neighbor phoned the cops. Jones heard the call crackle over the radio and tossed his candy wrapper to the floor.

Castro – that was only a few

blocks away! Pulling loose his wildly flowered necktie, Jones gunned the engine and made the trip in a minute flat. He pulled up with a screech in front of a well-to-do two-story and squeezed out of the car.

As he hustled up the walk, a man charged out of the front door, tripping over a bathrobe that hung down below his ankles. Jones noted that the man was quite short and looked like he was practically swimming in the oversized robe. The short man's hair was a mess, as if he had just gotten out of bed. He hustled up to Jones and pointed back toward the house, his face a mask of fear.

"I got him officer! I got the lousy thief! He's right inside, spread eagle on the parlor floor!"

Jones nodded and told the man to lead the way. The short man shuddered and pulled his robe tight. "Don't you think I should wait out here for backup to arrive? I mean, what if this guy is a raving lunatic? Why, this isn't even my house. I'm housesitting for a friend, you see. The first time I ever set foot in the place, and I'm attacked!"

The detective listened to the short man ramble and wondered if he might be in shock. He explained patiently: "If this gentleman is out cold, I'm going to require your assistance carrying him to the car." He pulled his coat back and revealed the cold steel of a .38 tucked away in a shoulder holster and added: "You'll be fine."

The short man nodded reluctantly and led Jones up the walk to the front door. As they entered the home, Jones observed the body of a tall man sprawled upon the hardwood floor. An oversized flashlight was beside the body. Even though it seemed obvious, Jones asked the man for his story.

"What transpired?"

The short man shivered as if the memory were too terrifying to consider. He smoothed his wild hair with a shaking hand and licked his lips. "I could sure use a drink. I've never been so scared in my life."

Jones nodded as he stooped to check the fallen man's pulse. It was steady and even. "That's fine. Bring the bottle. We'll wet this fellow's whistle and see if we can revive him. It will save us from

having to carry him to the car.”

The short man pulled up his robe so as not to trip again and made his way across the hall to a small study. Still counting the stricken man's pulse, Jones watched the short man head to a massive bookcase. He moved an ornate picture frame aside and retrieved a small crystal decanter of whiskey. From the bottom drawer of the desk he pulled out two matching tumblers and poured a couple of stiff drinks.

He hurried back and offered one of the drinks to Jones. “Here you are, officer. That should be enough to wake anyone up!”

Jones tugged at his lip and frowned. After a moment of thought, he shook his head and smiled.

“On second thought, we won't be needing that drink. You, sir, are under arrest for assault, breaking and entering, and attempted robbery.”

The short man blinked in astonishment. He stammered out a few protests, and then his shoulders sank in defeat.

“What gave me away?” he sighed.

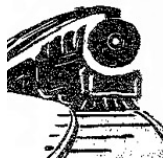
Jones chuckled as he snapped the cuffs on the man. “The answer is right at your feet!”

The thief looked down but couldn't see the clue that gave him away.

Can you?

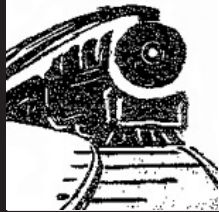
Solution: The clue was literally at the criminal's feet. As Detective Jones noticed immediately, the short man's robe was much too long. Anyone as short as this man was would not buy a robe that caused him to trip repeatedly. Jones figured the real thief, surprised by his speedy arrival, decided to think fast. He pulled the robe off the unconscious man and pretended to be a housesitter.

However, it was the housesitting explanation that was his undoing. It seemed unlikely that anyone staying in the house for the first time, as the short man claimed, would know that the whiskey decanter was hidden behind the picture frame.



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