

THE BACK ALLEY WEBZINE

Volume III, Number 1

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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

HARD-HEARTED HANNAHS

We are delighted in this new issue of The Back Alley Webzine to offer six new stories, this time from a collection of some of the finest female hardboiled and noir authors in the country.

For most of its earliest formative years, hardboiled and noir literature was considered to be the domain of male authors. Many of them had led lives of action--such as Dashiell Hammett--and used their life experiences as a literary pool from which they dipped to create their fiction. Even woman protagonists were rare, with sparse exceptions such as Erle Stanley Gardner's Bertha Cool stories, or Dwight Babcock's sex-and-violence-laced Hannah Van Doren tales.

Gloria Fickling and her husband, Forrest, did produce Honey West beginning in the 1950s. This series was almost certainly more serious than the tongue-in-cheek depiction by Anne Francis in the 1960s television series, and may count as early distaff-authored hardboiled.

We might consider that the true turning of the corner came in the 1970s, when Marcia Muller started writing the Sharon McCone series. Marcia Muller probably blazed the trail later trod by such wonderful authors as Sara Paretsky, Sue Grafton, Janet Evanovich (arguably soft-boiled, but still part of the tradition), and Liza Cody. Today, we are lucky to enjoy the works of dozens of marvelously hardboiled and noir female authors such as Vicki Hendricks, S.J. Rozan, Laura Lippman, Megan Abbott, Twist Phelan, Cathi Unsworth, and Christa Faust.

So, here in The Back Alley, we decided for this issue to feature the works of both established female hardboiled and noir authors, such as Derringer Award recipient Patricia Abbott and Edgar Award recipient G. Miki Hayden; and from some exciting new voices you may not have read before, but whom we expect to emerge over the next several years as forces in the genre.

We hope that, after reading this issue, you'll never again even think of using words like "...writes like a girl...". These women can stand up to any author in the market.

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Here at The Back Alley, we're very excited about milestones and the successes of our authors. It's always fun to receive award nominations and wins, and this year is no

different. We're extremely pleased to announce two award nominations for stories from the past year.

Claude Lalumière, a Montreal-based author and editor, was nominated for a Spinetingler Award, sponsored by Spinetingler Magazine, for his story *She Watches Him Swim*, which appeared in The Back Alley's All-Canada issue last December.

Chris F. Holm's story *The Big Score*, which was published in The Back Alley in the summer of 2008, was nominated for a Short Mystery Fiction Society Derringer Award this spring.

Neither story won the award in its category, but as both a three-time Shamus Award nominee and a two-time Derringer Award winner, I can tell you from personal experience that just being nominated is a thrill and a half. We are very happy to offer our congratulations to these two exceptional authors, and look forward to more award nominations--and wins!--in the future.

Rick Helms - Editor

LINEUP FOR VOLUME III, NUMBER 1



Short story Edgar winner **G. MIKI HAYDEN** (*The Maids*) is up for a Barry Award at the coming Bouchercon for her story *A Killing in Midtown*, which was published in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. Her last book out, *The Naked Writer*, is a style and composition guide for writers at all levels. Based in New York City, Ms. Hayden teaches at the *Writer's Digest* online school and freelances as an editor for other writers. This is her second appearance in *The Back Alley*, and she's always welcome.



DEBBI MACK has worked as an attorney, a news wire reporter and a reference librarian, but now devotes her life to freelance and fiction writing. She has published one novel, *Identity Crisis*, a hardboiled mystery in which female lawyer/sleuth Sam McRae investigates a complex case of murder and identity theft. She's also contributed short stories to the *Chesapeake Crimes* anthology published in 2004 and the *Chesapeake Crimes 4* anthology to be released by Wildside Press in March 2010. A native of Queens, New York, Debbi is an avid reader, movie buff and baseball fan. Debbi and her husband share a home in Columbia, Maryland with their three cats.



SUSAN FRY has sold short fiction to publications such as *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Crimewave*, and *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. Her stories have also appeared in anthologies, including *The Museum of Horrors* (winner of the 2002 World Fantasy Award for best anthology). She's won the 2004 Phobos Fiction Contest and a first-place prize in the 2001 Writers of the Future Contest. She was shortlisted for the British Fantasy Award in 2005. She has a B.A. and an M.A. from Stanford University.



KATRINA BARNETT is a college student at Loyola Marymount University where she is one year away from obtaining her degree in Screenwriting. She hails from California and Texas sometimes, and once drove from one state to the other with a stuffed beaver strapped to the roof of her car. She's written numerous screenplays, plays, and a host of short stories, but only recently made the decision to seek publication. *Back Alley* is her first paid fiction publication credit. We expect her to remember that when she collects that Pulitzer in a decade or two.



When **j.a. kazimer** isn't reading, she spends her time writing urban fantasies and crime fiction with a dark comic twist. Originally from Cleveland, Ohio, she escaped at a young age, and now lives in Denver, Colorado, where she received a master's degree in forensic psychology, and has worked as a PI, bartender, and most recently at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, where she apparently specializes in the avoidance of capital letters.



FRANK NORRIS holds a very special place in the history of noir fiction. Despite his relative lack of renown today, around the turn of the twentieth century he was setting the world on fire with his naturalistic, dark stories of doomed people.

His greatest contribution, however, came with the first volume of his projected three-volume epic tracing the role of wheat in society, *The Octopus*. Sadly, his trilogy was left unfinished when he died of complications from appendix surgery in 1901.

Continuing in this issue, we present Part Five of *McTeague*.

SOME CALL IT REVENGE

by
G. Miki Hayden

*Short story Edgar winner G. Miki Hayden is up for a Barry Award at the coming Bouchercon. Her last book out, **The Naked Writer**, is a style and composition guide for writers at all levels. She teaches at the Writer's Digest online school and freelances as an editor for other writers. Ms. Hayden appeared in the very first issue of **The Back Alley**, and we're very happy to have her back!*

They'd rented one of the cabins on the inlet for a few days. The sense of tranquility here brought tears to Bobby Leighton's eyes, and something inside him began to ease for the first time since his return from Iraq. He took a deep, solid breath and walked outside, still wearing his thick, down vest, pretty much needed in the early-March chill. But he'd wanted to come to this familiar spot so badly, and he used to hear a lot about winter casting for trout. His soul required the salve of white pines and hemlock, the unbroken expanse of quiet waters interrupted only by the occasional leaping of a solitary brookie.

Laura had gone down to the roadhouse they'd passed to pick up some supper. He could have driven her in the car, but she'd wanted to get a little exercise.

A small dark, woman came out from the cabin next door and called out a neighborly 'hello.' In a couple of minutes, another woman emerged, and the two got into a Ford Escort and left.

A little too much time went by as he stood there, so Leighton locked their cabin and got in the Volvo to find his wife. He was feeling on the verge of peace, with months of death and destruction seeping from his every cell into the snow-white and branch-brown landscape. But the more the tension eased on out of him, the more he realized how acutely he'd been injured by the harsh and endless rat-tat-tat of M-16s and the earth-shattering sound of distant explosions.

Leighton pulled into the row of parking in front of Rak's Tavern and got out. He hadn't seen Laura along the highway, but she might have cut back across the field. He hoped she hadn't. With ice and snow on the ground everywhere, walking could be treacherous.

Laura's nearness, after all his months away, felt strange. Though her unwavering presence was a relief, Leighton remained uncertain about where they stood as a married couple. The recovery of a precious treasure mercilessly stolen didn't remove completely the pervasive sense of loss and fear.

He opened the door and entered the winter-warmed space to . . . an assault on his eyes. Laura in the embrace of a rough-hewn country type, her hand either braced against him for support or pushing away. Leighton felt physically ill and wanted to throw up. He thrust the door open again, releasing it to a sharp, alarming bang. His voice had deserted him.

A bartender entered at once from the swinging door opposite.

Laura and the man separated and turned, and Laura rushed toward Leighton whose eyes remained on the stranger with the long, curling blond hair and single gold earring. A flaming heat shot through Leighton's gut. He could either kill the guy right here and now, or simply leave. Laura reached out for Leighton's arm and the pressure of her hand said she'd already made the choice for him—to simply go. Shaking with a fury akin to that he'd felt in a firefight Over There, he let her lead him away.

In the car, they didn't speak and didn't speak.

Finally, "He grabbed me," she said. "The bartender wasn't there right then." She gulped in air. "He said some horrible things, and then he grabbed me," she repeated. "It wasn't my fault." Laura started to cry.

* * * * *

Ralph Edwards found the body on the shoreline when he went down to check his launch. A bunch of kids had been messing around with the boat the last couple of weeks, and he was concerned. Seeing a bundle lying in the marsh, he figured the boys had left a load of garbage behind. When he got a little closer, however, Ralph saw the package of rags was a dead man. Not just a dead man, but Barney Dern. And Dern wasn't merely nicely, politely dead. He was beaten and bloody, beaten to a pulp. Edwards gagged, then took the cell phone from his pocket to call the police. If Dern was dead, the murder was most likely justified. Everyone knew just what Dern was, and how he operated. That he'd made it this long without being jailed or taken out was some kind of miracle. Still, this sort of thing wasn't good for tourism, which most everyone around here depended on for a living. Damn lucky that the killing had occurred off-season.

* * * * *

With a sweater, the down jacket, and a thick wool cap, Leighton was nearly comfortable standing along the edge of the lake, though he felt a little silly so duded up in all-new gear. He glanced over at Laura. As the years had passed, she'd become a better fisherman than he. She was a beautiful and valiant companion, but where lay her heart? Had it left him over the time he'd been away? Laura cast with the grace of one of the seraphim if such a heavenly creation might ever

take to a bout of angling. She had quite an arm, and an eye. To keep a woman like this for himself would be any man's singular ambition, worth any price.

