

MAY 2006
35 cents

THE
*mysterious
traveler*
MAGAZINE

*Ghosts
& More
Ghosts!*

MARK WEST

FENNA GEELHOED

CHRIS BURDETT

WILLIAM A. HALL

PAULINE C. SMITH

GREAT STORIES OF MYSTERY, TERROR AND SUSPENSE

GREETINGS. This is The Mysterious Traveler. You may remember me from the last trip we shared together. You recall that trip, don't you? The trip that ended in... Well, let's just say it was the trip that ended. I always knew our paths would cross again some day. And now here we are, together again!

It seems like an eternity since we spoke last. But, of course, a few months is nothing compared to the fifty years we were apart when my radio program ended its run. You will be pleased to know, however, that during the time we were apart I was able to collect several tantalizing tales that I believe you might be interested in. Some are curious, some are humorous, others are rather dark in nature. You have my word that all are of the highest calibre.

Whether you enjoy a clever tale read by fireside or a quick mystery on your laptop during a commute, THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER MAGAZINE has the suspense, action and intrigue to satisfy even the most discerning reader.

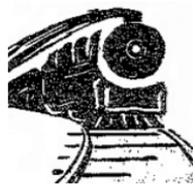
If you haven't done so already, I would advise you to get a good grip on your nerves – the train whistle is sounding and we're about to depart on another trip into the unknown.

What good fortune! It appears we'll be sharing the same compartment on our journey. Now that the wheels are turning, I've got a little tale to pass the time – if you're interested, of course.

Yes? Splendid!

I think this is going to be a wonderful trip. By the way... you don't happen to believe in ghosts, do you?

Sincerely,
The Mysterious Traveler



SUMMER 2006

THE *mysterious traveler*

MAGAZINE

GREAT STORIES OF MYSTERY, DETECTION, AND SUSPENSE

THE MACABRE

INCIDENT AT WARREN PASSMark West 4

CRIME

THE BROKERWilliam A. Hall 12

STRANGE STORIES

THE ATTICChris Burdett 19

SUSPENSE

FAIR AND SQUAREFenna Geelhoed 28

MYSTERY

THE BIG FIXPauline C. Smith 36

SHORT SHOCKER

SPECIAL DELIVERYThe Mysterious Traveler 52

SPECIAL FEATURES

THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER SUGGESTS54

All copyrights are held by their respective authors.

SETH T. SMOLINSKE, Publisher

MARK ZAHN, Managing Editor

Dedicated to Robert Arthur & David P. Kogan

When you travel as much as I do, you come to appreciate the little things in life... such as your train running on schedule, and a nice warm bed at the end of your travels – perhaps in a cozy inn. The Warren Pass Lodge has all the amenities one could hope for, and some you might not...

INCIDENT AT WARREN PASS

By MARK WEST

“There it is !”

The Warren Pass Lodge was lit brightly against the darkness of the countryside, an oasis of peace, comfortable beds and showers. It was almost twelve thirty and we’d been driving for six hours, having been held up for ninety minutes at Birmingham. We’d chosen Warren Pass to stay at because it was ten miles from Windermere and we’d fallen in love with it when we’d driven through on our honeymoon.

I pulled into the car park and parked between an Espace loaded with bikes and a camper van with several American stickers on the back. In front of us, Warren Pass Lodge was long and low, single storey and built from sandstone blocks. The roof was invisible against the gloom, the car parks

lights reflected back by the overhanging gutter.

“It still looks as good as it did before,” I said.

“Sweetheart,” said Carol as she leaned over to kiss me, “at this hour, it could look the pits.”

We got out and Carol shivered. It was late June and Britain was apparently enjoying a heatwave but the night was cold and a cool breeze from blowing across the car park.

“Do you want your jacket?”

“No, come on,” she said and met me at the boot. “Let’s get unloaded and get in.”

I grabbed the suitcase, Carol the rucksack and we walked briskly to the front door. Through the glass, I could see someone sitting at the reception counter and when I pressed the bell, they jumped. The buzzer rang and I opened the door.

“Sorry, did I keep you waiting?” The night porter was an old man, his salt and pepper hair short and neatly parted. He had a thin, pale face and half-moon glasses sat slightly askew on the bridge of his nose. He was wearing the Lodge chain uniform with a regimental tie and a plastic tag that read; “Charles - Here To Help.” There were blue marks around his mouth, which puzzled me, but then he closed the Wordsearch he’d been doing and tapped his pen against his

teeth.

“No, we’ve just got here,” I said. “Did we disturb you?”

Charles looked at his Wordsearch. “I’m not all that keen on them but my wife says I’ve got to do them to stay sharp.” He smiled at Carol.

“We have a room booked, in the name of Reeves,” I said and handed him my credit card.

Charles pulled a keyboard from under the counter. “You may have to excuse me, I’m not too great on these new-fangled machines.”

“Don’t worry,” I said and watched his arthritic fingers slowly type my name. When he’d finished, the screen filled with writing and we went through the rigmarole of signing in.

“Number 14 is at the end of the corridor, facing the car park,” he said and gave me the key. “Go through the door behind reception here and turn right in the foyer. If you need anything, I’m here all night. I hope you have a peaceful evening.”

“Thank you,” I said, “you too.”

We went into the foyer, where there were two payphones and a door on either side of the room and went to the right. The door opened onto a quiet corridor, carpeted with a deep, royal blue shag. We walked to the Fire Exit at the far end.

“Here we go,” I said, “home for the weekend.”

“Thank God,” said Carol and she slumped against the wall.

I unlocked the door, pushed it and went in, clicking on the light. The bathroom was to our right and the room opened out just beyond it, the edge of the bed visible from where we were.

“I have to have a shower,” I said.

“I have to lie down,” said Carol.

She gave me a kiss and laid on the bed. I put the suitcase by the window and when I turned back, her eyes were closed and her breathing was steady.

The shower woke me up and I went into the main room and shook Carol gently awake. It took her a while to stir and I sat on the bed, watching her come round. Her eyelids fluttered open, her bright blue eyes looking at me sleepily.

“Hey,” she said.

I kissed her. “Hey, beautiful, do you want to take a shower?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head and I laughed as she got off the bed and went into the bathroom.

At a little after two, we were propped up on half a dozen pillows, Carol cuddled into me, asleep. I was watching a dreadful film on Sky, the cheesy thrills of it somehow enthralling.

The film finished at three thirty

and I channel hopped, knackered enough to sleep but not wanting to miss anything that might be showing. I clicked onto BBC1 and found a black and white Hammer film, with Peter Cushing striding around dressed as a country squire, his cheekbones as wonderful as ever.

As I tried to work out which film it was, there was a tremendous crash from the corridor, as if someone had kicked a door off its hinges and let it fall to the floor. It made me jump but Carol didn't stir. I muted the TV and listened and thought I heard a faint scratching against our door. I got up slowly and Carol rolled onto her back, still breathing deeply. Apart from our breathing, I could hear nothing else. Then the scratching started again, as if someone was lightly raking their nails down the door.

I walked to the door and the scratching stopped. Looking through the spyhole, all I could see - distorted by the fish eye lens - was the door across the hall.

"Is anyone there?"

The door was scratched again and then I heard footsteps moving away, as if someone was skipping down the corridor. I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end as I debated what to do. The sensible thing would be to find something to defend us

with and then wait until daylight before taking off. The next most sensible thing would be to go and see the night porter but that would involve walking down the corridor and that just seemed stupid.

There was another crash, not quite as loud as before but terrifying all the same, and I decided to have a look. I got a T-shirt from the suitcase, pulled it on, and checked the spy hole again but the corridor was still empty. I got the car keys from my jacket pocket and put the ignition key between my middle two fingers for added bite to my punch. I looked back at Carol, said, "Love you," and slowly opened the door.

The corridor was deserted, as quiet as it had been before but the air was stale, as though every exhalation of the past hour had collected at the ceiling, waiting for me to breathe it in. I tried the Fire Exit door but it was solid and shut tight. I worked my way down the corridor slowly, ready at any moment to jump out of my skin or be confronted by someone and have to explain why I was prowling around at this time of the morning, a potentially lethal fist at the ready.

I reached the foyer door without incident and peered through the safety glass - the room was empty. I looked back down the corridor, saw

nothing and turned back to the door. Suddenly, the scratching began again, nails running across wood and plaster, getting nearer and louder all the time until it sounded right behind me. I closed my eyes and waited for the impact, but instead felt something light and airy brush through my hair. The door banged open and I looked up but saw nothing.

I went into the foyer. It was empty but the air was worse here, stagnant almost. I went through to reception.

Charles was slumped over the counter, his glasses askew, his pen just beyond the reach of his outstretched fingers. I shook him lightly and he awoke with a start, sitting bolt upright, his glasses falling to the counter.

“What is it, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” I said, “you were just asleep.”

“Oh dear,” he said and put his glasses on.

“It’s all right, don’t worry about.”

“No, Mr Reeves,” he said, straightening his tie, “I don’t think it is.” He got off his chair with a grace that belied the look of him. “What have you seen?”

I must have looked as confused as I felt because he looked at his watch and said, “Mr Reeves, it’s four-oh-seven and you are dressed in a T-shirt

and a pair of boxer shorts. You have just awoken me and you have a worried air about yourself. Therefore, can I ask what you’ve seen?”

What had I seen? Standing in the brightness of reception with Charles in front of me, I suddenly felt very silly. I’d been watching a horror film, I was tired and if I thought about it hard enough, I could probably explain just about everything I’d seen and heard. “Nothing,” I said, “I’m sorry, I was just having a bad dream.”

Charles leaned over the counter and touched my arm. “You’ve seen the Mokehli, haven’t you?”

“The what?”

“The Mokehli, the dream reaper. He’s here, isn’t he? Damn, of all the times to nod off. I knew I should have had another cup of coffee.”

Suddenly, there was an ear shattering scream and Charles’ grip tightened on my arm. I looked down and saw that his fingers no longer looked arthritic. He let go and I ran around into the foyer and met him, coming through another door. He was taller than I thought he would be, about five seven or so and he held himself remarkably straight.

“Could you tell which direction the scream came from?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Look, Charles, I have to go and check on

Carol.”

“Mr Reeves, believe me, your wife will be fine but you must help me. I’m not as young as I once was and I’m not sure I can handle this on my own.”

“Handle what? What is the mo- whatever you called it?” The scream echoed around the foyer again, making the hairs on my neck stand on end. It was coming from the left of the building, away from our room and Carol so I decided, for the sake of a couple of minutes, to give Charles the benefit of the doubt. “Come on then,” I said, “let’s see what’s going on.”

We went through the door into the corridor and stopped. The door closed behind us with a gentle bump and the whole building was silent, apart from the snores of someone in the room to my right.

“Walk slowly,” said Charles, “and be aware.”

“Right,” I said, wishing I was anywhere but here.

The scratching started again, at the end of the corridor by the Fire Exit and gradually got louder. I took a step backwards as a nebulous shape appeared in front of us. It came towards us and slowly swam into focus, two lengths touching the carpet and moving in a crude approximation of legs. Arms appeared, they

and the body wrapped in a heavy cloak and then a hood bubbled from the top, making it look like an extremely tall monk. I took another step back and hit the door as the shape kept coming, the features inside the hood gaining definition. I saw a pair of blazing eyes, a thin, ridged nose and the raw slash of a mouth that spread the width of the face.

The mouth opened and the most unbelievably foetid stench caressed my face and then it was gone.

The scream sounded again and Charles pulled me forward. “Come on, Mr Reeves, I’ll explain everything to you later. We have no time now.”

I followed him to room 3. “This is it,” he said and took a key out of his pocket. He unlocked the door and opened it gently. The screaming stopped as we stepped into the hall. The room was lit by one of the bedside lights and I could see a shape of feet in the bed.

Charles opened the bathroom door and a woman was sitting on the toilet asleep, her head in her hands and beyond her, the shower curtain was drawn. Charles knelt down and looked in the face of the sleeper.

“We may be too late,” he said and stood up and pulled open the shower curtain. The scream filled the bath-

room and I put my hands to my ears. Behind the curtain was a young woman, covered in soapy water, squinting at us and trying to cover herself.

I went to pull the shower curtain out of Charles' hand and the girl flickered, as if she were an image projected on smoke. Charles reached out but the image curled in on itself, encircling his hand. The image screamed again, quieter than before and then started to dissipate.