That was when he heard a car along the lake shore road, and he snorted in reaction. Damn engine was bound to scare off any fish. When the vehicle crunched its way down the gravel, Leighton noted it was a black and white cop car. He wasn't speeding, Leighton laughed to himself. No, thank God, even after the upset of yesterday afternoon, everything about him was still slowing down. He cast and listened to the line play out, while the cop extricated himself from behind the wheel and walked toward the water.

* * * * *

By twelve-thirty-five, Tom had his lunch eaten and his desk somewhat cleared. Afternoon was the best time for winter fishing, and he was set. Today's bright sun would have warmed the air a bit and the fish might come up from the deep to nibble a midge. With so few clients wanting his lawyering skills that filling even the morning with work took imagination, Tom felt more than entitled to inflict a little revenge on the trout up at Silver Lake. Not that the coasters were to blame for his troubles; no, probably he was, himself, for being so smart and, worse than that, for showing it. Nobody in this neck of the woods liked a smartass.

He stepped out, into the reception area. "Maida, I'm going now," he told his secretary, who raised her eyebrows, but didn't make a move to stop him. As if she could--though probably she wanted to. Likely wanted to wring his neck, make him go out on the streets and court the citizenry to drum up some business. But not today. Today was a true-to-his-innards kind of day, a day to speculate on the nature of the universe, and to fish.

Directly in front of his door, however, he ran into Parnell, who was with a young woman. Parnell stopped Tom with a hand on his shoulder.

"Can't now, Parnell. I'm off to the lake." Tom's eyes skipped across the woman—she was something—and onto his car, making sure it hadn't disappeared. He'd come to an age when fishing was more important to him than the sight of a beautiful female, and he didn't even think it sad.

"Wait a minute, Tom. This is your new client. I found her for you. Her husband was taken in for questioning as a person of interest in the murder last evening of Barney Dern. Someone beat Dern to death." Parnell smiled. "Mrs. Leighton came to me and I've brought her to you." The other lawyer puffed himself up like a man who'd just hooked a big one.

Now Tom took a minute and looked more closely at the girl. She was softly gorgeous and he could set forth the whole scenario right now. Dern had come on to her, molested her, maybe even committed a rape. And, finally, someone bigger and tougher than he had take Dern down

and would be charged with murder for the trouble. Tom knew he'd find grounds on which he could appeal to any sane jurors. Especially local jurors who knew Dern. But if Tom ran off, choosing trout over duty, he'd leave behind a man to serve jail time. And maybe pass up a nice fat fee on a high-profile case that could remake Tom's recently tarnished reputation.

"Okay," Tom said. "Come into my office." Maida would be happy now.

* * * * *

"I didn't do it. I did *not* do it," insisted Lt. Robert Leighton, addressing Tom in the mold-encrusted space the sheriff had set aside for prisoner/attorney consultations.

Tom liked the man's adamancy, which boded well. Not for an acquittal on the grounds that Leighton didn't do it, but because everyone but Leighton himself knew the guy was guilty of the crime. Leighton had blanked the incident out apparently, or something the psychiatrists would explain in two days of testimony at the trial. They would blame the ardors of war for the killer's mental state. The man was a hero. Six months of treatment in an institution and he'd be fine—and free.

"Okay, you got home with your wife from the bar. What happened next?"

"I slept," said Leighton. "I lay down and took a nap."

"A man had just assaulted your wife—that's what the sheriff has from the bar owner, Rak-- and you go back to the cabin and go to sleep?"

"Yes," said Leighton. "I was exhausted, completely worn out. I lay down and fell asleep."

"And then?" asked Tom. Dern had been killed that night, after dark. He had assaulted Laura Leighton and then showed up dead. Funny, how things sometimes worked out that way.

"Nothing," said Leighton. "Nothing happened. I went to sleep. That was it. We got up late the next morning, made breakfast, and went fishing. A little while later, I was arrested."

"Okay," said Tom. "Don't worry about it. But if you think of anything else, tell whoever's in front you want to see me. And if they try to question you again, demand your attorney."

"Laura and I don't have much money," Leighton warned.

"That figures," answered Tom as he stood up. Of course. What had he been thinking, anyway? That his luck was changing?

* * * * *

Tom had waited to question Laura Leighton until after he'd talked with her husband, curious to first hear Leighton's side of the story. Now he met with the woman in his office. "Tell me about what happened yesterday," he requested.

She crossed her legs and let out a throaty, weary sigh. "We got here about three-thirty in the afternoon, too late to fish after we checked in, with the sun already headed down."

Tom nodded in agreement.

"But we'd driven for about three hours and I wanted to be outside for a while. So I walked back to the tavern that we'd passed...."

She told Tom pretty much what Leighton had already said, though a little reluctantly, either as if from embarrassment, or as if she wasn't sure that Tom would believe her. He didn't challenge anything she told him, even if eventually he'd have to. But now his mind was busy traveling here and there, thinking of how he could make the situation sound that much the worse-or really, that much better for the defendant.

"And then, when you got back to the cabin?" Through the partially open door, Tom could hear Maida clickclacking away at her computer. But how much work did she really have? She was out there listening and only pretending to be busy, was his guess. Maybe she'd come up with some good ideas for him later on. He nearly grinned, but caught himself.

"Bobby slept," Laura said. "He slept for quite a while and I read. Then I took a bath. When I got out, he was awake. Said he was going to drive down the road and pick up some supper. A couple of minutes after that, he went out."

That was interesting information, certainly not what her husband had indicated. "And when did he come back?" asked Tom.

She thought a minute, looked at her watch. "About three quarters of an hour... an hour later."

"And he brought food?"

"Oh, yes," answered Laura Leighton without hesitation. "We had a stove in the room, but he brought cold cuts. And eggs. Eggs for the morning. So we had sandwiches and went to bed."

"What kind of a state was your husband in when he returned?"

She seemed surprised by the question, as if she didn't know why Tom would ask. "No state," she answered. "He was fine."

No state at all, after walking in that afternoon on his wife being molested. But Tom let that go. "He wasn't disheveled or bloody?" Tom continued.

“No,” she objected. “Maybe he hadn’t combed his hair when he’d gone out, but he was fine.” She wrinkled her face a little bit and Tom wished the image in her head could be projected directly into his own.

* * * * *

Leighton had stopped at the Shop and Go two miles away. That was what was printed on the plastic bag, Laura reported when she called Tom from the motel a half hour later.

Tom told her not to worry and he hung up. Then he called the sheriff, wanting to know whether they were going to charge Leighton, or what. The sheriff was waiting to hear from the D.A., a fact that touched a still-raw nerve in Tom. The D.A. Tom had been the D.A. in this county for four years running, and he’d thought he’d be the D.A. for a long time more. But today he was just another local ambulance chaser without enough clients to keep him in beer.

He drove out to the Shop and Go and looked around. He could see why Leighton had settled on cold cuts. He waited until the clerk was free.

“Can I help you, mister?” the clerk asked tensely.

Maybe the clerk thought that Tom had waited in order to rob him. Tom took his hands out of his pockets and placed them on the counter. He explained he was asking about the man who’d come in last night for the sandwich fixings.

“Oh, yes,” said the clerk. “Sure. About eight o’clock. He bought some eggs and butter, the olive loaf, some rye bread, and some Monterey Jack, plus a quart bottle of club soda.”

“You notice a lot,” Tom flattered him. “Anyone else in here then?”

He’d had other customers at the time, recalled the clerk. Two women who’d said hello to Leighton and a blond man with a gold earring buying some beer. Dern without a doubt, decided Tom, and the rest was history. But who were the women?

He questioned the clerk a little bit further, waited until a couple more shoppers were rung up and had left, and wound up giving the clerk a twenty dollar bill that Tom likely needed more than the clerk did.

Leighton had walked out, the girls had walked out, and then, finally, Dern.

Leighton had obviously stood outside until Dern had come out. Or maybe he’d stayed talking to the women. Or...

“Oh, yeah, something else,” the clerk said after Tom turned to go. “The car’s still outside. If you see the guy, can you ask him to get it?”

Tom was flummoxed. The car? If Tom saw the guy?

“Whose car?” he asked.

“The blond guy’s car. The guy with the earring. I walked out later for a smoke and the car was still there.”

Dern had left his car at the Shop and Go?

Tom went outside. He walked around the vehicle wondering if he was trampling on a crime scene. But he didn’t see any signs of something wrong. Had Dern gotten into Leighton’s car and left with him? The scenario didn’t quite click with Tom. He had to find out who the women were and talk to them.

* * * * *

As Tom was eating his own catch-as-catch-can dinner an hour later, his phone rang—Laura again, upset because Leighton didn’t remember picking up the cold cuts. Maybe he didn’t remember killing Dern.

Tom asked her if the couple knew anyone locally. The question didn’t compute for Laura until he mentioned two young women.

“Next door from Wisconsin,” suggested Laura. “They’re here for the week.

* * * * *

Both were slender and attractive: the one petite, the other medium height. The petite one, Marsha, pulled out the desk chair so Tom could sit down.

Tom glanced around the room. No fishing gear. “Why Michigan?” he asked. “Why not fly to the Caribbean?”

The smaller one smiled. “Just someplace not so expensive to get away to. We wanted to take a week and relax. We’re nurses in Milwaukee.”

“Did you see the man from next door in the Shop and Go yesterday night?” Tom was surprised at the degree of his anticipation. He could picture the whole sequence of events, but the way the women answered him now could be the key to the case. And the case, deftly handled, might remake Tom’s career.

Again, the smaller woman took the lead. “We saw him,” she acknowledged. “He bought a few things and then left.”