Charles screamed, "No," but it was too late, the woman was now no more than a suggestion. Within moments, she was gone altogether and Charles knelt down in front of the sleeper. He tapped her shoulder and she fell off the toilet, sprawling in an ungainly heap at his feet. I gasped and he looked at me, as though it should have been obvious she was the same woman as the one in the shower.

"We're too late," he said and got up. I grabbed his shoulders and turned him to face me.

"Too late for what? What the hell is going on?"

"This is the work of Mokehli, the dream reaper."

"You've already said that but it doesn't tell me anything."

"Come with me," he said and guided me into the corridor. "The

Mokehli is a legend, the belief of which is almost extinct apart from local myths and legends. It goes back centuries though I only found out about it in the late fifties. At that time, paranormal investigation was big business and if you had a Nagra reel-to-reel, a flash camera and nerves of steel, you could make a good living. I was on Dartmoor with a colleague of mine, a Geordie called Duncan and he told me all about the Mokehli."

"What does that have to do with today?"

"Tell me, Mr Reeves, at home, where do most people die?"

"I have no idea." I started to walk towards my room. I wanted to be with Carol now, to make sure she was there and not a smoke image that would run through my fingers like sand.

"They die in their beds, Mr Reeves and most of them are signed away as heart attacks but that isn't so. The Mokehli takes them."

We were two doors from the foyer. "That is rubbish. If people die of heart attacks, they die of heart attacks."

"Not if they were asleep," said Charles and he put his hand on my arm. "Warren Pass is steeped in mystery and unpleasant history. It has been the site of many a bloody battle

and some local historians maintain that this lodge is built over a centuries old burial ground.”

“And what does that have to do with this Mokehli thing?”

“The Mokehli is a guide to hell for souls that pass in the night, as dawn breaks. The new day doesn’t want to be bothered by the detritus of the previous day so the Mokehli takes care of it.”

I heard the nails scrape at the end of the corridor behind us.

“There is a problem, though. Part of his deal is that he is allowed to search the area he is called to. He’s been using Warren Pass as an entrance for centuries and now, with this lodge, he has rich pickings. If the Mokehli is called, he will check all twenty one of our rooms and that’s where we have the problem.”

The nails scraped wood and plaster.

“You’re not making sense, Charles. I’m going back to my wife.”

“When he searches for the dead, his deal allows him to take those who have just reached the land of dreams. Those who are deep asleep are okay but new dreamers are, I’m afraid, fair game. That woman back there had had a shower and then fallen asleep on the toilet. The Mokehli was called because someone has died and he’s stayed put for a little action. Don’t

you understand, Mr Reeves? Ask yourself how many people you’ve ever heard of who died in their beds between four and five in the morning. Don’t you see?”

The nails scraped wood and plaster, getting ever closer.

Charles shouted over the din. “He’s here and those new to sleep are at risk.”

It didn’t make sense but, at the same time, I understood him. The nails scraped louder and louder. “How will we know who’s next?” I yelled as we pushed through the door into the foyer. We fell in a heap and the Mokehli towered over us, impossibly tall, its legs and arms (what I could see of them under the heavy cloak) barely covered by flesh. Its face was all but invisible inside the cowl, apart from the blazing eyes. The foetid smell from before invaded my nostrils.

“The Mokehli,” said Charles and the thing threw its head back and screamed, an obscene parody of the woman from the shower. “Out the front,” yelled Charles, “take him away from the lodge.”

I scrambled to my feet, Charles at my side. We ran through reception and out into the car park where the sky was now turquoise and the bird song was like hearing a choir. I looked back as the Mokehli came

through reception, kicking chairs and a small table out of his path. He burst through the main doors, smashing the safety glass in them and came at us, screaming his terrible scream, his arms outstretched.

We reached my car and Charles leaned against it and seemed to shrivel before my eyes, turning back into the old man who had been the night porter when we'd arrived. "It's too late," he said. Gone was the firm grip, the confident assurance and the straight back. I tried to pull him away from the car before the Mokehli reached us but he wouldn't move.

"Leave it, Reeves, don't you see? He's coming for us because we are dreaming."

"I don't understand," I said but I suddenly did.

"Make your peace and say goodbye, Mr Reeves."

The Mokehli was almost on us. In the light, I could see his face and it terrified me. The flesh that was left on its skull was stretched and ripped, like centuries old parchment and as it grinned, pleased with itself, I heard it crack. It stopped, a couple of feet from us and laughed and the stench of it - of death and decay and sad, painful longing - washed over us.

"Goodbye Elise," said Charles quietly and the Mokehli reached out,

dug its bony fingers into the top of his skull and pulled him, screaming, into its cloak. It turned to look at me and I heard every sinew in its neck creak above the birdsong.

This couldn't be happening. I had to get back, to see Carol and I tried to get away but the Mokehli casually reached out his right hand and I felt his bony fingers catch in my hair.

For an instant there was tremendous pain and then bright lights filled my vision and everything faded to white.

I can see Carol, snuggled into my side, trying to make herself warm. I want to reach down and touch her but I can't. I don't even want to be here now because it's torture, to see her beauty and not be able to touch it. I don't want to see her asleep next to my corpse, to wake up and scream when she realises that I am dead. Please, take me away, I don't want to see. Don't let me look at my wife as she realises that she is all alone.

Please.



The balls are racked, the cues are chalked... A ceiling fan turns lazily above two players in a dim pool hall. With a crack, the balls are broken and scattered across the felt. As the balls fall one by one into their pockets, so too fall the hands of fate...

THE BROKER

By WILLIAM A. HALL

I had been watching the door out of the corner of my eye and I saw him walk in a few minutes after midnight. I noticed because I always keep a periodic eye turned to the clock, as it seems the after-midnight patrons always offer the best possibilities. I was hoping this young man might be the special someone I had been waiting for.

He was probably in his early 20's, short and solid like an overgrown human fire hydrant. He had long reddish brown hair that was pushed back behind his ears like the unruly mop of a tomboyish girl. The features of his profile were sharp and angular, his eyes being the most memorable part of his face, pale blue, like small pools of fresh rainwater. They were hard eyes, quick and cold, calculating beyond his years, knowing eyes that seemed to sweep the room like a searchlight.

We were in a dim smoke filled

room, a large rectangular room, and a sputtering neon sign outside the glass doors identified it as Hill's Recreation Parlor. The recreation offered inside was six billiard tables and across the back wall were two longer tables for playing snooker. To the left of the entrance was a short bar with eight smooth wooden stools in front. Behind the counter stood John Hill the proprietor who maintained an inventory of cheap cigars, cigarettes, pouches of chewing tobacco, and faded packages of chewing gum in a trio of dingy and fingertip-smearred glass cases. I always thought of him as my idea of a "perpetual" man. He had a perpetual three-day-growth of beard, and seemed in a perpetual doze, which added to his air of perpetual boredom. If nothing else he was consistent.

Immediately to the right of the entrance and opposite the bar was the only other recreation, three heavily scarred wooden tables and mismatched chairs, occupied by a collection of men whose average age was somewhere between 65 and 100. Their passion was dominoes and only the constant belch of beer as well as a steady stream of colorful profanity interrupted the cloud of smoke hanging about their heads from cigarettes.

I watched the young man, who had arrived at midnight, for about an hour. He had taken his time in selecting a

pool cue from the wide rack across the far wall and then, while still alone, had shot two games of rotation before stopping to again survey the room. His eyes paused on me for only a moment before they moved on and he had at last focused on two men closer to his own age who were circling a table in the farthest corner of the room. He slowly pulled a cigarette from a crumpled pack inside his shirt pocket then deliberately polished the end of his cue with a square of blue chalk before sauntering over in their direction.

The two men looked up and after a round of haphazard introductions they took turns playing pool with the newcomer. They alternated with a mixture of rotation and eight ball. After a time it became apparent the first player was outmatched and so he took a seat while his friend played three games with the stranger. I slowly circled my own table while watching the threesome out of the corner of my eye. At last I saw what I had been expecting and the first show of money came into view at the end of the table.

It was almost a classic hustle. The stranger and his opponent split the first four games, dividing the money almost evenly, until there was no real discernable winner. The first young man seemed to grow a bit bolder in his ability and so the winner made the

suggestion of raising the ante. The stranger obliged.

“We’ll play rotation. Dollar a point, winner takes the difference of points in cash.” They played three games, the stranger losing the last two, and in the process almost \$40.00. He stopped to chalk his stick.

“What about one more game? And, hey, since I’m down why don’t we play for 5 bucks a point? Let me try and win some of my money back.”

The other man considered for only a moment then grinned before he picked up the cue ball and tossed it underhanded to the stranger.

“Why don’t you go ahead and do the honors. I’m going to let you break.”

It was a good game, a close game, and they were both almost evenly matched until the stranger sank the 6 and then the 14 on his last shot. It was enough to win the game and he was ahead 12 points, which translated into \$60.00 and a profit for the evening. The young man reached in his back pocket and produced a shabby wallet he deposited on the end of the table.

“I think you owe me one more chance don’t you?”

The stranger once again slowly polished the end of his pool cue with the blue chalk. “How do you mean?”

“One more game to give me a chance to win back my money. But, you know, it’s getting late and I want

to make it worth the time.”

The stranger continued to polish the end of his stick. “What do you have in mind?”

“One game of rotation. We play until the table is empty. Winner takes the difference in points, only this time, 10 bucks a point.”

The other man looked up. “Well, I don’t know.”

“What’s wrong? The price too rich for your blood?”

He squinted his eyes in concentration. “Well... that’s 120 points. For all you know I could run the table and that’s a lot of change for a boy like you to have to come up with. Even if I won half that’s a lot of dough and I don’t play on credit.”

From my nearby table I watched the man momentarily consider before he snorted and burst into sarcastic laughter. “Hell, now we both know you ain’t going to run the table against me.” He nodded his head in the direction of the wallet. “Don’t worry about the money. I got you covered right there on the table.” He paused. “Now what about you?”

The stranger carefully leaned his stick against the table and reached inside the pocket of his jeans. He pulled out a short sandwich of bills secured with a paper clip then unfolded them and smoothed out five one hundred dollar bills across the felt.

“That’s all I’ve got on me if you’re

willing to play. If it turns out anything over that I’ll have to owe you.”

The young man grinned. “Well, I think 500 bucks would be a nice down payment. Besides, you seem like a nice guy and I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt.”

The stranger tossed a coin and when the other man won he elected to break. He began with a combination shot using the one ball, sank the 7 and then the 10, before missing. The stranger followed, sinking the 1, 11, and then the 14 before he failed in his attempt.

The young man slowly walked around the table carefully reviewing his next shot and while he did so I wandered over to observe the game. With careful accuracy he did a combination shot with the 2 sinking the 8 and followed it with a nice bank shot, in the process sinking the 12 before missing. He swore under his breath in disgust and glared in my direction.

“Who invited you?”

I gave a short shrug. “Just thought I might pick up a few pointers from you young men.”

“Well, stand back out of the way. I need to concentrate on my game and I don’t need anybody in the way.”

I gave a timid smile before taking two steps back and seating myself in a nearby straight-backed chair.

The stranger gave a brief glance in my direction then slowly massaged

the end of the stick with his chalk before he spoke in a low almost taunting voice. "Oh, that's going to cost you my friend. The game is still laid out there on the table."

He leaned across the table and in a series of rapid shots sank all the small numbered balls. They fell in almost perfect succession: 2,3,4,6,5 and then the 9. At the far end of the table sat the two remaining balls and with one quick stroke he pushed the cue ball between them and the 13 and 15 came home to their respective corner pockets. The young man stood motionless not looking up until the stranger spoke.

"By my calculations that's a 57 point run. Add my previous 26, subtract your 37, and that's a difference of 46 points. In dollars and cents that's \$460.00 plus 60 from the game before which adds up to \$520.00 total." He held the pool cue lightly in his hands. "It's getting late and I'll be needing my money now."

To my surprise the boy had produced all of the money except for around \$80 and his friend reluctantly made up the difference. It seemed they both knew they had been taken. After they had left the young man slowly racked the balls and looked over in my direction where I had remained seated. I returned his gaze and then spoke. "That's a pretty good night's wages for a couple of hours

work."

His mouth parted into a slow grin. "Well, I gave up on that 9-5 stuff a long time ago. Too much work for not enough money." He slowly walked around and leaned against the table to stand in front of me. "How about you? Do you play?"

I sat up straight in the chair. "As a matter of fact I do play from time to time. The only difference is that I don't play for these penny ante games. I'm getting older now and it takes too long to accumulate large sums in a timely manner. I've also found that as I got older my habits are a bit more expensive than in my youth."

The younger man stood straighter as though he were assuming a more confrontational stance. "You sound pretty confident in yourself."

"Of course. You can afford to be confident when you are the best."

The man cocked his head like a small bird as he considered this. "So... just out of curiosity, what kind of stakes do you play for?"

"I don't bother with the kind of juvenile hustle that you just pulled on your new friend a few minutes ago." I paused to think. "There are exceptions depending on the person and the various circumstances but as a general rule it's one game at a time, rotation, and the difference in points determines the winner. My personal mini-

mum is \$10,000.”

He scoffed. “I don’t believe you. Nobody in this crummy joint would play for that kind of money.”

“I disagree. In fact, I do it on a fairly regular basis. Many of the community’s wealthier citizens drop in for a game when they need a bit of excitement in their lives. It’s really no different than a poker game or even an illicit marital affair. It’s the thrill.” I stopped. “If you still have any doubts feel free to talk to the proprietor, Mr. Hill. He can vouch for the games as well as my ability to pay in the unlikely event I should ever be beaten.”

We began our game at one minute past 2 AM. In the interim the stranger, who had since identified himself as Eddie, had talked to Mr. Hill who assured him that my personal check was good for any amount that the two of us agreed upon. In return, Eddie had handed me the key to his automobile, which was parked across the street. The car was easily worth more than the \$10,000 bet. In the glove box was the title and I had every confidence that within the hour it would be signed over to me.

It was a good game. Eddie showed much more skill than he had exhibited in his earlier matches but I could tell that he was being very careful, trying too hard, and that is always the sign of a loser. Relax and play your own game or suffer the consequences. It

was getting late but I nevertheless let him have two shots before I ran the table. The contest lasted less than 15 minutes.

Eddie stood at the end of the table, his face slack and unbelieving, and his body appearing as though something internal had been severed. He slowly laid the cue stick across the felt and sat down heavily in a nearby chair.

I walked over to stand next to him. “You played a good game, Eddie. These things don’t happen overnight and it takes years of practice to perfect your game to the degree that some of us have.”

He sat stiffly while one leg bounced nervously up and down before he spoke. “One more game. I know I can take you. If you’re so confident you’ll play me one more game. That’s all I’m asking. How about it?”

I thought about it. “Well, technically I have your car in my pocket so to speak. I don’t play for free. What else have you got to wager?”

He hung his head and I could barely hear him speak. “I... a few hundred in the bank, that’s it. But, I know I can win.” He stared up at me and I could see the desperation in his eyes.

I sat for a full minute and watched him, my eyes never leaving his face before I spoke. “You can’t beat me Eddie, but to prove it I will give you one more chance, and this time we

play for bigger stakes.” I had his full attention. “One game. If you win I double the bet and pay you \$20,000. I’ll even give you back your car as a good will gesture.”

“And if I lose?”

“You do me one favor, no questions asked, and we’ll be even.”

“What kind of favor?”

I shrugged. “You murder my wife.”

He sat motionless and his eyes held a curious mixture of fear and disbelief. “Are you out of your mind? I could go to jail for the rest of my life. You’re crazy.”

“Those are my terms. If you’re as good as you think you are you can walk away with big money. If we stop now, you literally walk away; with nothing.”

His eyes narrowed. “I...look you’ve got me over a barrel but I can’t take a chance on something like that.”

“I’m a careful man, Eddie. If there was any chance of being caught I wouldn’t ask you.”

“Well, if you’re so confident why not just do it yourself?”

“When a married person is murdered the first person the police suspect is the spouse. While you do the deed I make sure I have an airtight alibi. At the very least you get your car back and I gain my freedom. If everything goes as planned I may even throw in a little monetary bonus,

say...\$5000.00?” I sat back and crossed my legs. “Eddie, it’s a few minutes work. I can give you the details but it has to be tomorrow night, because that’s the way I set it up.” I paused and studied him. “Now, do we play that game or do I drive home?”

It took a bit more talk but I knew that he was in. You don’t spend the time in a pool hall that I have and not learn how to read people. As it turned out the game was better than I expected but the end was a foregone conclusion. In less than 20 minutes I put my checkbook back in my pocket and we retired to a table in the corner to talk things over.

It was a simple plan. Every Tuesday night my wife Emily finished her aerobics class and stopped afterwards at a bar called The Spot. She had a couple of martinis and set about obtaining a male companion for the evening’s entertainment. Being 21 years my junior she still felt the need for male conquest to massage her feminine ego. In that unsavory area of the city there were a number of cash only motels that would provide a couple of hours of reckless pleasure. Emily was quite beautiful and when I supplied Eddie a photograph I noted the lustful eagerness in his eyes. Apparently he had some pleasures of his own in mind before sending Emily to the next world.

The following night, Tuesday, I spent the entire evening at the pool hall. I played dominoes, three games of snooker, and bought a round of beer for everyone in the room after I won a hard fought game of eight ball. There was no doubt whatever that I would be well remembered as to having been there all night. I took my leave at straight up midnight and arrived home by 12:30 A.M.

I walked inside the house and all seemed unusually quiet. I slipped off my shoes then made my way downstairs to our basement, which has been converted into a den. As I approached the room I was surprised to hear the quiet hum of the television. When I entered I found Emily relaxing on the couch in her bathrobe. Her hair was wrapped in a towel and she had that clean after-shower smell. I leaned toward her and she gave me a long lingering kiss then made room for me next to her on the sofa.

She spoke softly. "You're a little bit later than usual."

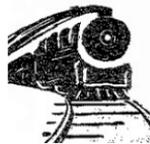
I smiled. "I wanted to give you plenty of time." I looked at her with interest. "Did everything go as planned? No problems?"

A small sigh escaped her lips. "No problems at all, darling. That bar you picked out was perfect. I have never done anything in that part of the city before." She giggled. "It should drive the police crazy making them wonder

where I will strike next. And God, it still gives me a thrill to see those newspaper headlines: Mystery Killer Strikes Again. FBI Profiler Brought To City. Cops Frantic For Clues." She repeated that little-girl laugh and it was one of the things I loved about her.

She suddenly stopped covering my hand with hers as she gazed into my eyes. "I know you don't always understand, darling, but I simply have to kill those men. It's just something inside of me, an urge I can't control, and something that makes me feel whole. Your help is one of those things we share and married couples should share their lives don't you think?"

"Of course, Emily. Don't you know how much I love you? You are so beautiful and I'm so lucky to have you in my life. I would do anything you ask of me without question. All I have ever wanted was your happiness." I covered her hand with my own and returned her gaze. "Why don't we go upstairs, darling? I've been waiting all night to see you." She gave me another long lingering kiss and together we held each other close, turned off the television, and walked upstairs to our bedroom.



It's no secret that I've come across many stories of things going bump in the night. Some of these stories are sorrowful, some are filled with nerve-racking tension, others are... well, simply beyond description. I'll leave it to you, faithful reader, to decide in which category to put...

THE ATTIC

By CHRIS BURDETT

It was late and we were all tired, but not ready to part each other's company. We kept our positions about the Bradfords' living room, a couple of us on the sofa, a couple in chairs, and Martin and Denise stretched out on the floor on opposite ends of the coffee table. There was a lull in the conversation, not uncomfortable when you've known each other as long as we have, and Martin's eyes were shut. Denise stared at the ceiling and absently stroked her husband's leg; Jason, in turn, gently rubbed the back of her neck. I watched them, my head resting on my fist, until the mantle clock began its slow striking of midnight and we were shaken out of our collective reverie.

"God, I'm tired," I said. "I guess I ought to get home." But I made no

move to rise from my chair beside the fireplace.

Jason yawned and said, "Us too," but he also stayed put.

"Too bad," Brian said from the couch, which he shared with his wife, Karen, "we haven't even shown you the attic yet. It's the best part of the house."

It was our first visit to their new home, which they had moved into only a month before. The house was "new" only to them and us; it had actually been built more than eighty years ago, half a century before any of us had been born.

"Well, let's see it," I said, and slowly stood up, my knees creaking. Jason also rose, and Denise stood, straightening her skirt.

"You coming, Martin?" Brian asked, starting toward the hall.

"I don't think so," Martin said. "Go on without me."

"Oh, come on, Martin," Denise said, and attempted to pull Martin to his feet.

"No!" he said, and jerked his arm away.

Denise frowned at him. "What's wrong? Afraid of attics or something?"

Martin remained silent.

"He doesn't have to go if he does-

n't want to," Karen said. She remained on the sofa, not interested in seeing her own attic.

"Okay," Brian said, and opened the door at the end of the hall. "You don't know what you're missing, though. We'll be down in a few minutes."

Brian was about to lead Jason, Denise, and me up the stairs into the attic when Martin cleared his throat and called out, "Did I ever tell you about when I lived under a haunted attic?"

Denise was the first to return to the living room. "What?" she demanded.

"Never mind," Martin said, lying down flat on his back on the floor. "It's not important."

Brian, Jason, and I returned to the living room and stood in a circle around our friend. We glared down at him, our arms folded across our chests.

"All right, Martin," I said. "You've got our attention. Start talking."

Martin propped himself up on his elbows. "It's not very interesting. You don't want to hear about it."

Denise kicked the bottom of his shoe and growled, "Speak, boy."

Martin grinned. "If you insist." He paused dramatically and looked

around at all of us. "I'd never lived alone," he began. "I had roommates throughout college. When I started graduate school, I decided to get a place of my own."

"This was before you roomed with Tony?" Denise asked.

"Right," Martin agreed. "I found a room on the top floor of a huge house only five miles from Tech. It was ugly, but it was cheap, and the landlady, Mrs. Bashrum, made several remarks as she was showing me around about how well she thought I would get along with her nineteen-year old daughter, who had the rather promising name of Jacqueline, and who, Mrs. Bashrum had me know, had flowing hair the color of red."

"Jacqueline..." Denise said, fairly purring the name. "And how was the red-headed Jacqueline?"

Martin raised his eyebrows in annoyance. "I'll get to that. So I moved into my third-story room on the Sunday before classes began. I started moving later than I intended, and my brother, who had promised to help me, never showed up, so I dragged all my stuff up two flights of stairs myself. That night I was exhausted, and I fell into bed without supper and fell right to sleep.

"I awoke with a start in the middle

of the night. Above me I heard this scratching sound, as though someone, or *something*, was trying to dig through the ceiling above my head. Remember, it was my first night in my new room, and for a few seconds I didn't know where I was. Slowly the memory of my day's move returned to me. The more I remembered, the more exhausted I got, and as I lay there, hearing the scraping above me and debating whether I should get up and investigate or just flee, I fell back to sleep.

"When I woke up the next morning I had forgotten all about it. Mrs. Bashrum served a big breakfast, and I was the last one at the table. I almost missed out on my share of the eggs."

"Is that when you met Jacqueline?" Brian asked.

"No," Martin said, "I didn't meet Jacqueline then, but I did meet the guy who lived on the second floor. His name was Garret, and he was this tall, skinny guy with bright red hair and a beard. He tried to talk to me, but I wasn't really in the mood, so I just sort of grunted when he asked me questions. Then, when he was done drinking what had to have been his fifth cup of coffee, he said, 'So, did the ghost keep you up last night?'"

"I sort of frowned at him and said,

'What?' But that's when I remembered about the scratching I'd heard the night before.

"Mrs. Bashrum was quick to say, 'Oh, he's just pulling your leg. We have squirrels in the attic, and sometimes you hear them scratching around. That's all. I keep meaning to go up there and find out where they get in and seal it up, I just haven't gotten around to it.'

"Garret grinned and said quietly, like he was telling me something confidential, that yeah, it was because of squirrels that the last tenant had run out in the middle of the night and never come back.

"Mrs. Bashrum frowned and said that wasn't true, and Garret admitted that in fact the previous tenant had come back, but only long enough to get his stuff. 'But,' he added, leaning toward me across the table and almost whispering, 'he wouldn't go up and get it himself. He made Mrs. B bring it all down to him.'