The eyes of the second girl were on her friend. She wet her lips and didn't say a word. The women wouldn't bother to protect a stranger, would they? Unless Leighton had helped them, had beaten off Dern in order to help them. Then they might feel they owed him something.

Maybe Dern had left with the women.

Tom pictured Leighton, having waited for Dern, driving after the car. Then perhaps Dern had compelled the girls to turn off and stop. Leighton, who'd followed, got out of his vehicle. Then Leighton pulled Dern out of the girls' car, beating him to death. Not just because Leighton was angry over Dern's assault on Laura, but perhaps also to protect the girls.

Tom dropped his head. He wasn't the D.A. around here any more. He had no powers of enforcement and practically no livelihood, either. "Tell me what happened," Tom begged humbly. "Unless I can find some grounds for the murder, he's going to prison for the next 20 years."

"Twenty years?" repeated Marsha. The words fell out of her mouth as a solid brick of time, the passage of a man's life in a series of essentially undifferentiated days. Hard days. Long days.

"Depends on what you can give me," Tom told her without embellishment.

"I killed him," said the other, less assertive woman, the one whose name Tom hadn't even tried to catch exactly.

His jaw dropped open. He didn't know how to respond. He just looked at her with all the astonishment he still had to offer—which, apparently, was quite a lot.

"That's right," she said, almost proudly. "We saw the man from the next cabin in the store. At first he was friendly, but a minute later his eyes became glazed—you know, like from shock. Then he paid for what he got and left."

Marsha had stopped trying to speak. Her attention was simply on her friend, who went on.

"We bought a few things a minute later, and then we left, too. We were joking about something when the blond man came out." The second woman shrugged. "He told us he was having car trouble and asked for a lift. We didn't want to be rude about it."

She gave a short, self-mocking laugh.

Dern had gotten rough with them and told them when to exit the highway. At one point, Marsha, who had been driving, had pressed down on the horn, and Dern had punched her. Then, yes, he made them stop the car.

"My dad's a fireman," the taller woman said. "I have four brothers."

While Dern was busy struggling with Marsha, the second woman had gotten out, opened the trunk, and had taken out the tire iron.

“I was careful,” she added. “I didn’t want to crack *you* on the head,” she told Marsha. The two women smiled at one another wryly.

Once she’d gotten him down on the ground by himself, she’d hit the man several more times. Probably both women had kicked him in frustration and rage.

“He was dead,” said Marsha. “By then he was dead. We checked his pulse. He couldn’t have been saved, so we left him there.”

“We didn’t mean for someone else to get in trouble for it,” the second woman said. “We didn’t know...”

Leighton would never be charged now, and Tom was thinking. This case against the women could be a whole lot easier than the one against Leighton, though not as reputation-building in terms of a win. But maybe, as nurses, they had something they could put down, as a retainer.

“Don’t worry,” said Tom. “We’ll straighten this out. If you want to hire me...”

“Of course,” said Marsha at once. “Of course.”

And when the girls were back in Milwaukee on bail, Tom could take the odd afternoon to go out to the lake.

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G. Miki Hayden

THE RIGHT TO REMAIN SILENT

by

Debbi Mack

*Debbi Mack has worked as an attorney, a news wire reporter and a reference librarian, but now devotes her life to freelance and fiction writing. She has published one novel, **Identity Crisis**, a hardboiled mystery in which female lawyer/sleuth Sam McRae investigates a complex case of murder and identity theft. She's also contributed short stories to the **Chesapeake Crimes** anthology published in 2004 and the **Chesapeake Crimes 4** anthology to be released by Wildside Press in March 2010. A native of Queens, New York, Debbi is an avid reader, movie buff and baseball fan. Debbi and her husband share a home in Columbia, Maryland with their three cats. We'd also like to note that this story was nominated in April 2010 for a Short Mystery Fiction Society Derringer Award. Just sayin' '...*

"I hear kudos are in order."

Mike Finnegan strode into the office he shared with Dan Marinelli, files under one arm and a battered briefcase swinging from the other. He parked the files on his desk and tossed the briefcase into a nearby guest chair. "Way to go, dude. You're racking up an impressive record on those capital crimes." He offered Marinelli his upraised hand. Marinelli slapped it in return, feeling Finnegan's excessive give in response.

Lame-ass, white-boy high five, Marinelli thought. *No wonder the brothers make fun of us.*

"Thanks. I think I did all right." Marinelli was having mixed feelings about the case he'd just won for the Culver City State's Attorney's Office. Chico Hernandez, a not-so-bright, emotionally-damaged, but sane man in his early twenties, had been accused of shooting a priest, Father Jaime Ramirez, who had allegedly abused Hernandez as a child.

"All right? You got a conviction, despite all that psychological crap the defense tried to raise. I mean, the guy's got problems, okay. But that doesn't mean he can go around shooting anyone who messed up his life in the past."

Marinelli shook his head.

"Maybe it's just me. You know how I feel about priests. Especially those pedophiles. Hell, it was all I could do to keep from slapping Hernandez on the back and saying, 'Attaboy,' when I saw him in court."

Finnegan looked at him. "Dude. We're talking about murder. Even a sick, twisted pedophile deserves better."

"I know."

"Besides, as the city with the second-highest crime rate in Maryland after Baltimore, don't you think we could use the win right now?"

"Totally. Still . . . something doesn't feel right about this one. Hernandez wasn't retarded, just kind of slow. And he only spoke Spanish. The court assigned a translator to help Baxter get his story. Even then, she didn't get much, from what she told me. He wouldn't deal, but he wouldn't fight either. So she ended up relying on that psych defense."

"Well, that's Baxter's problem, isn't it?"

"Sure. So why do I keep wondering what he wasn't telling her?"

"Again, not your problem. Defendant has the right to remain silent, doesn't he?"

"That's not supposed to refer to what you tell your own attorney."

Finnegan gawked at Marinelli. "Quit worrying about it, you dumb guinea. You did your job and the public defender did hers. You won. End of story." He grinned. "Now, sit back, smile and wait for your next plum assignment from Big Dick."

Marinelli nodded. Big Dick Dawson, Culver City State's Attorney. He'd be happy. There'd be good headlines in the Culver City Chronicle's morning edition—the kind of headlines that couldn't hurt a State's Attorney coming up for re-election in six months. Marinelli sat back and smiled. But he couldn't seem to stop worrying.

* * * * *

Three months later, Marinelli was at his desk, reviewing a new case file, when the phone rang.

In mid-greeting, the familiar voice boomed from the receiver. "Dan, it's Dick Dawson. My office. Now."

Big Dick. He could certainly live up to his nickname sometimes. Marinelli noticed that Dick Dawson never failed to use both names when identifying himself on the phone. As if there were ten other guys named Dick running around the State's Attorneys' Office who he might get mistaken for.

Marinelli stepped into the corner office furnished in dark walnut, plush beige carpeting and navy drapes. Big Dick was at his desk, scribbling something on a pad and scowling. He had a full head of short, mostly-dark hair that, as usual, appeared to be combed within an inch of its life, right down to his short graying sideburns. Without looking up, he waved Marinelli toward him and said, "Sit."

Suppressing the urge to tell the old man not to order him about like a dog, Marinelli sat and waited.

Dawson put down his pen, folded his hands on the desk and gave Marinelli a grim, steady look over his tortoise-rimmed reading glasses.

"That priest-killer, Hernandez? He's asking for a new trial."

"Now? A little late in the game, isn't it?"

"Some crap about new evidence, plus the usual ineffective assistance of counsel stuff. You know how it goes."

"Usually, nowhere, especially post-sentencing, unless it's pretty compelling. Are we talking DNA evidence?"

"I don't know, but Baxter's got a bee in her bonnet on this one." Dawson sounded unusually annoyed. "I need you to nip this shit in the bud. Understand?"

"Fine. Frankly, I'm surprised she didn't do it sooner. I mean, from what I gathered, the client wasn't easy to work with. I guess Baxter must have stumbled onto something after the fact." Marinelli wondered vaguely how the overworked, underpaid public defender had managed to do that. "Plus the language barrier could provide grounds for her ineffective assistance argument."

"She had a translator! What more could she ask for?" Dawson snapped. "This unhappy childhood shit is no excuse for committing murder. We needed to set an example and we did. Let's not wreck it by letting Baxter pull some eleventh-hour bullshit."

"I wouldn't worry," Marinelli said. "Judge Gardena won't grant a new trial."

"That's another thing." Dawson picked up the pen and tapped it on his legal pad. "Baxter's making noises about asking Gardena to recuse himself."

Marinelli issued a harsh laugh. "Good luck! On what grounds?"

"Some kind of bias argument, I'd guess. Gardena's been hearing some of those priest molestation cases. He also denied all her evidentiary motions and used your jury instructions practically verbatim."

"Those aren't grounds for bias, and she knows it. As long as he wasn't assigned to Hernandez's molestation case, I can't see any conflict. If anything, it should make him more

sympathetic to the defendant. As for his rulings, he's a law-and-order judge, no different than half the bench in this town."

"Just be prepared." Dawson tapped out a Morse Code rhythm on his pad. "We'll be getting some pressure on this one."

The Archdiocese, Marinelli thought. Naturally, they'd want to make sure the verdict in this case stood. He wondered how many child molesters they were trying to protect from the Hernandezes of the world. The sour thought put his teeth on edge.

* * * * *

Marinelli saw Leslie Baxter roaming the hall between court dockets later that day, a stack of files on one arm. He pulled her aside.

"Talk to me about the Hernandez case," he said. "What's your new evidence?"

Baxter sighed and shifted the files to the other arm. She was a short, chubby woman with cropped black hair and cinnamon-brown skin. "Got a minute? I'd like to drop these at my office. We can talk there."

Marinelli checked his watch. He had a hearing in an hour, so he nodded and followed her to the small windowless room she shared with another public defender, who wasn't there at the moment.

Baxter lowered the files onto a side table with a grunt, sat down and waved Marinelli into a guest chair. "Hernandez lied. He's taking the rap for someone else."

"And you know this . . . how?"

"Inconsistencies, mainly. Things I didn't catch at the time." She yanked a file from the middle of a stack, pulled out some papers and lay three documents like playing cards across the top of her state-issue metal desk.

"The police report and the autopsy show Ramirez was shot in the chest, point-blank, with a nine-mil Glock. A semi-automatic handgun."

"Right."

"In his statement to the police, Hernandez admitted that he had shot Father Ramirez with a pistol he got on the street. He said the same thing when I interviewed Hernandez through an interpreter. In fact, he told me very little he hadn't already told the cops. But, at one point, the interpreter referred to the gun as a revolver. When I asked him about that, the interpreter said something to Hernandez. Both of them seemed to get very agitated. Then, the interpreter said

he'd made a mistake in his translation. He told me it was a revolver, when he should have called it a handgun."

"And you didn't think to question his story at the time?"

"I did—believe me, I tried my best—but the interpreter insisted it was his mistake and Hernandez wouldn't change his story."

"So what makes you think it wasn't just a mistake?"

"Ramirez was shot at St. Ignatius Church after hearing confessions on a Saturday night. According to his statement, Hernandez waited for everyone to leave, then ran up to the communion rail and shot Ramirez as he was crossing the altar. Then he tried to move the body. He'd gotten as far as the rear of the altar when he was caught by the maintenance man, who'd heard the shot. I went through this version with the interpreter to make sure it was right. I go through a series of questions. Where were you standing? Where was he standing? Yada, yada, yada. I couldn't get a straight answer on why he moved the body, but the man isn't exactly the sharpest tool in the drawer, so I figured maybe he panicked. The bottom line is, Hernandez confirmed shooting Ramirez, standing outside the communion rail."

"And got caught by a witness. Pretty damaging."

"Yes and I didn't think much more about it. Two weeks ago, I happened to be in the neighborhood to speak to a witness on another matter. I was near the church, so I stopped in. I noticed the dais is raised. So if Hernandez only ran up to the communion rail, the bullet would have entered at more of an angle." She pointed a finger in an upward slant to demonstrate. "So I rounded up the interpreter again and went to see him, to ask some more questions. I go over it again--where he was, where the priest was, why he tried to move the body. The more I questioned him, the more rattled he and the interpreter got. Finally, Hernandez refused to say anything more."

"So why didn't the police catch this?"

"Cause they were too busy listening to the maintenance man and my own client's confession. A story he continues to stick by, but I don't believe it. I think he's lying to cover for someone else. And I think the interpreter knows that."

"So, you don't actually have any new evidence. You have a new theory based on old evidence."

"I know I have a snowball's chance in hell of winning this." She heaved another sigh. "But unless Hernandez stepped onto the dais or Ramirez came out from behind the rail, the forensics don't make sense. Something is wrong here. So I'm taking a shot."

"Why would he lie?"

"Two possibilities." She held up a finger as she counted each. "To take the fall for someone he cares about. Or because he's afraid to tell the truth."

* * * * *

Marinelli took his role as officer of the court seriously. Even after years of contact with the criminal system, he hadn't become so jaded he was willing to settle for anything less than a clean conviction. He knew about police corruption--the occasional use of 'throw down' weapons to 'prove' an officer had shot someone in self-defense, the overzealous interrogation tactics that were sometimes employed to break a suspect down. He knew these were the exception, not the rule, and that most cops played it as close to the book as they could. Cops had a tough job and he felt empathy for them, even for the ones who crossed the line thinking they were doing it for the right reasons.

That night, he kept going over what Baxter had said. *You did your job*, he told himself. *And it wasn't your job to show inconsistencies between the defendant's story and the forensic evidence. But it is your job to prosecute bad guys, not put away innocent ones.*

So what to do? Baxter will file her motion. She has no new evidence, so that argument will fail. She could prevail on the ineffective assistance of counsel argument, but then again, maybe not. You could never tell how a judge would rule and Judge Gardena tended to side with prosecutors anyway. And Judge Gardena wouldn't recuse himself from the case. There simply weren't grounds for it.

But Baxter's words stayed with him and refused to go away, until it was Marinelli who had a reasonable doubt about the guilt of the man he'd successfully put behind bars.

So Hernandez could be covering for someone else or could have been threatened into lying. If the latter, Marinelli had a good guess who might have threatened him. He knew there were gangs who ran the Culver City drug trade who'd intimidate witnesses to beat charges against them. Could a gang member have murdered Father Ramirez, then framed the simple-minded Hernandez, assuring his cooperation through threats? If so, why would the gang want the priest dead?

The next day, Marinelli put in a call to a detective he'd worked with in the Culver City Police Department's Violent Crimes Division. He told him he was looking for some information on the street about Father Jaime Ramirez, just to confirm a few matters, since the defense intended to seek a new trial.

He told no one in his office about these inquiries, as he knew Finnegan and the others would just give him shit. It wasn't his job to do the defense attorney's work. But he burned with silent anger and humiliation at the notion of being a tool for a guilty party who'd let someone else take the blame for a murder.

The detective put him in touch with one of his CIs, a former Crip member, who agreed to be contacted at a designated pay phone. Marinelli put the question to him directly—could any of the local gangs be behind Father Jaime Ramirez's death?

"Yo, anything possible," said the raspy-voiced man on the other end. "'Specially since da man had old connections."

"Connections? To whom?"

"Connections from his days in Salvador. To Los Diablos."

Marinelli's felt his hands go damp and gripped the receiver tighter. Los Diablos was one of the biggest and most dangerous Salvadoran gangs in Culver City and all along the I-95 corridor. There were no means too violent for them to use in protecting themselves.

"Do you know if the guy who shot him, Chico Hernandez, had connections to Los Diablos?"

"I dunno from Chico Hernandez, man. I do know that neighborhood there be all spics. And them spics like to stick together, see what I'm sayin'?"

Especially when to speak out against Los Diablos meant you could get your tongue cut out or worse, Marinelli thought.

"I wonder how Hernandez got pulled into this thing?" he asked aloud, but talking to himself.

"I dunno, man."

"Tell me more about Ramirez's connections with Los Diablos."

"I can tell ya what I hear, but you ain't hear it from me. Ya feel me?"

"Okay. Give."

"Word is the good father been handing out more than holy hosts, see what I'm sayin'?"

Marinelli let this sink in. "Drugs? Are you saying Los Diablos supplied Ramirez with drugs?"

"Truth."

"Are we talking meth? Heroin?"

"Meth, mostly. He had people dealing for him to fancy folks wit' da cheese to make it worth his while."

"Any word that Ramirez might have double-crossed the Diablos? Done something that led them to kill him?"

"Don't know 'bout dat, but like I say, anything possible."

Marinelli hung up and leaned back in his chair. This could be good, he thought. If one of the Diablos could be made for the killing, it would be a big win for both sides. And the Ramirez connection could lead to bigger things, too. Possibly exposing a Diablos drug ring, run by the priest. It would be a huge coup not only for himself, but for the State's Attorney's Office.

* * * * *

"Are you insane?" Dawson's nostrils flared. "Have you forgotten whose side you're on?"

Marinelli was stunned. "Sir, this is an opportunity..."

Dawson peered at him. "We've successfully prosecuted a case and the defense is filing a late motion for new trial. It's your job and your duty to fight that motion."

"With all due respect, sir, it's my job to prosecute criminals. Not put innocent people behind bars." Marinelli pointed toward the window. "Out there is the real killer with Diablos connections. If we can find him and prosecute him, it'll be a huge victory. Plus . . ." He paused, not willing to discuss the details of his conversation with the CI yet. "I have reason to suspect the priest was running a drug ring."

Dawson stared at him for several seconds. "What in blazes leads you to that conclusion?"

"Some information I've picked up. I'm checking into it further, before I do anything official with it. Frankly, I think Ramirez's murder was just the tip of the iceberg. I can feel it."

"I don't care what you feel. With the crime rate sky-rocketing and an election right around the corner, this office will not simply toss away a successfully prosecuted murder. You will fight the motion for a new trial, if you want to keep your job."

Marinelli's mind reeled. He felt overwhelmed with disgust that statistics and Big Dick's re-election could matter more than the truth. "What about the forensic evidence? Are we just going to conveniently ignore that?"

"Those arguments should have been raised earlier. Baxter's waived the right to raise them now."

Big Dick was right. But Marinelli still didn't like it. He had to think this through. To buy time, he simply said, "Fine. Whatever," and left it at that.

* * * * *

Marinelli prepared a standard response to Baxter's motion, but put off filing it. Meanwhile, he continued investigating Father Ramirez. He wondered why the cops hadn't investigated Ramirez before, if there was word on the street of his gang connections. The archdiocese, he thought. He'd lay odds someone in the archdiocese pressured the police to leave Ramirez alone.

Marinelli asked his detective friend to set up another call with his CI. He promised confidentiality in exchange for names--Ramirez's contacts in Los Diablos, his biggest buyers,

whatever he had. Once he had some names, maybe he could prod someone on the force into investigating the connection, seek warrants to obtain some hard evidence. If a case could be made against someone in Los Diablos for the murder, he wanted to make it. If it led to more, so much the better.

* * * * *

Marinelli was eating dinner at home, when he heard a tap on his door. When he looked through the peephole, he was surprised to see Dawson. He opened up.

"Sir?" he said. "What brings you here?"