"Mrs. Bashrum just shook her head. I was already in a bad mood, and this wasn't helping. I didn't want to say anything about the scratching I'd heard, so I just sort of nodded and got up and told them I didn't want to be late for class.

"Well, that night at dinner I met

Jaqueline. She was pretty, and she did have long red hair that was really nice, but she...well, she didn't strike me as the sharpest knife in the drawer. She asked me what I was doing in school, and I told her I was studying physics. She got this dumb grin, and said, 'Oh, you're going to be a P. E. teacher?'"

"Coach Luse," Denise laughed.

Martin allowed himself a chuckle. "Well, I didn't feel like correcting her. That Garret guy had this evil grin, and I could tell he was laughing at her, and I didn't want her to feel bad, so I made the mistake of asking her about herself. After a few minutes of her blabbing, my brain shut down and I stopped listening. She talked for about half an hour, though, and I guess I laughed and nodded in all the right places, because when we were done eating, she asked me if I'd like to go for a walk. I lied and told her I had a lot of reading to do, and went upstairs

"While I was lying on my bed, Garret knocked on my door. I wasn't all that excited to see him, but I let him in anyway.

"'You should know,' he said, 'that some people believe this house really is haunted.'

"I told him I didn't believe in ghosts, and he laughed. 'Maybe they

don't believe in you, either,' he said. I was a little annoyed, but also intrigued, so I asked him about the ghost.

"He told me that eighty years earlier, Jacqueline's great-great-aunt had moved into the house with her new husband, and only days later he had gone off to fight in World War I. When she got news that he had been killed, she was so taken with grief that she hanged herself in the attic.

"Well, I didn't think too much of the story. Garret bothered me, so I wasn't inclined to believe him, and at the time I fancied myself a sophisticated scientist who had no time for the supernatural.

"When I went to bed that night, I laid there and stared up at the ceiling, waiting for the squirrels to start up. I must've laid there for an hour waiting for those stupid squirrels. When I finally heard them start scratching around I thought, thank God, now I can get to sleep. And I did. For a while...

"I woke up with a start. I could still hear the squirrels. It was three hours before I needed to get up, so I just rolled over and tried to get back to sleep. But I couldn't. I just lay there, hugging my pillow and cursing the squirrels and wishing I was back in

my old dorm room.

“When I was just about to drift off, I heard the squirrels scamper across the ceiling right above my head. I jumped out of bed, grabbed my flashlight from my top drawer, and went out into the hall in my boxer shorts. I opened the door that I figured must lead up to the attic, and sure enough, there were the stairs.

“When I opened the attic door, I heard a scurry of little feet and some chattering. I threw the door open, shined the flashlight around, and there were the squirrels. There must have been about six of them in the corner, sort of running around each other.

“I looked around the attic for a couple of minutes, but I couldn’t see where they were getting in. Just when I was about to go down the stairs, I heard something. I couldn’t quite tell what it was, so I turned around and shined the flashlight but I didn’t see anything. The squirrels were gone, though.

“I turned to leave again, and I felt suddenly cold. From behind me I heard this woman’s voice say, ‘Please don’t leave me alone here to die.’”

Karen gasped and clutched at Brian. We were all staring at Martin, our eyes wide.

“I turned quickly and shined the

flashlight around, but I didn’t see anything. I went down the stairs so fast it’s a wonder I didn’t fall and break my neck. I probably woke up everybody else in the house when I slammed the door at the bottom of the stairs, but I didn’t care.

“I ran in my room, threw on a shirt, and as I was pulling on my pants, I heard the voice again. ‘Please,’ she said, ‘I don’t deserve this fate.’

“I grabbed my keys from my dresser and tore out of my room without any shoes on or anything. When I got to the second floor I slowed down a little, trying to calm down. I walked down the hall, kind of quickly, and just as I was passing Garret’s door I heard the voice again: ‘So this is how you show me how much you love me.’

“But then I heard music, and a male voice said, ‘We’ll be right back after these messages,’ and then some guy started talking about denture cream or something.

“I stopped at Garret’s door, put my ear to it for a second, and then knocked.

“‘What are you watching?’ I asked when he opened the door.

“‘Some horror movie about a witch,’ he said. He told me he could-

n't sleep, so he'd been watching TV. I looked in and saw that his television was against the wall, under the duct.

"As I stood there, all of the panic drained out of me, and for a second I was relieved, and then I was mad. I groaned and shook my head. 'Garret, I can hear the damn TV in my room,' I said. 'It must be coming through the vents.' I didn't say anything about hearing it in the attic.

"He apologized and turned the TV off. I went upstairs and went back to bed, and I didn't hear anything else the rest of the night. I didn't get back to sleep, either, though.

"Anyway," Martin went on, "I was exhausted at breakfast that morning, and in a really bad mood. It really rubbed me the wrong way when Garret asked, 'See any ghosts last night?'"

"I just shook my head and didn't say anything. I almost fell asleep in one of my classes, and I had a headache all day. Tony asked if I wanted to go to the bar with him and his girlfriend that night. I didn't really want to, but he talked me into it. I didn't get home until late.

"So I climbed into bed, half drunk, and right away the squirrels started scratching around. Sometime later, I don't even know how long, this sound

woke me up. I couldn't even place it at first, but after a few minutes, I realized what it was: a woman crying.

"I turned on my light, yanked the phone number Garret had given me from out of my wallet—we all had our own phone lines in that house—and called him.

"I could hear it ringing through the floor, but he didn't answer it until about the seventh ring. He said 'Hello' in that really raspy just-woke-up voice.

"'Could you please turn down your television,' I said.

"He didn't say anything for a minute. Then he said, 'What? Who is this?'"

"I said, 'It's Martin, upstairs. I can hear your TV again. Please, turn it down!'"

"He let out a sleepy groan and said, 'My TV's not on.' And he hung up.

"Just the then I heard the crying break into pitiful sobs. And I heard a voice say, 'I just can't go on.'

"Then there was a scream from above me."

We were all staring at Martin, waiting for him to continue. He picked up his coffee cup from the coffee table, looked in it, found it empty, and put it back down.

“Well?” Denise said.

Martin shook his head slowly.

“This is where it gets weird,” he said.

“Oh,” Denise said, “*this* is where it gets weird. I see.”

Martin ignored her. “I can’t explain what made me do this, but I pulled on my pants, got my flashlight, and went up into the attic.

“It took a few seconds for me to see it. It seemed so quiet and still when I got up there, and cold. There weren’t any squirrels. The floorboards didn’t even creak when I stepped on them. It was like the whole attic was in suspended animation or something.”

Martin was speaking slowly, quietly, and deliberately. We all leaned forward to hear him.

“Then, when I went around the chimney that came up from the kitchen, I saw it, hanging from a rope tied to a support beam.

“For a second I couldn’t move; I couldn’t even breathe. The body was slowly rotating, the head drooping forward, the arms hanging at its sides. As I stood there, frozen, it finished a slow turn so that it was facing me.

“It was Jacqueline. Her eyes were open and lifeless.

“I screamed and bolted down the stairs. I had no idea what I was going

to do, other than get out. I didn’t stop at my room. I just kept going till I got to the first floor. I think I might have been screaming the whole way.

“On the first floor, Mrs. Bashrum met me in the hall. I stood there facing her, gasping and shaking. I sputtered out Jacqueline’s name a couple of times but couldn’t quite put together a complete sentence.

“She put her hand on my shoulder and nodded. ‘I know,’ she said.

“Just then a door opened, and Jacqueline came out, pulling on her housecoat. ‘What’s going on?’ she asked.

“And at that point...well, I guess I sort of fainted.”

He paused and took in a deep breath, then blew it out slowly. He shook his head, and looked around at all of us.

“Well, when I came to, I was on the sofa in the den. Mrs. Bashrum and Jacqueline were sitting near me, talking quietly. They didn’t notice I’d woken up.

“‘We’ve got to do something about her,’ Jacqueline said. ‘We can’t afford to let her run off any more tenants.’

“‘I know,’ Mrs. Bashrum said quietly. ‘But what can we do?’

“I heard Jacqueline sigh, then say,

‘Well, I suppose one of us should go up there and cut her down.’

“Let’s leave her up there for a while,’ Mrs. Bashrum said. ‘Maybe if she starts to think that one day we won’t come to her rescue, she’ll stop doing this.’

“We should check on her,’ Jacqueline said. ‘What if this time she really killed herself?’

“Wouldn’t that be a blessing,’ Mrs. Bashrum said.

“Mother!’ Jacqueline said, ‘how could you say that about your own daughter!’

“Mrs. Bashrum sighed. ‘We should be thankful that she didn’t seduce this one first.’

“As far as we know,’ Jacqueline added. ‘Thank God she never took an interest in Garret.’

“Garret would probably like it.’

“They went on talking about random stuff for a few minutes, and after a while I shook my head and coughed and sat up, to make them think I’d just woken up.

“Oh, hello, Martin,’ Mrs. Bashrum said. ‘How are you feeling? You seem to have had a nightmare; you ran downstairs screaming.’

“I didn’t say anything for a minute. I didn’t even know what I could say. What could I do, accuse

them of having a ghost, or a crazy woman, in their attic?’

“So finally I said, ‘Yeah, a nightmare. That’s what it was.’ They told me I should just go back to bed. ‘I’m sure nothing else will trouble you tonight,’ Mrs. Bashrum said. So I got up and told them I was going to go back to bed, but I had no intention of spending the night in that house, not ever again.

“So I went upstairs and I called Tony to see if I could sleep on his sofa. His girlfriend answered, and she wouldn’t let me talk to him; I think I interrupted a fight. So I got my suitcase down from the closet and I started putting stuff in it, I guess to go to a hotel or something, and there was a knock at the door.

“‘Who is it?’ I called out, and Jacqueline’s voice said, ‘It’s me. Can I come in?’

“I didn’t really want to let her in, but I did anyway. She came in and I went back to packing. She sat on my bed and smiled up at me.

“‘You’re a very interesting person,’ she said. Her flattery wasn’t really getting through. ‘Thanks,’ I said, putting a handful of socks in my suitcase.

“‘You have really nice eyes,’ she said. I thanked her again but didn’t

even look at her.

“She came and stood behind me at my chest of drawers. She put her hand on my shoulder and breathed on my neck, and, well, let’s just say some of the shock of what I’d seen in the attic started to wear off.

“I’ve always been so attracted to intelligent men,’ she whispered in my ear. ‘Especially scientists.’

“I was starting to think I should reevaluate my opinion of this woman, but then I thought, ‘Scientist? She thinks I’m studying to be a gym teacher!’

“So I turned to face her, and she had this devilish grin on her face. She leaned forward so that her lips were right next to my ear and whispered, ‘Do you want to have a little fun?’

“Well, I didn’t know what to think. Part of me was a little intrigued, but I was also calming down enough to realize that if this wasn’t really Jacqueline, it must be her crazy twin sister, the one Mrs. Bashrum and Jacqueline had been talking about...the one I had seen in the attic.

“So I was standing there, getting really freaked out, when she took a couple steps back, her eyes practically glowing, and held up her hand.

“She was holding a hangman’s noose.

“She leaned forward and tried to put it over my head. I screamed and bolted; on my way out, both Mrs. Bashrum and Jacqueline, the real one, came out of their rooms and asked me what was wrong, but I just kept going. Fortunately, I had my keys and wallet with me. I jumped in my car and took off, and didn’t go back for my stuff for nearly a week.

“I haven’t seen any of them since.” Martin leaned back and let out a big yawn, and looked around at all of us. We didn’t say anything for a about a minute. Then Denise said, “Martin, in all the time we’ve known each other, why didn’t you ever tell us that story?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Martin said, shrugging. He lay back down flat on the floor, his hands behind his head. “I guess it didn’t seem important. Anyway, you should go up and see the attic. I think Brian wants to show it to you.”

It’s been a year now since they moved into that house, and I still haven’t seen the Bradfords’ attic.



For better or worse, I have received my fair share of advice. One piece of advice in particular stands out: life is short... so make the most of it. For surely the choices, both right and wrong, that we make in this lifetime will have a cause and effect on the next. That's simply the way our universe keeps things...

FAIR AND SQUARE

By FENNA GEELHOED

I probably shouldn't have called Timothy that night.

There was a kind of balmy heat you can only get in August, and the thought of sleeping in his arms was repulsive instead of comforting. I must have been seriously lonely to ask him to come over. I like to think that, if I hadn't, perhaps I'd still be alive today.

The whole thing began right after I'd put down the phone. A muffled tap on the window alerted me to the fact I had a visitor, and I turned around to find my neighbour, Friendly Fred, looking into my house through the glass panel in the front door. I don't know why he was known as Friendly Fred, exactly – he wasn't any more friendly than my other neighbours, but all in all, a decent man. I opened

the door and squinted my eyes at the low suburban sun.

"Hello, Fred."

He smiled warmly. "Evening, Lilah. Haven't seen you out and about all day. Everything all right?"

"I had a bad migraine," I lied, to disguise the fact that the sight of our street in summertime simply revolted me. There would be perfect people tending to their yards and perfect children playing on the street, with perfect haircuts and perfect smiles. "But I'm fine now."

"Michael on another business trip?" he asked, referring to my husband.

"Yes. He won't be back until Wednesday."

"Right. Right."

I knew he knew I was having an affair, but I also knew he felt he should stay out of it.

"Listen," he said. "This afternoon, there was a salesman going past the doors on the other side of the street. I mean, he looked like a salesman, you know? Business suit, hat, little briefcase in his hand... Ringing the doorbells of Joe Prosciutto and the Stevens family. They weren't there, of course – hell, I think half the block is at the beach today. Anyway, I sort of kindly

told him to get lost – this is not the kind of neighbourhood where these things are appreciated, you know?”

I thought, if anything, it was, but I didn't mind him getting rid of a little weasel at all. “Yeah. Thank you, Fred.”

“Well, hold up, I ain't finished yet. Just now, when I was walking Pedro, I saw him sitting in his car at the end of the street. In his black car, I tell you, wearing a black suit! In this heat? Gee. I almost started thinking he was some kind of weirdo.”

“Is he still there?”

“You betcha.” He took a little step back on the porch to allow me to scan the corner of the street. There was a black Chevrolet parked in front of the Stevens' house, and, like Fred had said; there was a man with a hat on sitting behind the wheel, staring out into nothingness. The Stevens' dog, an old Jack Russell on a chain in their front yard, was sitting nearby. Usually he lay in the shadows, tending to his wounds – Patrick Stevens' youngest son had a nasty habit of kicking the animal around – but now he was sitting straight up in the sun, looking at the vehicle in front of him, his tail swinging curiously across the grass. The man in the car was ignoring him.

I slipped back into my doorway. “What did he sell?”

Friendly Fred shook his head. “I didn't even wanna know. Something about shoes, he said, I believe. Look, all I was wondering – could you help me keep an eye on him? Guy gives me the creeps.”

“I wonder why he's not moving on to another part of town,” I said, thinking strictly cost-effectively. My husband's influence, most likely.

“Seems to me he's not done yet,” Fred said. “Let's agree to call the police if he starts bothering people again.”

“Sure,” I said, giving the Chevrolet one more look. It was almost half past six. Surely the man would be heading home soon.

Fred stepped down off my porch. “Thanks, Lilah. Give Michael my best, okay?”

I prepared some pasta and a salad in the kitchen – not too much, for I wasn't very hungry, and Timothy's appetite never related to food. Then I ran down to the cellar to pick out a bottle of white wine.

At a quarter past seven, the doorbell rang. I rushed to adjust my hair in the living room mirror before hopping

up to the door. I shouldn't have bothered, however. It was only the salesman at my door, tall and tidy.

"Good afternoon, ma'am." He tipped his hat. "My name is Myers, from Myers Soles. I was wondering if you'd be interested in purchas—"

I quite rudely cut him off. "No, I'm not interested, actually."

He smiled. "Then perhaps you have a sole or two you'd like to get rid of?"

"You buy old soles?" I asked, suddenly realising I had never heard of a company that dealt in soles. "Just the soles?"

"Oh, you'd be amazed how long they last. We fix them right up and sell them to those who need them most at a nice profit."

"That sounds a lot like swindling."

He wasn't offended at all. "I assure you our clients are most satisfied. Are you sure you don't own a sole you have no need for?"

"Quite sure."

"Very well, then. May I ask you something? Do you know when your neighbours will be home?" He turned halfway and indicated the two houses on the other side of the street Fred had mentioned before: those of Joe Prosciutto and the Stevens family.

"Unlike some of the people in this street, I don't care about my neighbours' comings and goings," I told him with a sour smile. "And honestly, sir, I think you'd better leave the area before someone starts calling the police. Good day."

I closed the door without allowing him to say anything else. He took it well. Through the glass I could see him straightening his tie and stepping back down off my porch. He crossed the street to where his Chevrolet was still parked and got back into the driver's seat. I expected him to start the engine and drive off, but he did no such thing. He leant back in his seat, put his hands on the steering wheel, and resumed his trance-like state from before. Frowning, I wondered why he was so convinced there were soles to be traded across the street, but thought no more of it. Assuming Friendly Fred would have probably called 911 by now, I turned away and carelessly continued preparing for Timothy's arrival.

He only reached me at a quarter to eight. I heard the sound of an engine in the driveway and walked out to the porch. A familiar well-muscled man stepped off a red motorcycle and hung

his helmet on the handlebar. To my surprise, the black Chevrolet was still parked on the other side of the street, Myers motionless inside. For a moment I glanced at Fred's house on my right. Had he not noticed the visit I'd been paid earlier?

Timothy flashed me a dazzling smile and athletically jumped onto the porch. "Sorry, babe," he said. "Damn car wouldn't start, so I had to get the bike out of the garage."

Many women might have agreed that a handsome biker who used the word 'babe' was something of a turn-on, but Timothy really wasn't. His sweaty hair stuck against my forehead when he leant in to give me a kiss and I could smell beer on his breath. So much for my fine choice of white wine.

He pulled back, took in my appearance and noted that I looked pretty. It was to be expected. I was never beautiful; I just looked pretty. Timothy really wasn't so eloquent when it came to compliments. He really wasn't so eloquent in general, nor so intelligent or kind. He wasn't even so passionate either. Frankly put, there was nothing about my lover that made him in any way better than my husband. In fact, I could find no other

reason forever starting an affair other than that I was bored. Completely, utterly bored.

"Are you hungry?" I asked him.

He shook his head and grinned.

Over his shoulder, Joe Prosciutto's silver Mercedes was just pulling into the driveway on the other side of the street. The driver had his elbow sticking out of the window, his big sunglasses trying to conceal the fact that his head was so comically small.

Timothy noticed my stare. "Something wrong?"

"What? Oh, no, it's nothing." Curiously, I waited until Joe had gotten out of his car and walked up to his front door to see what the salesman in the Chevrolet would do.

"Who was that?" Timothy asked, turning to watch the door close behind Joe.

"Joe Prosciutto," I replied.

"That his real name?"

"No, of course not. He's just... Italian."

"No kidding. Looked like a mobster's accountant."

I smirked. "Michael makes jokes about that too."

Myers did not get out of his car; in fact, it was as though he had not noticed Joe coming home at all. Now,

instead of seeming an odd man, he began to look like an odd idiot.

Timothy snapped me out of it. “Hey.” He swept me into his arms. “You know I have no problems with your marital status, but could you just not mention his name? Kinda makes me twitchy.”

“Sorry.” We kissed again, and retreated into the safe confines of my house.

I woke when it was nearing midnight. The Stevens’ dog across the street was barking frantically. I would have turned on my other side and continued sleeping, but there was something suffocating in the air – and Timothy’s body wasn’t even wrapped around mine.

My toes touched the floor next to the bed and I reeled over the window to check outside.

Patrick Stevens was standing in the middle of his front yard, fist raised in anger. “Don’t come back here!”

I tried to discern whom he was screaming at, and then I saw the black Chevy. It had not moved from its spot. “My God.” There was no doubt in my mind that something had gone wrong. Stevens was trying to calm down the dog, even though he was still fuming

himself.

I heard his wife wailing from the doorway and I could just make out her shape in their hallway, bent down over something on the floor. “Bobby!” she was screaming. “Oh, Patrick, he’s so pale...”

The dog was going mad, jumping and running around in circles in the yard, as far as his chain would allow it. He was howling and barking in staccato, but not in an aggressive manner – it almost sounded like a human laugh of joy.

Timothy’s head raised itself lazily from the pillow. “Babe? What’s up?”

Having the odd idiot causing a commotion in my street in the middle of the night had alarmed me more than somewhat. My heart sped up several beats.

“Call the police,” I said, slipping into a nightgown.

Timothy sat up further. “What?”

“Just do it. Tell them there’s been an accident.”

I ran down the stairs and slid into the hallway to have a better look through the glass panel in the door. Patrick Stevens had joined his wife at the body of their son. The Chevy still hadn’t moved. I tried to see inside if Myers was behind the wheel, but the

vehicle appeared to be empty.

Timothy came rushing into the hallway, having hung up the phone. "Cops say they're already on their way."

Friendly Fred, no doubt.

He joined me at the door and looked through the glass. "What's going on?"

My breath caught when a tall shadow slid onto my porch. Myers had crossed the street. He put his hand on the doorknob and tried turn it. Miraculously, I had remembered to lock the door.

"Mrs. Baxter?"

"Don't answer," Timothy hissed, pulling me away from the door.

The voice came again, this time softer. "Lilah?"

He pounded on the door with his fist.

"Go away," I screamed through the glass panel, shocked that he knew my name. Suddenly I was scared out of my mind. "I've called the police. They will be here any minute."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he responded. "I cannot leave before I've collected your soul."

I didn't understand what he was saying, except that he really meant it. Maybe I didn't want to understand –

maybe the idea that I had misinterpreted his words earlier was too frightening. "Go away! You can't have it."

"Now, now, I asked you nicely. You could have just said yes and then you would have never known you hadn't the option to refuse at all. We wouldn't have to go through all this."

I could still see the image of little Bobby Stevens lying in the doorway of the house across the street. It filled me with dread and the feeling that, somehow, I had gotten myself into big trouble. "Please." My voice broke in a desperate sob. "Please go. I don't want you to take my soul. I don't want you... please."

He looked through the glass, his blue eyes piercing their way into mine. "You have wasted it, ma'am. It should go to someone who has more use for it."

I ran back up to the door and slapped my hand against the glass, begging him. "That is not true. Please, that is not true. I am a good woman." He turned his head and eyed my lover.

"I don't believe that's entirely true."

Timothy tried to pull me away again, raising his voice at the man. "I'm warning you, if you don't leave

right now..."

"I don't think you understand," the man said. "You have no choice but to hand it over. I'm going to have to break the glass if you don't open the door and let me in."

Without waiting another second, he slammed his briefcase straight through the panel in the door. Timothy and I jumped back into the hallway as shards of glass spread across the floor.

I screamed. I think it was actually the first time in all my life I had been able to produce a high-pitched scream like that, and to maintain it for that long. Friendly Fred would later describe it as a 'scream like a ban-shee'. Whatever it was, it didn't help me. Myers's arm steadily reached in to unlock the door from the inside. He stepped into the hallway, the glass crunching underneath the soles of his expensive leather shoes. I couldn't move. Paralysed with fear, I watched him come straight towards me.

In a brave move, Timothy tried to jump straight in his way to block me, but by doing so he exposed his bare feet to the glass and, yelping in pain, he staggered off to the left.

I remembered how to breathe, and instinct made me grab a letter-opener lying on the hall table. I didn't know

how it had gotten there or if I'd be able to use it for my protection, but I grabbed onto it for dear life.

The sight of the sharp blade made Myers stop in his tracks, about two yards in front of me. "Lilah..." He smiled, almost pityingly.

"What did you do to him?" I asked, referring to Bobby.

"He's fine. And so is Joe. They're both fine." He took a single step forward.

I stuck out the letter-opener. "Don't come any closer!"

"It will only hurt for a little while, I promise," he said, starting to fumble with the combination lock of his briefcase. "Not a lot will change. You just won't be able to feel anything anymore."

Timothy was on the floor, clenching his feet to stem the blood oozing from between his toes. I think he cursed, but I couldn't make out if it was directed at the salesman or himself.

Click.

The lock on the left side of the briefcase sprang open.

I stared at the weapon in my hand, knowing that there was no way I'd dare to thrust it into the salesman's body. My fear of death would proba-

bly only make me stab too softly, and anger him instead of wound him. I was an adulteress, not a killer.