"Bad news, I'm afraid. May I come in?"

"Of course," Marinelli said. Dawson, looking dapper in a camelhair coat and matching kidskin gloves, stepped inside and closed the door quietly behind him. Marinelli turned and led Dawson to the kitchen.

"I was just having dinner. I made a lot of spaghetti--too much. Would you like some? Or something to drink?"

"This won't take long." Dawson said. "I'm sorry."

Marinelli turned. Dawson was pointing a gun with a silencer at him.

"You're fired," Dawson said and shot twice.

* * * * *

Dawson called an impromptu staff meeting to announce that someone had apparently forced his way into Dan Marinelli's apartment and killed him. It looked like a professional hit, possibly ordered by someone involved in one of his high-profile cases. Marinelli's cases would be reassigned. Finnegan volunteered to take the Hernandez case, since as he put it, "it's such a slam-dunk for us." Dawson said he knew the case would be in good hands.

That night, Dick Dawson left the office late and went directly to an out-of-the-way cocktail lounge that featured low lighting, scantily-dressed waitresses and a privileged customer base. It was the opposite of a networking venue, Dawson thought. A place one went so as not to see or be seen.

Dawson slid into the back room booth and ordered a double scotch, straight up. "It's done," he told the man across from him.

"You're sure? No loose ends?"

"No, sir. No loose ends. The gun's in the river. Even my nice new gloves went in the drink." He shrugged.

"And you're sure your new man on the case won't go digging into Father Ramirez's life?"

"Yes, sir, I'm sure. Finnegan is a 'yes' man."

"Glad to hear it." The middle-aged man across from him was half-hidden in shadow. The parenthetical lines creasing the sides of his mouth and the tangle of crow's feet around his eyes were deepened by the gloom, but his teeth gleamed as he spoke. They were big teeth, Dawson thought. "I told Ramirez I couldn't make those molestation suits just disappear. Would he listen? No, that sick padre started blackmailing me. When he threatened to expose my part in his drug operation, I had to get rid of him."

He downed half his drink in one swallow and added, "He was ready to go after you, too, you know."

"I know that, sir. About Hernandez . . ."

"He won't be missed and he won't give us up. Once I told him I was doing it to protect the Diablos and he had to take one for the team, the poor sap was scared shitless to say otherwise. Even put the fear of God in the interpreter. And with what happened between Hernandez and the priest, he was as good a scapegoat as any."

"Was he, your honor?"

Judge Gardena leaned forward and gave Dawson the look he'd reserved for many a defendant when pronouncing sentence. "When I heard from our friends what your boy Marinelli was up to, I don't have to tell you how much heartburn it was giving me. And you know what would have happened if he'd started looking too closely at who Ramirez was using to sell that shit."

"You and I would both be out of a job."

"Then we'd actually have to work for a living." Judge Gardena bared his big teeth and laughed. He laughed for what seemed to Dawson like a full minute. And Dawson forced himself to smile in response.

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RUSH

by

Susan Fry

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"Me, I'd do the one in the blue dress." Kennedy leaned over the café's rickety metal table and pointed at a woman walking across the plaza.

"Yeah, she's hot," J.J. said. But he felt sick to his stomach. He told himself anyone would feel sick after the two shots of tequila Chip had insisted on ordering him for breakfast. Not to mention the chorizo before that. The early morning light hammered against J.J.'s eyes. They'd driven all night to get to Juarez, and J.J. just wanted to check into the hotel and go to sleep, so he wouldn't have to think about what Chip and Kennedy were going to make him do that evening.

"The one in the blue dress? You smoking crack, dude? She must be thirty." Chip downed a shot of tequila and scanned the square.

It wasn't really a square—more like a parking lot edged with crumbling cafes, little hotels, and taquerias. All the building windows were barred over, and someone had parked a pickup truck in the middle of the lot to sell vegetables and kitchen utensils to a group of women arguing in Spanish. Most of the women were older, but a few were young and pretty. J.J. didn't think any of them looked like hookers. But what did he know?

"Her."

Chip nodded toward a woman who seemed to be around their age—eighteen, maybe twenty. Her dark hair was long and flipped up at the ends, her skin a deep golden-brown. She wore a red T-shirt that was a little too tight for her full breasts, and faded blue jeans with a rip in one knee.

“Yeah,” J.J. agreed again, then bit his lip when Kennedy frowned at him. J.J. didn’t want Kennedy, of all people, to think he was an ass kisser. Kennedy wasn’t Kennedy’s real name. The frat brothers just called him that because his father and uncle were senators.

J.J. was relieved when Kennedy sat forward and poured him another shot of tequila.

“You deserve a reward tonight, compadre,” Kennedy said, “just for making it through rush this far. Not many guys did. But there’s always room for an academic in the house — boost the frat’s GPA, you know? So drink up.”

J.J. hesitated. The color and smell of tequila reminded him of urine. But this weekend wasn’t just a reward. It was his final test. If he passed, he was in. If not...

J.J. took a deep breath and drank. The alcohol burned down his throat and jolted into his stomach. He’d never even slept with anyone before. The one time he’d gotten close, in high school, his mother had come home early. J.J. and his date had scrambled for their clothing, and his mother hadn’t even turned away. She’d just folded her arms over her chest and laughed. J.J. had been too embarrassed to stand up for himself. He’d never had the guts to call the girl again, either.

And tonight he had to have sex with a hooker. What did they call them down here? Prostitutes? Whores? Probably some word in Spanish he didn’t know.

“Hey, she likes me!” Kennedy waved at the girl in the parking lot. She smiled and waved back. The palm of her hand was much whiter than the skin on her arms.

J.J. sighed, wishing the girl had waved at him. But of course he wasn’t Kennedy, with broad shoulders from prep school lacrosse. Or Chip, with a brown suede coat that cost more than J.J.’s mother had ever paid for a month’s rent. The coat lay in a pile next to Chip’s feet. Chip didn’t give a damn it was getting dirty on the dusty sidewalk.

When J.J. had gotten into the five top universities in the country, his mother had just shrugged. She’d said she wasn’t going to pay for them. Community college had been good enough for her. Then she’d gone out and bought a new TV, a big screen one that filled up the whole wall of their tiny living room.

J.J. had tried to be understanding. His mother worked long hours as a receptionist, and his father had stopped paying child support once J.J. had turned eighteen. So he’d gotten scholarships. Good ones—enough to pay for tuition, the dorm, and books. He’d had to skimp on food, but he’d been able to sneak fruit and bagels from the dining hall.

He’d gotten a part-time job to buy nicer clothes than the WalMart shirts his mother had grudgingly given him before he left. He’d thought about copying Chip’s clothes, but Chip was rebelling against his Dad, who did something big in the military. Chip’s sandy blonde hair was so long it straggled into his eyes, and he only wore faded, frayed T-shirts and baggy pants.

Kennedy looked more upscale. So J.J. clipped his hair short and found polos at J. Crew that resembled Kennedy's two-hundred-dollar Izods.

J.J. had made the mistake of wearing the clothes home over Christmas. His mother had looked him up and down and laughed.

"Look at you," she'd said. "Who are you trying to fool? That girl you brought home? You'd need more than new clothes to impress her, at least from what I saw that night." Then she'd laughed again. J.J. had wanted to walk out, but he didn't have anywhere else to stay over the holiday.

An older woman standing next to the Mexican girl on the square shot Kennedy a dirty look, grabbed the girl by the arm, and dragged her away down one of the side streets. J.J. felt a stab of envy at her protective gesture, especially because the girl obviously didn't appreciate it -- she waved sadly at Kennedy as she was pulled along.

"Mothers," Kennedy said. "Can't live with them, can't shoot them, eh, J.J.?"

"Yeah." This time, J.J. picked up the tequila bottle himself.

"It's empty." Chip pointed at the wet, brown squiggle of the worm at the bottom of the bottle. He signaled to the café owner, who was sitting idly in the shade offered by the café's sign. On the sign, the word "Rosa's" arched over the sun-faded cartoon of a laughing, dark-haired woman with a rose in her hair. The sign was rusted around the edges. The owner got up and slowly shuffled over to them.

"I bet even the girl's mother would get friendly if we offered her enough dineros," Kennedy said.

"That one?" The café owner opened a bottle of tequila as he spoke. "She will not let her daughter go with you, not with what has been happening. You want women? You talk to me. I will take care of you." He filled their shot glasses until the tequila splashed onto the table. From the sticky stains on the table's surface, that was the way he always poured.

J.J. squinted up at him. The man's skin was as creased and brown as Chip's suede jacket, and he was as thin as a stray dog. "What do you mean, with what's been happening?"

The café owner took the question as an invitation. He scraped a chair over from another table and sat down. He looked at the tequila bottle as if he would have liked a glass, too, but Chip and Kennedy didn't seem to care, and J.J. didn't dare offer him one himself. The man sighed, deeply, as if realizing this.

"The murders. Over six years, maybe two hundred women killed." The café owner waved his hand, as if tossing something into the air. "Maybe more."

"You're kidding." J.J. laughed, but his laugh felt shaky.

Chip and Kennedy didn't say a word.

The man shook his head.

“I no joke. They ride on the bus to work over the border, in El Paso, and then walk home to Juarez at night, across the desert. Every month, two or three—gone. Sometimes their bodies discover, sometimes no.”

“So who's doing it?” J.J. leaned forward, his mouth open.

“Drug runners, border guards, factory owners, who knows? No one cares. These women are poor.” The café owner spat into the dirt.

“Are hookers getting killed, too?” J.J. heard his own voice squeak. He cleared his throat, hoping Kennedy and Chip hadn't noticed. But of course they had.