Click.

I dropped the letter-opener, gave my assailant a hard push and jumped past Timothy as far as I could. My heels didn't manage to escape the debris around the doorway; I gashed my foot on a large piece of glass, and staggered off the porch in hysterics.

The sound of a siren was coming closer, but in my panic to escape, I paid no attention to it. Limping out of my yard, tears streaming down my face, all I could think about was putting as much distance between Myers and myself.

I stopped in the middle of the street when a single gunshot rang out from Joe Prosciutto's house. It froze me to the spot, leaving me in perfect alignment with the bumper of the police patrol car driving down the street. The officer behind the wheel had been distracted as well, trying to reach for his service pistol while pulling up to Joe's house. Blinded by the headlights, my suddenly so precious life flashed before my eyes. It wasn't so bad at all.

Instead of not feeling anything, I was in incredible pain before I died.

Several ribs cracked when the car drove into me, and the bones in my right foot were shattered when one of the wheels hit it. My head took the hardest blow, however. On my way over to the hospital I went into a seizure and died right there in the ambulance. But that's hardly the worst of it.

Looking back now, I regret just about every single thing I did that night, but most of all, I hate myself for trying to run from my fate. I wish I had allowed Mr. Myers to take my soul, for now it is left to dwell between my front door and the middle of the road forever, watching the suburban life I always enjoyed shutting out so much. Friendly Fred still walks his dog every day while meddling with his neighbours' lives as much as he can. A new family has moved into Joe Prosciutto's house. Bobby Stevens is a living dead. His dog has never been happier. And Michael? Michael broke Timothy's nose at my funeral and then moved on.

They say we get what we deserve.



A hot night in the big city is the perfect breeding ground for mystery. In this tale, a classy dame seeks out a small-time detective to look into a fixed boxing match. Will the private eye stay on the wagon long enough to find the truth? And, once found, will the truth be worth dying for? Find out in...

THE BIG FIX

By PAULINE C. SMITH

Peepho sucked air between his teeth. Blood ran down his chin. He pasted a corner of toilet paper on the wound and frowned. His hands hadn't been steady since he gave up the drink, as evidenced by the criss-cross grid of minute scars from his long razor. He studied himself in the mirror, then glanced down at his left hand and its curious absence.

The tip of his index finger was missing between the first and second knuckle. While cleaning his gun he had lost a finger and his tin with one scotch smelling pistol blast. Simple as that – although there had been other things, too. With fierce concentration he finished his face and wiped it down with a hot towel.

The bottle was still there. At the entrance to the drab three-story where

he made his office and home, an empty bottle of cheap whiskey stood on a brick ledge which once kept flowers. It had been in a paper bag. The bag had withered and wasted away months ago. The bottle stood. Ace Peepho had set it there a year ago the last time he had taken drink. There were flowers then. Now there was only dirt and a thousand cigarette butts and the bottle.

There was a full bottle of the same whiskey in his top desk drawer. He had been planning on drinking that too when he blew his finger into the floorboards. Sometimes he smelled it. Other times he dipped his pinky finger into the brown liquid and ran it around his gums, savoring the bite it gave his brains.

But he never drank it. Not now.

Eunice Noonan had bandaged his hand and driven him to the hospital. She was his secretary and lounging in the fold-out bed in the office/bedroom. Peepho knew he shouldn't be sleeping with her. The blinking red glow of the second-story vacancy sign shouldn't be keeping her awake right now. Her lipstick shouldn't be smeared on his collar. There were a lot of things that shouldn't, but only one thing that should: the case.

Of course it was dirty business.

Peepho didn't know much, but he knew dirty. The girl was a knockout. She had legs. She marched into the office that, until recently, Peepho had shared with his partner Tent Milesko. The knockout nylons on her knockout legs made a swish-swish that stood the hair on the back of his sunburned neck on end. He looked her all the way up and then the mile back down, then tapped tobacco into paper and rolled it expertly, despite his missing joint.

He took his time. She seated herself in Tent's dusty chair and drew her own thin cigarette, lighting it with the dead Milesko's dusty lighter. The vapors from her perfume hit Peepho's brain like a left hook. He enjoyed it. When the silence hung in the air long enough and began to mix with the smoke, she licked her lips and spoke.

"My name is Baby Goyette. Are you for hire, Mr. Peepho?"

Peepho said: "Sure, I'm for hire. You don't see anybody beating down my door. Go on, Miss Goyette – I'm all ears."

Baby Goyette crossed her knockout legs. The red of her smart skirt and hat was like an exclamation mark in Peepho's gray office. Her voice was breathy and rough, like she smoked and drank and did other things, too,

and liked it all.

"Do you watch the fights, Mr. Peepho?"

"Call me Ace," he said. "And yes, I watch the fights."

"Are you familiar with a boxer named Floyd Cortez?"

"The black man fighting heavy-weight? Sure, I've heard of him."

"He'll take a fall Saturday night." She re-crossed her legs with a swish-swish. "The Grover Quartier fight. Floyd will go down in the fourth round."

"How do you know that? If you don't mind me asking."

Baby Goyette snuffed out her expensive cigarette in his dead partner's ashtray. "I'm his lover," she shrugged. "I overheard him fixing it with his management. A Mr. Sartin. Sim Sartin. There is also a Mr. Watts and a Mr. Spencer Vargas. They're all in it."

Peepho shook his head and stood up. "I know Vargas. He's not dirty. The others might be, but not Vargas. The old man has been in the fights his whole life."

Peepho came around his desk and sat on the corner. Baby Goyette's eyes were hidden by a three inch veil sewn into the lining of her hat, but her legs

were in plain view.

“Think what you will,” she said.

“What’s this got to do with me?” he asked. “So the fight is fixed. Call the cops. Call the local rag. You’ll probably make a fortune.”

“I already *have* a fortune,” Baby said. “I want to know why.”

“Don’t be dumb,” Peepho said impatiently. “I just met you and I know it doesn’t suit you. There’s only one reason a fighter takes a fall and that’s for the green. Even a woman like you knows that. Please...”

“Floyd isn’t like that. He wouldn’t take a fall unless he was forced.” She rose from her seat and gazed out Peepho’s window. “You don’t know Floyd. He beat his way from poverty in Cuba – he’s 34-0. He’s taken beatings no other man could stand. All for a paycheck he gives to his mother and family. He’s got pride. Do you know what that is?”

“Stop it, I’m getting weepy,” Peepho grimaced. “So you’re shacking up with a saint. I get the point. He’s infallible. Well, let me tell you something sister: no one is infallible. No one is above the green. He probably got a stack of bills waved under his nose and figured: why fight? Why not just take one dive and never have to fight

again?”

Baby turned slowly. “I didn’t expect you to be sympathetic. I know Floyd, that’s all that matters.”

Peepho shrugged. “That’s fine.”

“So will you?”

“Will I what?”

“Take the case.”

“Why not,” Peepho said.

Peepho knew his office was haunted by the ghost of his recently deceased partner. He could feel Tent Milesko peering over his shoulder – even smell his aftershave from time to time. Peepho wasn’t frightened by the possibility of a supernatural presence. In fact, he rather enjoyed it. He would ask Tent’s empty chair for advice then chuckle when his hat fell off the rack or the lightbulb flickered.

Milesko might have been a bum and a crooked investigator, but he kept a smile on Peepho’s face with his womanizing and drinking and dangerous hobbies.

Ace Peepho dipped a finger into his hidden bottle and ran it around his gums. He screwed the cap back on and leaned back in his chair, staring at Milesko’s empty seat.

“Well, partner – what’s the plan?”

No reply.

“Time to see Manny, you think?”

Silence.

“Yeah. Manny’s got the word on Floyd Cortez. No, no – don’t worry about it,” Peepho said to no one. “I’ve got this one. You just relax and keep putting the screws to that Esther Dupree dame you was telling me about. And I want details when I get back.”

Peepho strung a neck-tie over his head and jammed a hat on top, stopping to grab his pouch of tobacco and papers which he stuffed in his pocket along with some matches.

“Later, pard,” he said.

Peepho did not drive much. He preferred public transit – buses and cabs – to the dodge and go of the city streets. When he had to pay a visit to Manny Pomiji, he drove. Where Manny and his information were located was no place bus drivers and cabbies wanted to be.

He pushed open the garage door behind his office building and threw back the tarp that covered his Olds. It was dusty and needed to be run hard. He felt the same way.

Burbank stunk, but to Peepho it was a good kind of stink. He liked it. He smoked cigarettes with the top down

and inhaled deeply. Five different odors mixed up in his nose: sewer, sweat, urine, asphalt, exhaust. Horns honked and lights blinked and he forced himself to concentrate on the road. The city stretched out before him in a complex grid of sex and smog. It made for good business.

Manny Pomiji was a snitch. An oily, rat-faced maroon who would sell out his own mother if it got him the inside on something. Peepho loved the man. Manny was a card-shark, a loan-shark, and a pool-shark. He was an informant and a squealer. A backstabbing, two-timing criminal. But another thing he was was good. The best. He had the dirt on everyone. Peepho figured that’s why he was still alive. Ten gangs would kill the man if only he didn’t know so much about the other nine. When Ace Peepho needed dirt, a wad of green was his shovel and Manny Pomiji was his hole.

Peepho turned his Olds toward Hollywood and watched as the streets grew narrow and the cars seedy. He parked his car in front of a hydrant and mashed out his butt. The Derby Pool-Hall was where Manny could be found on most days. The clink and church were the others.

Peepho entered a dim room of

clicking pool balls and ceiling fans. A fiver to the muscles guarding the door pointed him to Manny. The snitch was having trouble sizing up a shot on one of the back tables on account of his eye being as swollen and purple as a plum. Peepho ambled over and chewed patiently on a toothpick, waiting for Manny to sink the eight ball.

“Watchoo-want, copper?” Manny said. His voice sounded tired, and the mouthful of teeth that usually held a smile for him remained clamped down like a scar.

“I haven’t been a cop for years. You’re slipping.”

“Manny don’t slip, Ace,” the snitch said, touching his eye almost as an afterthought. “I ain’t got nothing to say.”

Peepho said: “To me or to Andrew Jackson?”

“Not even to Grant.”

Peepho stuffed a couple of sawbucks into Manny’s shirt pocket and pulled him by the elbow to a booth. “What have you got on the Cortez - Quartier fight?”

Manny tittered a nervous laugh and shook his head. “Uh, uh... I *told* you – Manny got nothing to say.”

“Since when?”

“Since I don’t know.” The rat-faced

man replied, shaking a cigarette out. His one good eye darted about the room. “Ask me something else, copper.”

“That’s all I want to know.”

“A case?”

“Yes.”

“Drop it.”

“Now, why would I want to do that?”

Manny Pomiji inhaled smoke deep into his lungs and blew a jet above the detective’s head. Peepho rolled his own while waiting for Manny’s answer. He popped a match on this thumbnail and held it under his smoke.

Manny pointed to his grotesque eye. “Bad business. Big people and bad business. I’m doing you a favor. If you want to stay above ground, you’ll keep your snoopin’ nose out of it. That’s all I’m saying.”

“You really *are* losing your touch.”

“Uh, uh... Manny just knows when to mind my own damn business. Manny wants to stay healthy. If you knew what was good for you – which you *don’t* – but if you did, you’d do the same. Manny’s got a game waiting. So long, Ace.”

Peepho watched the rat go. He sat in the booth a while longer, smoking and thinking. Manny never sold out –

no matter who was involved. But then again, Manny had never been severely beaten either. At least not in a long, long time. Someone put the screws to him but good to keep his loose lips from flapping.

Peepho wanted to find out who.

Driving back to his office, Peepho considered Manny's warning. He was used to warnings. He was also used to ultimatums, threats, decrees, pronouncements, and predictions. At a red light, he rolled a smoke and rubbed the stump of his finger.

After talking to Manny he was no closer to understanding Cortez's motivation for taking the fix. He didn't expect to get very far on his first day on the case – but he also didn't expect Manny to clam up like he was scared of being on the wrong end of a gun. Peepho was used to surprises, but that didn't mean he liked them.

One thing he *did* know: Baby Goyette was obviously more than she seemed. Peepho didn't buy her sob story about Cortez and he looked forward to grilling her and digging out what the dame was really after.