“Oooh, J.J.'s nervous. Of what? The killer? Or the women?” Chip stuck out his tongue and wagged it up and down.

Kennedy barked a laugh.

The café owner shook his head. “Men no hurt. Only women.”

“Still looks like there are plenty left for us,” Chip said, looking back out at the square. “But maybe we better hurry.”

Silence fell across the table. J.J. glanced at Kennedy and thought even he looked shocked at the remark.

The café owner frowned. “It is a tragedy,” he protested. “Even your American news says so. It has been on the CNN.” He paused, as if waiting for an apology, or at least for some kind of acknowledgment.

Chip just rolled his eyes.

The café owner stood up and walked back into the doorway of his café. He didn't even bother to take the money that Kennedy held out for the tequila.

“Jesus, Chip,” J.J. said, the words out of his mouth before he realized what he was doing.

“What?” Chip narrowed his eyes at J.J. His eyes looked mean. They didn't match the casual, floppy strands of hair that partially obscured them, as if Chip was a commando peering out from a hiding place in the grass. “You got a problem?”

J.J. glanced at Kennedy. Kennedy just looked back at him, his face blank, a politician's expression he might have picked up from his father or his uncle. As if he was waiting to see what J.J. would do. Above Kennedy's head, the woman on the “Rosa's” sign was still laughing. Just for a second, she looked familiar.

J.J. slowly shook his head. “No problem.”

“I'm glad,” Chip said. He picked up the empty bottle of tequila and shook it over J.J.'s glass until the worm plopped out. “Drink up.”

J.J. hesitated. Then, quickly, he tossed the contents of the glass into his mouth. Just for a second, the worm lodged in his throat, and he swallowed again and again, until the lump painfully slid away. Under the acid of the tequila he thought he tasted something worse. Something oily, rancid, meaty.

“Good job,” Chip said. “I hear it’s an aphrodisiac.”

* * * * *

“What a shithole,” Kennedy said, wrinkling his nose. “I can’t believe we’re paying three dollars a night for this.”

Chip snickered, but J.J. didn't think the room was so bad. It contained a narrow bed, a barred window, and a door opening onto a small bathroom. There were no insects, mildew, or water stains spreading over the ceiling. But J.J. wrinkled his nose, too, trying to learn to despise the thin, moth-eaten woolen bedspread, the smell of stale cigarette smoke, and the grime edging the white tile on the bathroom floor.

“Just don’t drink the water,” Kennedy said. “We have a big night tonight.”

His words sounded like a threat. As soon as J.J. closed the door behind them, he heard Chip laugh. J.J. pressed his ear to the wood, but he couldn’t understand the murmur of their voices as they walked down the hall away from his room. He cursed himself for sounding nervous when he’d asked about the murders. He was going to have to make up for it tonight.

J.J. threw his backpack on the floor, pulled a cracked yellow window shade down over the window, and stretched out on the bed. He closed his eyes. He tried to imagine himself lying on a bed in the frat house, maybe in one of the rooms on the third floor that looked out over the quad, where he could see girls walk by while he studied. The house was over a hundred years old, Kennedy had told him. Every room had its own brick fireplace and high ceilings edged with ornate, carved wood.

Kennedy had pointed out the photographs covering the wood-paneled walls of the long dining hall--old members who’d made good. The most recent pictures were in color, but when you walked backwards in time, they faded into black and white. The borders on the oldest photographs were yellow with age. J.J. recognized many of the faces from “Fortune 500” lists, the evening news, and even the Supreme Court. He found Kennedy’s father and uncle. They looked just like Kennedy, with their square-cut dark hair and square jaws. They looked down, severely, as if judging him. Just like Kennedy.

J.J. opened his eyes and sighed. Daylight bled in around the edges of the window shade. The room was hot. Even lying down, he felt the room sway from the tequila. He lifted the shade and wedged his face between the window bars, hoping to feel a cool breeze. He looked down

over the square and recognized the café they'd sat in by the "Rosa's" sign over the door. From up here, he could see the cartoon of the dark-haired woman clearly. That's when he realized she reminded him of his mother. The same dark hair, the same wide, open mouth.

"Jesus," he thought. "She's even laughing at me here. That's the last thing I need."

The café owner came out and picked up their dirty tequila glasses and the empty bottle. As he bent over, J.J. saw that the man was going bald, his dark hair just a thin swirl over his scalp.

He remembered Chip's remark about the women, and how Chip hadn't seemed the least bit guilty about saying it. Just for a second, J.J. imagined going down and apologizing to the café owner. The man would look surprised, then grateful. He'd bring out another bottle and invite J.J. to sit and drink with him. By the afternoon, they'd be buddies. By nighttime they'd be brothers. He'd invite J.J. to stay at his house, and Chip and Kennedy would never know what had happened to him. Eventually, J.J. would marry the man's sister and work in the café with him. Would that be so bad?

The café owner carried the bottle and glasses back toward the doorway of his café. On his way in, he swiped the dirty rag against the sign, more as if for luck than to actually try and clean it. There was a shiny patch on the cartoon woman's dark hair, as if he'd been doing that for years. He'd probably still be doing it twenty years from now.

By then, maybe some future freshman would be getting the tour of the frat house during rush. Maybe he'd be standing in the dining hall, looking up at a picture of J.J., with envy and hope.

* * * * *

A knock on the door woke J.J. up. He rolled over, the taste of tequila and chorizo caustic in his mouth. The light behind the window shade was gone. J.J. hurried to the door, rubbing his face. Chip and Kennedy stood outside, dressed in black, as if they were going to a dance club instead of a whorehouse.

"Ready to party?" Chip looked J.J. up and down. "Dude, get dressed."

J.J. found the darkest clothing he had -- a black button-down and gray pants. He started to pull off his shirt, then hesitated.

"No time for modesty," Kennedy said. He and Chip laughed.

J.J. wanted to turn his back to them, but he didn't want them to think he was afraid. He dressed quickly, feeling their eyes on his bare skin, wondering whether they were going to watch him later, too.

Kennedy drove the rental, and Chip rode shotgun. J.J. sat in the back, feeling like a kid on a family outing. Chip tossed a backpack on the seat next to him, and J.J. wondered what was in it. He was afraid to ask.

Instead of driving deeper into Juarez, they drove away, into the darkness of the desert. A few lights hung over the road here and there, but most of them were burned out, with more and more dark gaps as they got farther from the city. Chip turned on the radio and skipped from station to station. J.J. couldn't see the city at all, now. Soon, the only outside light came from the half moon hanging over the desert.

“Jesus, Chip, stop with the music,” Kennedy said. “It's all that sombrero shit.”

Chip snapped off the radio, and the sudden silence made the darkness outside seem as vast as an ocean. J.J. thought about the women murdered every year. What if the killer was out tonight?

“Where are we going?” he asked, trying to sound casual. He glanced at the backpack again. It seemed empty, like a deflated balloon.

As an answer, Kennedy rolled down the window and howled up at the moon. Wind gusted into the car. Chip pulled a bottle of tequila out of the glove compartment, unscrewed the lid with a crack, and drank so quickly J.J. could see the muscles in his throat tense and contract. Then he passed it back to J.J.

“Here,” he said. “No drunk driving laws, right?”

“Just wait till you're a brother, J.J.” The wind ruffled Kennedy's hair. “You'll get your pick of the women -- all those sorority bitches hoping for a husband.”

“As if,” Chip said.

Nervously, J.J. got down a couple swallows of tequila. The bitterness actually tasted refreshing. In ten years, would he get some business deal because of what was going to happen tonight? He took another chug of tequila. His body felt loose, and his fingers tingled. He drank again.

Then the car jerked around him, bucking and heaving like a wild animal. The tequila splashed onto his face and neck, ice cold in the night wind, and the backpack rolled across the seat. They'd driven off the road.

“What the fuck?” J.J. said.

“Be quiet.” Chip pointed. “There.”

Kennedy shut off the headlights and the engine. J.J. squinted back at the road they'd just left. Two lights appeared in the distance. Slowly, they grew larger.

“What's going on?”

“Ssh!”

The lights got closer. They came from a long, white bus. It pulled up next to a sign by the side of the road. J.J. heard brakes squeal. The doors creaked open, and a group of people slowly filed out. Women. They were dressed alike, in T-shirts and long pants, like uniforms, as if they were coming home from work.

“Guys, this is not a good place to be,” J.J. said.

“Shut up.” Kennedy's voice was suddenly businesslike. He reached over the seat and opened the backpack. He pulled out a flashlight and turned it on. Then he took out three knives—a long hunting knife with a bone handle, a battered chef's knife, and a smaller, straight knife. They were rusted and flimsy, and J.J. remembered the truck selling kitchen utensils on the square.

J.J.'s heart began to pound. “What are those?”

“What the fuck do they look like?” Even Chip's voice sounded different now. It was clipped, adult. Like he was used to command. He held out the third knife. “This is yours. It's a switchblade. You can stab or slice with it. This is how it works.” He pressed a button on the side of the knife, and the blade flickered in and out of sight, like a snake's tongue.

“In and out.” Chip grinned and nudged Kennedy. “Get it, in and out?”

“This isn't a joke, Chip.” Kennedy looked at J.J. “Go on. Take it.”

The calm from the tequila was gone. J.J.'s body was a mass of tensed muscle. In the glow of the flashlight, Chip's floppy hair shadowed his eyes, and Kennedy's mouth looked like a grim, straight line. They looked like strangers.

The bus slowly pulled away from the bus stop and headed back toward El Paso.

Chip rolled his eyes at Kennedy. “Oh God, J.J.'s going to be a pussy.” He reached forward, put the switchblade in J.J.'s front shirt pocket, and patted it.

“You guys are the ones killing all those women?” J.J.'s voice was a croak, dry from alcohol and fear. The women were gone now, into the darkness. How many were heading toward the car?

Kennedy laughed, a short, brisk chuckle. J.J. could easily imagine Kennedy in a suit. He could imagine him as president.

“Not the only ones, dumb ass. We're just coat-tailing. A few years ago, the frat heard about the senioritas getting whacked down here and decided no one would miss a few more.”

“Don't worry,” Chip said. “It's easy. I was nervous, too, the first time.”

“The first” J.J. cleared his throat.

Kennedy nodded. "It was our initiation, too. Now, we get to come down, watch the new guy do 'em, maybe have a little fun first."

"Or even after, if that's your thing." Chip snickered.

Kennedy wrinkled his nose, as if in distaste. "For God's sake, Chip. Have some class."

Tequila flooded into J.J.'s mouth. He barely got the car door open before he threw up, his vomit splattering onto the hard desert floor. He took a deep breath, and his throat felt so raw that he heaved again, his stomach cramping, but this time nothing else came up.

After a second, he wiped his mouth and closed his eyes. He heard the other car doors open, and the dirt crunch under Chip and Kennedy's feet as they walked around the car. He felt Chip's hand on his shoulder.

"You want to succeed in life?" Chip asked. "You have to understand power. It's about life and death. There's nothing more real than that."

J.J. smelled the tequila on Chip's breath and nearly gagged again.

"It's a rush," Kennedy's voice was persuasive, wheedling. "Like nothing you've ever experienced before. I promise. Come on, get up."

J.J. shook his head.

Kennedy grunted in disgust. "Too bad. Come on, Chip."

* * * * *

As their footsteps faded away, J.J. huddled in the back of the car and stared out the windows. The longer he stared, the more his eyes adjusted. The moon threw a blue light over the scrub brush around the car and a low clump of trees maybe ten yards away. But he couldn't see Chip, or Kennedy. Where were they? Surely they were just hiding behind some of the bushes, laughing at him, at the joke they'd played on him. He touched the knife in his pocket. They could have gone down that afternoon and bought the knives on the square. They could have gotten the idea from the café owner's story.

"Hey, guys," he called. "Come on out. Enough's enough."

The world around him seemed to jump into silence, as if his voice had startled the insects and birds providing the background noise he hadn't even noticed until now. He burrowed deeper into the leather car seat. It smelled like mold.

No Chip, no Kennedy.

J.J. wanted to think it was all a joke. But what did he know about their world, what they were capable of? Kennedy's father had probably helped start wars from his luxurious office in

D.C. And Chip's dad had probably dropped bombs, fired machine guns. What were a few Mexican women compared to all that?

J.J. remembered the look in Chip's eyes when he'd treated the café owner like dirt. J.J. suddenly felt guilty. He hadn't made Chip apologize because he was afraid of not getting into the frat. But now...now he was out for sure. And it wasn't too late to stop Chip and Kennedy from killing one of the women from the bus. He could shout and warn the women before Chip or Kennedy got to them. And if he did? J.J. shook his head. The other women from the bus would probably run over, someone would call the police, and they'd think he was part of it. Chip and Kennedy would call their families to bail them out. J.J. would call his mother, and she would just laugh at him and hang up. His life would be over.

J.J. couldn't breathe. The thin metal walls of the car suddenly seemed like a cage, not a refuge. Chip and Kennedy had admitted they weren't the only ones attacking the women. That meant there could be someone else, someone dangerous, out there right now. And J.J. would be an obvious target in a car only rich Americans could afford.

He took a deep breath and opened the car door. The door pinged, and the light blazed on. J.J. winced at the sudden brightness. The light would show anyone who might be watching exactly where he was, so he quickly stepped out and shut the door behind him. The light shut off, and J.J. couldn't see a thing except the bright white image of the car's interior, still burned onto his eyeballs. He blinked, but his eyes were going to have to adjust again to the darkness.

He heard footsteps.

J.J.'s heartbeat doubled. Someone had seen the light and was coming for him. He stumbled forward through the scrub brush, trying to stop his knees from shaking. He didn't have to go far, he told himself. Just to the trees, to hide. He remembered where they were, and he could already distinguish enough to see their shadows.

He felt his hand swat against a tree trunk. He quickly squatted behind it, close to the ground, listening. The night was silent again. He'd probably imagined the footsteps. He took a deep, trembling breath, and for a second he felt safe.

Then he heard the footsteps again.

He stopped breathing. He crouched as still as he could, trying to stay quiet. His lungs ached to gasp noisily for breath. His eyes were nearly adjusted now, and the ground glowed an eerie silver from the moon, the scrub a bleached white. The air smelled sharp and green, like pine needles.

The footsteps were close now. A dark shadow flickered against one of the trees.

"Kennedy!" J.J. hissed, suddenly full of hope. He jumped up and grabbed the figure by the shoulders, ignoring the thorns that tore into his arms. He took a full, relieved breath.

But it wasn't Kennedy. It was a woman. Both of them froze, just staring at each other. The woman was older, maybe his mother's age, with dark hair, like his mother. Her arms were soft under his fingers. The moon shone on the whites of her eyes, and on her pale teeth as she opened her mouth to scream.

Before J.J. realized what he was doing, his hand covered her mouth. "It's all right, I won't hurt you," he heard himself say, even though he knew she probably didn't speak English. If she screamed, he knew how it would look, being out here, alone with her, a switchblade in his pocket. He tried to hold her gently, not to hurt her. But the woman grunted and bit the palm of his hand. Pain lanced up his arm, and J.J. pulled away from her with the shock of it. He heard himself curse. He heard himself say, "Bitch!"

The woman's dark hair whipped around her face. She stretched her mouth open again, to scream. She looked like she was laughing at him.

The switchblade sprang into J.J.'s hands, his fingers remembered Chip's instructions, and he felt the blade snicker out. He thrust it forward, gently, more a warning than a blow. To his surprise, the blade slid effortlessly into the woman's stomach. They both gasped, as if they'd kissed, or something even more intimate. J.J. pulled the knife out and stared at it. The blade was dark. The woman staggered, as if trying to run, and he thrust again, harder this time. That's what Chip would do, or Kennedy. They'd get the job done. It felt satisfying, like he was finally accomplishing something important. Who would care how it had happened? He was doing it. He was in.

The woman slumped into his arms, gasping. Liquid gushed out onto J.J.'s shirt and hands, wet, then immediately sticky. J.J. held her weight for a second, then let her body fall to the ground. The gasping stopped. The only sound he heard now was his own, ragged breathing in the darkness.

Then other voices. Chip and Kennedy. He walked toward them. His legs trembled, and each breath was as cold as the knife he still held.

"This is a switchblade. You can cut or slice," he heard Kennedy say, mimicking Chip. Then Kennedy dropped into his own voice and laughed. "That was a good one."

J.J. frowned. He shook his head. Their words moved sluggishly through his ears. He couldn't make sense of them. He heard the car door open, heard Chip say, "Hey, what the fuck? J.J.'s gone."

"Probably tossing his cookies again," Kennedy said. "Hey, J.J.!" he called out. "Where the fuck are you?"

"Here!" J.J. said. His voice sounded deep and hoarse, like an older man's voice.

He heard a click, and the flashlight beam swept over him. He had a quick mental image of how he must look to them—blood-spattered, triumphant.

Above the flashlight, Chip and Kennedy's hands were clean.

For one dizzying, exhilarating moment J.J. felt the rush Kennedy had described. It sizzled through him, like lightning. It was all about power. He wasn't just their equal, but their superior. He had killed, and they had not.

Then the flashlight clattered to the ground, its beam pointing out into the desert, and J.J. saw the horror on their faces.

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DEAD DAY

by
Katrina Barnett

Katrina Barnett is a screenwriting major at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. She's previously had work published in the Ventura College publication. Ms. Barnett is currently putting together an anthology of her short stories for publication and attempting her sixth screenplay. We are relatively certain that this is her first paid publication, so remember that when she is nominated for a Pulitzer...

The streets are empty tonight, but to me they feel crowded with ghosts of a dead day. I call it a dead day 'cause it was one of those 12 hours in a person's life where the sky is more than just cloudy, it's heavy. Sometimes the fog can weigh a ton, sometimes it can press down on you with the kind of force that a crashing rainstorm wished it had. Sometimes the weight settles on your head, trying to shove you down as low as you'll go, and even once your nose meets the concrete you've got farther to fall.

Sometimes, though, you can feel it in your chest, like sand filling in the space where they say your heart's supposed to be, and you know something dark is going to go down, and it's gonna be bad, and it's gonna be your fault, and nobody's gonna care when you tell them it was just the weight of the dead day that did it. I've seen myself through so many of those damn days; someone should name me heavyweight champ.

* * * * *

Began like any other day, I guess. Me, flickering like a match at 3AM, watching the lights in the city do their business from our chipped window. I used to average about 5 cigarettes in the morning while I sat there and waited for Ronnie to stir. Every time I got down to the nub the thought of waking him with a burn to the shoulder was always such a crack up that I had to make myself stick to just one sacred cig- four more chances got to be too much of a temptation. I guess it makes the smoke a lot more enjoyable anyhow, like sucking a lemondrop down to the last bit before you bite into it. I used to watch the smoke sort of slither away from me and soar out the window, and I used to envy it, I really did. But today the smoke seemed to be filling my head instead, and as I studied the sleeping lug I'd married six years ago I counted his breaths. In and

out, in and out. Totaled about 50 before I lost count, when I finally decided I'd like to get that total down to zero.