The sun was setting behind a gritty haze and Peepho longed for a drink. He inhaled deeply and could feel the pres-

sure in the air. A storm was gathering.

A *Cortez vs. Quartier* billboard splashed across the top of the sports arena.

Whatever it was that made a 34-0 fighter tank a bout worth tens of thousands, it wasn't good. Peepho had a nauseating feeling that by the end of this case, he would wish he didn't know.

Back at his office he rattled the lock and let himself in. Eunice sat at his desk, smoking and reading the newspaper. She looked up but did not smile.

“That orderly you play bocce with called.”

Peepho's ears perked up. He tossed his hat onto the rack.

“Oates?”

“Yeah, Oates.” She stood up and took a step toward him, cracking her knuckles – which meant it was bad news.

“Well, what did he want?”

“He said Manny Pomiji was brought in this afternoon. He'd been shot four times. He thought you'd...”

Peepho turned on his heel and headed for the door.

He jogged around to the back of the building and threw open the door for the second time that day. The Olds growled and belched blue smoke as

Peepho pushed it hard and fast on the asphalt. He raced down Lexington, running two red lights, and pulled up on the curb in front of St. Anne's.

Peepho was hoping to see some badges he recognized outside of Manny's door, but he was out of luck. Two fresh-faced kids chewing gum sat up straight as he marched down the hall. Peepho flashed his old shield to the boys and quickly hid it away.

"Homicide. How's the rat?"

A kid named Romano looked like he swallowed his gum. "He's pretty shot full of holes, sir. You can go in, but he's out of it. Hasn't woke up yet..."

"Where'd it happen?"

"Sir?"

Peepho made a gun with his finger and thumb. "You know – bang, bang. Where'd he get plugged?"

The other kid, Price, spoke up. "The steps of St. Luke's – right across from the pool hall. The Derby. Shouldn't you..."

Peepho was already gone. He trotted back to his car and horsed it to The Derby. A small group was gathered on the steps of the church.

The area was taped off, and a couple of lunks were about to wash away the blood with a bucket of water.

Peepho was glad to see a face he recognized.

"Patullo!"

"Ace. Figured you'd show up sooner or later."

Lindo Patullo was one of the few beat cops left from Peepho's days on the force. He was a tall, swarthy Italian. They put up with each other; mainly because Peepho had an annoying knack of pointing Patullo in the right direction when it came to a case.

Peepho jerked a thumb at the flatfoots with the buckets.

"Tell 'em to hold the suds."

Patullo whistled and waved away the two cops. "You look like hell," he said.

"Thanks. What's that in the blood? Was he trying to write his will?"

The two men squatted down on the church steps and examined the congealing red mess.

Patullo said: "That's what I was wondering. Looks like the poor bastard was trying to write something with his own blood. Only got a couple letters though."

"O-B..." Peepho finished. "Can't make out the next letter, though. Any idear what it means?"

"Search me," said Patullo.

Peepho gnawed on a toothpick and

studied the strange letters. Patullo gave a nod to the bucket boys and the cryptic message was washed away.

“You got a line on this case?” the Italian asked.

Peepho sighed and watched the streetlights hum on. “Yeah – but I’ll be damned if I know what it means.” He nodded to the pink puddle. “I visited Manny today, but he wouldn’t talk. Someone must be mighty troubled about what he knows. He was pretty worked over. They must have thought he spilled to me.”

“Did he?”

Peepho snorted and walked down the steps. “That’s why you’ll never make captain, Lindy.”

“Ace. Wake up!”

“What is it?” Peepho buried his head under his pillow, but the shaking continued.

“Wake up, ya big lummo!”

He groaned and rolled over. Eunice jerked her head toward the door that split the office from the waiting room.

“She’s here.”

“Who’s here?”

“Miss Goyette. *If* that’s her name.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Eunice stood and smoothed her skirt. She looked very satisfied, and

when she winked at him Peepho could have murdered her. He swung his legs out of bed and the two of them pushed the mattress back into the wall cavity.

Eunice continued. “You’re not the only one that’s clever. Your client stepped into the ladies room when I told her I would wake you. I snuck back into the waiting room and took a peak in her handbag.”

“Well?”

“Well, her name’s not Baby Goyette.”

“I’m shocked,” Peepho yawned, pulling on his suspenders. “What is it?”

“Oberhauser. Heddy Oberhauser.”

Peepho blinked. “You don’t mean Oberhauser as in *Senator* Oberhauser, do you? It ain’t that old fossil’s kid is it?”

“How many Heddy Oberhausers can there be?” She helped him button his shirt and knot his tie. “I’d say that kind of deduction deserves a raise.”

Peepho smirked. “Maybe later.”

When he had washed his face and the room was put back in order, Peepho had Eunice show the client in. Baby Goyette/Heddy Oberhauser glided into the room and seated herself once more in Peepho’s dead partner’s chair. Even dead, Tent Milesko could get the

dames, Peepho thought wryly.

This morning she was dressed in a smart black and white number. The hat pinned to her head was without a veil, so Peepho was allowed to marvel at a pair of eyes that were ice blue – savage.

“Good morning, Mr. Peepho.”

“Is it? Let me have some coffee and I’ll think about it. Do you always wake with the birds, Miss... Goyette?”

“I needed to talk to you. It’s urgent.”

“About Cortez?”

“I’m afraid for him. He... he says he’s not going down in the fourth.”

Peepho rocked back in his chair and shrugged. “And you think something will happen to him if he doesn’t?”

“Yes.”

“He’s a plenty big fella. There aren’t a lot of men who could work him over. Unless you think...”

Baby Goyette nodded her head. “I fear for his life. If Floyd Cortez doesn’t go down, and, my God, if he *wins* – he’s a dead man.”

Peepho spun his chair lazily and gazed out the grimy window. “I won’t ask how you know. But I *will* ask why you’re lying to me.”

He didn’t need to be looking at her to know that she was startled. He could

hear a tiny intake of breath and the slight rustle of her clothes.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“I’m sure you do.” Peepho was suddenly tired. His impatience gave him a surly tone. He wheeled on her and growled. “Why don’t you tell me who you *really* are? What’s this all about? Do you know Manny Pomiji? Do you know what happened to him? And what’s your *real* name, anyway?”

Baby Goyette stood up as if she meant to leave. “If you’ll excuse me. I think I made a terrible mistake coming here.”

Peepho blocked her path. “Sure. No one’s stopping you. Say hello to the Senator for me, will ya?”

The woman locked eyes with Peepho for a long moment, and then sat down slowly in Tent Milesko’s ghost chair.

“How did you find out?”

“It’s my business. I get paid to find things out. Your name is Heddy Oberhauser – only daughter of Senator Miles Oberhauser. Is it the old man that’s pulling Cortez’s strings?”

Heddy Oberhauser tapped out a cigarette and took her time lighting it. She blew smoke through her nostrils and plucked a stray grain of tobacco off

her exquisite tongue.

“Yes.”

“Then you don’t really expect trouble if Cortez wins?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, you do or yes, you don’t?”

She gave him a cruel stare. “Yes, I expect Floyd to – to find trouble – if he wins. Even though my father’s involved. *Especially* since my father’s involved.”

“Well that helps me out,” Peepho laughed. “What is it with you? Why the charade? Why not just tell me what you want? What is it, Miss Oberhauser, that you want me to do?”

The woman stood up and stubbed out her smoke in the dead man’s ash-tray. She swish-swished to the door and opened it. On the other side, Eunice scurried back to her desk.

“I want you to find out why my father wants Floyd Cortez dead.”

“Why don’t you just ask him yourself?”

“Because it’s your job, Mr. Peepho. You get paid to find things out, remember?”

Peepho ate a hurried breakfast of scrambled eggs and coffee, grabbed his hat and headed for the Olds. He planned on getting some answers out

of the Senator one way or another, but on the advice of his partner’s ghost, he decided to pay a visit to Floyd Cortez first.

Now that his name was first on the marquee, Peepho knew Cortez would never train at a regular gym. In order to find the boxer, he would have to hope Manny had come to his senses. Peepho thumbed off a few bills from the roll in his desk drawer – the going rate for the address he was after.

The kids guarding the door were long gone. Peepho walked right in and was relieved to see Manny awake.

“What, no flowers?” the rat croaked.

Peepho grinned. “Even better.” He dumped some tobacco into paper and rolled a smoke. Peepho stuck the cigarette between Manny’s lips and cracked a window to let the smoke out.

“My God. I haven’t had one of these in two days!”

“These things will kill you, Manny.”

The rat laughed, winced in pain, and laughed again. “I suppose you want to know who poked holes in Manny?”

“If you want to tell.”

“Well, what *do* you want?”

Peepho sat on the edge of the bed

and helped himself to Manny's smoke. "I know about Oberhauser." He waited for Manny to reply. When he didn't, Peepho continued. "I want to know where Cortez is training. You can tell me that much, can't you?"

Manny took the cigarette back and shook his head at Peepho. "You're like a mutt with a hunk of meat, you know that? And twice as dumb! Manny ate lead four times because of you, and you still won't let go. You gonna find him whether Manny tells you or not, huh?"

"That's right," Peepho agreed.

Manny blew smoke in the direction of the window and shrugged. "Look at me. What do I care? He's training at a house in Beverly Hills. Big pink place on Levine called Fillmore Terrace. Lots of trees. Know it?"

Peepho nodded as he headed for the door.

"Just remember, you didn't hear it from Manny."

Peepho grinned. "I never do."

Fillmore Terrace was a sprawling, flamingo estate tucked away in an exclusive hillside neighborhood. Large brick walls with iron posts surrounded a jungle-land straight out of an African safari. A security guard stood post by

the front gate, and Peepho guessed there would be others roaming about.

"We're here," he said.

He shifted the Olds into neutral and coasted beneath the shade of a palm. When the activity on the street had ebbed and it was quiet to his satisfaction, he stole around the perimeter of the estate and found a palm tree that offered to help him over the wall.

Once inside he only had to follow his ears. The sounds of shouts and men arguing came from inside the pink structure. Peepho looked over his shoulder and advanced toward the nearest window. Before he arrived, a sickening gunshot scattered a flock of mourning doves at roost on the red tiles of the rooftop. Peepho cursed and hoped the bullet hadn't met bone.

When his eyes were above the window sill, he found himself witness to Floyd Cortez crumpling to the floor. Miles Oberhauser sat in a wheelchair ten feet away – a smoking pistol clutched in his spotted, bony hand.

Peepho fumbled for his own gun and entered like a bull through the window. Oberhauser aimed the pistol, but all the strength seemed to be drained from the politician's face. When the old man saw Peepho's gun, he let his own drop into his lap.

Two men, stunned at first by the gunshot, came to their senses and stepped toward either side of the old man. The man on the right – a dapper, hawk-nosed man dressed in brown – had a dazed look like he'd been slapped. The thin man in gray at the old man's left had his hand dipped inside his jacket pocket.

Peepho grunted and shook the gray man's hand away with a couple jerks of his rod.

"You're the dick the rat squealed to," Oberhauser said. He had a dry, cracked tone that suggested a once great orator reduced by time to whispering in the ears of oil men and land developers. He wheeled his chair to Cortez and jutted his chin out defiantly. The two men stepped in tandem to his side.

Peepho nodded to the man in gray. "Tell the gent to put it on the floor and kick it over to me. Nice and easy."

The Senator dismissed the men with a wave of his hand. "Leave us."

The man in brown exited, but the man in gray remained steadfast, his hand still hidden. The Senator smiled. "It's okay, Lucius. You can go. Mr. Peepho and I have a thing or two to discuss."

The man in gray bored holes in

Peepho with his eyes. He looked terribly disappointed at being robbed of his chance to throw lead at the detective. He backed slowly from the room.

Peepho looked at Oberhauser. "You know my name."

The old man wheeled closer still to the fallen boxer. A puddle of blood oozed beneath him, making a queer lake on the imported Spanish tiles. Oberhauser kicked the boxer's arm and the man let out a weak groan.

"I know everyone. He's alive."

Peepho said: "Lucky for you. Call an ambulance."

Oberhauser shrugged his bony shoulders. "It's all the same to me whether he lives or dies."

The callous confidence in the old man's voice turned Peepho's stomach. He didn't know with any degree of certainty whether the Senator could really get away with murder or not.

"Your daughter seems to think he's worth saving."

The old man chuckled sardonically and caressed the shaft of his pistol with a gnarled finger. "She would. The stupid cow has caused me more trouble than she's worth. I suppose she told you her connection to this unfortunate man on the floor?"

Peepho put his gun back into his

coat pocket, but left his hand on the butt. "She told me they were lovers."

The old man barked laughter that startled Peepho and almost made him draw his gun back out.

"Oh, she's rich, that one," Oberhauser laughed. "Just like her old man. She would have made a hell of a politician if she wasn't a woman. Venom like a snake and twice as slippery, God bless her. You didn't believe her, I presume?"

Peepho shook his head. "I don't believe much."

Oberhauser backed his chair up to a lamp table and set his gun down. Next he wheeled over to a larger table with several crystal bottles on it and poured a drink into a tumbler.

"Drink?"

Peepho declined, and then knelt to check the boxer's pulse.

Oberhauser drained his glass. "You're determined to save this miserable wretch. I'll make it quick, then. Twenty-five years ago I had political dealings, business dealings, that took me to Florida, the Bahamas, and eventually to Cuba. I made money, of course, but more importantly, I made friends. You're too young to know or care, but my re-election campaign hit a

few snags back then, and friends were needed to ensure I stayed in office. While in Havana, I met a native who I'll call Rita. If I would have known the trouble that little harlot would bring me, I would have strangled her there and then. Alas, she sniffed out my money and gave me everything I ever desired. You can imagine my shock when, a year later, lovely Rita shows up with a child – threatening to go public! Naturally, I threw her out. The next day I received an envelope in my mail with a packet of photos detailing...well, you're the detective. I don't have to spell it out.

"I put up with this nonsense for almost a year, until I worked out her deportation. She could show the pictures to whomever she liked in Cuba. It was really nothing to me. I had gained enough power where I could deny her allegations, and cover up her proof. Besides, my contacts in Cuba were persuasive when it came to her keeping quiet."

Peepho tried to make himself look comfortable in a chair by the window. The old man poured another drink and looked at him over the rim of his glass. "I hope you aren't too bored with my tale. I won't be long at getting to the point. You see, I never gave the matter

another thought until five years ago. Oberhauser pointed to the fallen boxer. "It was at that time our deflated prize-fighter here started to make a name for himself. I even went to several of his fights – never suspecting that the brute delivering punishment in the ring was really my son! After he went 25-0, a massacre that left Royce Romada a dope and Floyd Cortez a household name, he finally came to me. At first I couldn't believe it. But then I only had to look into his eyes – *my* eyes – and see the bitterness and cruelty that resided in them to know that it was all true."

Oberhauser took a long drink before continuing. "Well, that was all fine and good. The prodigal son had returned. Ha! Pounding flesh wasn't getting the pug enough money – he actually tried to blackmail me. He threatened to go to the press, he threatened to tell the world that the great senator from California with the spotless record had fathered an interracial child out of wedlock and abandoned them both at birth! Well, I'm not running for president, mind you, but a scandal like that could ruin me. An insane woman from Cuba with doctored photos I can sweep under the rug easily enough. But a famous prizefighter would cause me

no end of trouble."

Peepho looked out the window, his face vacuous. "So why the fix?" he asked. "If you're gonna plug him anyway, why throw the fight?"

"An excellent question," the Senator said agreeably. "And here's why: Because if Cortez wins, he goes to the press. And if Cortez loses, he goes to the press. I knew I had to strike first. If you've read the papers the last year, you'll know that my name has been attached to several investigations into the gambling and professional sports circuits. I've headed up congressional inquiries into anti-trust suits, grafts, money laundering, and fixed games, matches, bouts, and contests. As far as the public is concerned, I'm the only man standing between every baseball game and boxing match being thrown from here to New York City! Cortez didn't have to be in on the fix, he just had to show up for the fight. The mere appearance of a rigged match against Quartier – with my name attached to the investigation – would sound the death knell for poor Floyd Cortez, making whatever claim he made about his ancestry utterly preposterous!"

Oberhauser licked his lips in satisfaction and dared Peepho to respond.

The detective scratched the nub of his missing finger and gazed at the palms outside the window. He spoke quietly. "Summed up nicely, Senator. But it doesn't fit with you popping holes in him just now, does it?"

Peepho was glad to see that he had succeeded in elevating the old man's blood pressure. Oberhauser scowled and clattered his tumbler on the small lamp table. Ice cubes jumped out of the glass and clattered to the floor around Cortez's head. "The idiot wasn't going to fight!" he snarled. "A bluff, no doubt, but I couldn't take the chance. You see, I had offered a tidy solution to both our problems. It was really quite simple: we both have our people bet a handsome sum on Quartier, and then when he tanks it in the fourth, we both cash in a pretty figure. Surely more than his paltry twenty grand purse – probably closer to fifty!"

Oberhauser's face was flushed. He squirmed in his chair. "He sent word to Sartin, my personal assistant, and Watts, my bodyguard, that he intended to back out of the Quartier fight. To walk away from twenty grand unless I forked over one hundred thousand! I'll give the man this: he may look like a lummo, but he's got his mother's devious brain. He had the goods on me.

Enough proof to raise a few eyebrows anyway. I had my boys find out where he was training, hoping to talk some sense into his battered brain. He grew enraged, pulled me out of my chair, threatened to harm me. I have two witnesses who say it was self defense. And, as you know, Mr. Peepho, the word of a Senator goes a lot farther in this town than the word of a drunken gumshoe."

Peepho was about to respond when a gasp came from the doorway. The two men turned to see Heddy Oberhauser staring wide-eyed at the crumpled boxer. She rushed to his side but turned almost immediately to her father and grabbed him roughly by the lapels.

"What have you done you monster?" Tears threatened to spill over her lids and ruin her facial. She cracked a palm across the old man's face and was drawing back for a second helping when she was stopped mid-swing by a meaty hand around her wrist.

Watts, the man in gray, twirled her around like a rag doll so that she tumbled to the floor beside her half-brother. The gray man smiled savagely at Peepho, his gun trained on the girl.

"Drop it, dick," he hissed.

Peepho stood up deliberately and

placed his gun on the mantle. Stepping back toward the window, he removed his hat and wiped his brow with a handkerchief. Watts' lips twisted into a menacing sneer as his gun moved from the girl and rested on Peepho.

The shot that followed made Peepho's knees give out. He sank into the chair next to him and blinked. Heddy Oberhauser screamed.

Across the room, Watts barked out a curse, and then crashed backward out the door and clattered to the tile floor, a flower of crimson already spoiling his Sunday suit.

Miles Oberhauser worked his dentures up and down like a puppet. He looked from the window to Peepho, and back to the window. The smell of gunpowder wafted in from the gun of Lindo Patullo. The swarthy cop scrambled into the room and snatched up the old man's gun.

Peepho said: "Thanks. But next time don't wait so long."

Patullo grinned and whistled out the window. Within moments, two uniformed officers entered the room to care for Cortez and guard the old man.

Oberhauser sputtered furiously, a shower of spittle spraying from his lips. "How long... You've *nothing* on me. Nothing you can prove. I'll call my

lawyer at once."

"You can call him from the hoosegow," Patullo grunted. He tipped his hat to Peepho. "Next time don't wait so long to wipe your brow with your hanky, or the boys will be working on *you* instead. That was a risky move, Ace. You're lucky Cortez is still alive."

Peepho licked paper and rolled a smoke. "His pulse was as strong as an ox when I checked him. I took a chance by whispering in his ear – asking him if he could hold out for a few minutes while I got the dirt on his old man. I told him not to move no matter what happened."

Patullo grinned and shook his head. "You'll have to give a statement. You gonna be around?"

Peepho yanked his hat onto his head and nodded. "I'll be having a smoke at my office. This caper will top any story that damned ghost has cooked up."

Patullo scratched his head and watched the detective disappear between the palms.



For secret agent Geno Solis, death is a way of life. He plays the role of executioner in this short shocker, but is reminded that his own death walks a razor's edge...

SPECIAL DELIVERY

By THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER

Geno Solis fixed the telescopic sight on his six-shot repeater and pressed it to his left eye as a gathering of pigeons cooed in annoyance at the intruder who had invaded their rooftop meeting place. The girl had actually done it! From his vantage point across from the opera house he could see her clearly through the sights. In a red satin dress, her hands, white at the knuckles, were grimly clutching a matching leather purse. Saul stood like a giant amid his seedy entourage and waited patiently, serenely, for his sleek, bombproof limousine to glide up to the curb.

In a matter of seconds all hell was going to break loose. Either she was going to pull the razor-sharp knife out of her bag and calmly slit Saul's throat, or Geno was going to do what he had trav-

elled half-way around the globe to accomplish: blow the largest peddler of designer narcotics in the free world straight to hell.

The directive had come from his superior and had been quite specific. Infiltrate Saul's group and assassinate him, checking personally to see that he had no pulse. There could be no doubt, no question that Saul might survive. The very welfare of today's youth depended on this man's death. Geno was ordered to play the dual roles of executioner and coroner. And now here he was about to go against command – the deadly poison in his right cufflink that was to find a home in Saul's negroni remained intact. If his superior knew he was about to attempt a spectacular shot at night with an unfamiliar rifle from one hundred yards...

Geno's mind raced in a confused jumble of photographs: the glorious weekend in Ipanema with the girl. The long drives along the coast – the longer nights of champagne and passion beneath the tropical moon near Rio. And now it had come to this. Hell! She had

sworn she would do it. Saul had her brother killed – now *she* would play the executioner and fall herself in a rain of bullets when the job was done.

But hadn't Geno known it might come to this? After all, he *was* perched atop a building holding a gun instead of standing in the crowd of Saul's men that he had taken such pains to infiltrate. Six weeks of dirty work washed away by this spoiled brat's blind scheme of revenge. It was all so absurd Geno Solis nearly wanted to laugh out loud.

He cradled the powerful gun like a baby and nestled the butt into his shoulder, setting the cross hairs on Saul's deeply creased, Mediterranean face. He had about ten seconds to execute a perfect shot and save this girl's life; or watch the woman he had made love to barely twelve hours ago drop like a rag-doll to the filthy pavement – pierced by a firestorm of lead.

His mind raced, trying desperately to rationalize his actions, to make sense somehow of what he was doing. What in hell was he to

tell his superior when news of Saul's death got splashed all over the wire? He could read the expression on the old man's face as clearly as if he were sitting across from him – those piercing eyes! The only thing he could come up with was what someone had asked him once a million years ago. 'Why send a man to do a bullet's job?' For the life of him, Geno could not recall who had shared that wisdom, but he clung to it now and made it his personal dictum.

Geno's grey eyes narrowed to slits and his mouth became a cruel, bloodless gash. His tongue yearned simultaneously for a drink and a cigarette. They would both have to wait. He sharpened his mind.

"Why send a man, indeed?" he said between clenched teeth.

A flock of drowsing pigeons fluttered suddenly into the cool summer sky.



THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER SUGGESTS...

"In The Rain With The Dead will grab you from page one and keep you in its clutches until the very last page! Mark West does what he does best - he scares the living daylights out of his readers!"

- T. M. Gray, author of "Ghosts of Eden"



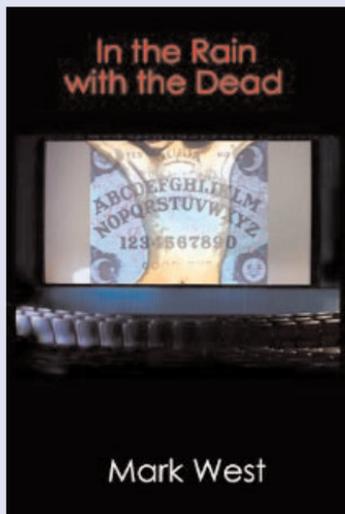
A novel of lost love and gut-wrenching terror...

Ten years ago, Jim and Nadia started a tentative romance which was ripped apart by a supernatural occurrence that resulted in the death of one of their friends.

Now, at the funeral of an old friend, they meet again. But something has come through from the other side, a demon that wants Nadia all to himself...

In the Rain with the Dead

by Mark West



"In The Rain With The Dead" by Mark West is available at:

www.pendragonpress.co.uk

Amazon.co.uk

Shocklines.com

"One of the brightest horror writers to come out of England since Clive Barker."

- Brian Keene, author of "The Rising" and "City Of The Dead"