Ronnie's not a bad guy, never has been. Nice to his folks, swell to my family, clean to his business, keen on me, and not too shabby to any other Tom Dick or Harry that comes along. But God in heaven (if there is one) he's despicable. His walk, like a heavy-set camel on his way to someplace important, or his stupid laugh, like a hyped-up jackass choking to death is enough to make any person wish him a good time in hell. You're shaking your head, I know you are, but spend every night next to this bag of rot that's so stuck on you he won't raise a hand against you when you're out for blood, so proud that you're his gal that he'll do anything except stop being himself and there's nothing you can do about it—spend every night next to this guy and you tell me if you don't boil just a little.

Ronnie likes to joke that everyone is on pretty good terms with my legs, even though my ankles are as thick as the bratwurst that the warty porker sells down the block. Ronnie's right about the thick part- just about the only thing about me that anyone could pick on, I've gotta be fussy about my heels. But no matter how much Ronnie has churned my stomach I've been picky about who gets to know their way around my stockings. Hosiery isn't cheap these days, and I don't let rip for just any good-time Charlie. That's why when Davey walked into Ronnie's gym I knew things were headed for a change.

Davey isn't too tall, just an inch or so more than me, but his shoulders are broad as a barn and his arms could fit around me twice. He has a tough jaw, just the opposite of Ronnie's fat, droopy one, his eyes are small and slanted like a lizard on the sly, and his dark hair has a funny kind of curl to it. His handshake, when he offers it, could make anyone weak in the knees. When Ronnie introduced us, Davey the new fighting champ and me the boss's wife, Davey looked me up and down and responded with a grunt to my traditional apathetic greeting, as if to say I'd do. And I did.

Can't say I ever came close to loving Davey, but my guess is I got as close as I ever will. At least the lunkhead knew what to do with me half the time. The first time he hit me it was a goof--he was drunk and I was stupid and he smacked a mug into my face when I told him not to drink anymore. Woke me right up, let me tell you. Suddenly I saw all the mistakes that Ronnie had ever made, why I ragged on him so much and never got any get-up-and-go out of him. Made me see the difference between a real man and a wing. Broke the mug, too, but those are cheap- I bought him another one.

Ronnie knew what was going on, he had to. But besides spending one or two dollars worth of worry over a couple bruises he never said anything other than "Don't get bent out of shape, Doll." He was always saying that. As long as I can remember every time I ladled out any thought of my own Ronnie'd suck it up, spit it out, and tack on a healthy dose of *don't get bent out of shape*, like he figured that'd fix it, like my figure was so perfect that any bending would do it injustice. Well, that was just the point--I was bent and I had to go on being bent.

That's what I was thinking about this dead morning while I thought about subtracting his breath away.

The fight was going down at The Lew, and there was a big fuss about it. It was Davey, naturally the best this side of town, against the Dain, pretty much the burliest from the other side. The Dain was rough around the edges but everyone crossed their fingers for Davey- no one was hot in the ring like him. Which was why Ronnie in all of his fat-headed glory had told Davey to take a fall, and take it hard in the 2nd. And he had agreed, he had listened, my stupid chump of a stud had listened to Ronnie, and he was gonna go down just like they told him to.

As I continued my imaginary breath subtraction and began to feel the weight of the day sneaking up on me this morning, I made up my mind that I was going to fix everything. Davey was not going to go down in that fight, he was going to do like I told him for once and beat the Dain to a pulp like I knew he could, and we were going to make a haul. No, *I* was going to make a haul- my own dough instead of Ronnie's cast-offs.

I watched Ronnie take a deep breath and listened to his vague mutterings and thought about what a swell guy he was for just a second, then stabbed out the last of my cigarette, knowing that by tonight, by the time it came over the radio that the Dain and not Davey had gotten pally with the dust, by that time Ronnie himself would be friendly with the quiet dark.

The sky was already grey and clingy when I went to see Davey. Halfway up to his apartment I found him in a stairwell, crouched in that way that only the tough and the hung over can manage. I used my toe to wake up his knee and he glared up at me.

"Keep comin' back for more, you crummy weak thing?" he was almost slurring, which was good enough for me. I rested myself on the step above him so that he got a front row seat to my yams.

"Listen, Davey," I murmured soothingly, leaning in to his stench and filth, reminding myself that I had to love everything foul about it. "Listen, you're not going to throw the fight tonight. You're gonna win."

He flinched and gently swatted in my general direction.

"I don't wanna hear it, honey, you're always making plans... always with your crazy plans... well this time *I've* got a plan and you can just follow along..." His swatting subsided into a calm stroking of my knee and promoted itself from there to fondling the fringe of my skirt.

"I know you do, Davey, sincerely," I watched him absent-mindedly at play, all the while I wondered if someone like me could ever find a happy medium of a man. Someone with real grit like Davey but who might also have half a brain. Maybe those didn't exist—maybe I didn't want to be happy, even—isn't 'happy' just silly in the long run anyway?

While Davey was pleasantly distracted with the enigmas that are my Sunday stockings, I brought out a flask from my coat. I brought it to soften Davey, but from the looks of it he had

lower things in mind. I took a good hard gulp and let it slip down, my skirt following in its general direction. While I let Davey have at it I tried to tell myself that the weight pressing down on me was all him, the pressure against my back was just the splinters of the scuffed up stairs that so many lowlifes had clambered on, and here I was, just a part of the scene, just a no-good trying to strike it rich with her guy. I tried to tell myself that because I knew Davey would do exactly what I wanted him to do, just like he always had.

I wasn't sure what that made me.

I rushed home later with a bruise on my neck, a pain in my lower back, and a plan making the rounds in my head. No more room for smoke. I had to convince Ronnie to stay home from the fight tonight. We'd have a quiet dinner around the radio—a good dinner, chicken and dumplings, Ronnie's favorite, only this time we'd have it with cheap wine. The funny tasting kind. The kind that smacks gently of poison. With any luck he'd be out before the Dain in round two. Then I'd pack up the goods, pick up Davey in the Bentley, and we'd take off for the hills and have our winnings wired to where ever we landed.

My only shaky moment came after Ronnie sheepishly agreed to stick around. I started shaking out the tablecloth for dinner until I realized it was my hands that were shaking like leaves about to make their drop and I let loose. Ronnie looked up from the newspaper he had resting on his fat whale of a stomach and grinned at me.

“Catch a spider, kid?”

My hands stopped shaking.

“A whopper.”

He chuckled to himself, that damned stupid choking laugh, and rested his eyes while I set the table, all the while telling myself this was it. This was all of it. My fingers were strong as I handled the wine glasses in the kitchen, and I told myself to feel a twinge of pity but none came. It was getting dark outside. The fight was starting on the radio.

“Hey, hon,” the lardbucket called to me from the den.

I took out the vial that I'd been holding close to my heart for a long time and opened it.

“Yea, Ronnie?”

He exhaled heavily, depressed-like. “There's no moon out tonight. It's all dark.”

“Stars?” I asked him.

“Some.”

I let the liquid slide to the bottom of the glass before I let the wine go. “Good enough for me.”

I gracefully joined him at the dinner table with a heaping serving of All-American Sap food, just the way my husband liked it, and when I put his glass in front of him I knew I was cool as ice. There was no going back now.

He grinned his big silly grin at me and chuckled senselessly for what I prayed would be the last time. Finally, he took a good sip while I nibbled at a biscuit and pretended to listen to Round One of what was supposed to be Davey's dark night. Everything seemed still as Christmas Eve in the snow as Davey placed his nearly empty glass on the table and made a funny expression.

I turned up the sound on the radio. Ronnie started to cough a little and looked across at me questioningly.

“Is that some cheap wine, hon?”

I nodded calmly.

“Dirt cheap.”

He sighed and coughed a little more.

“Well now, is that any kind of way to be..” he adjusted his collar and took a bite of dumpling. I knew he had to be feeling it by now; else he'd have already downed fifty dumplings. He kept coughing and adjusting but nothing gave. And here we were, already in Round Two and Davey was showing no signs of backing down. And Ronnie kept eating and coughing and smiling at me to let me know how swell I was, how keen I was, and what a lucky bastard he was to have me around to buy him cheap wine.

How swell, how keen, how lucky. How swell—and then the Dain bit it. He was down and Ronnie was up and fired, hollering his lungs empty at the defenseless radio and I kept counting his breaths down to zero until I realized I wasn't sitting at the table anymore, I was up and I had what felt like Ronnie's pistol in my hand and sand in my heart and I knew the day was pressing down on me again and I couldn't back down now, not ever. He looked at me and fell quiet and gazed at me and knew. He knew it was coming as I stood beside the window with the darkness, my only partner in crime, creeping in.

All Ronnie could do was gaze at me, even with the bullet speeding towards him. All he could do before he crumbled was gaze with that same keenness at me and speak the words, “Dadgum, Charlotte. You *are* the moon.”

I don't know which feeling was stronger—that of disgust at his tenderness even now, when he knew I wanted him gone, or the intense elation, the electrical charge running through my head when I held the pistol against his bloated face. I wasn't happy to be killing him, or holding a gun, or even thinking about living without him. No, the joker's smile I was wearing wasn't about contempt anymore; it was just because I was so damn happy to be feeling anything at all.

As I felt my inexperienced finger brush the trigger I knew all of Davey's roughness couldn't excite me more than the feeling I had just then, having a weapon in my hand capable of ending everything. And no man could ever make me feel the way I did the moment it was done and half of Ronnie's face was wall décor.

A lot of times you'll read stories about folks who stuck it to someone, and how all the killer could think of was the pleading look in the victim's eyes and the remorse they felt later. I don't even remember much of what Ronnie looked like, aside from that keenness which I'd never see again, and that funny feeling I got when I looked at the gun nestled in his cheek; I couldn't help thinking it was kind of like a kid's head on a pillow. And then I thought how grand it was that I never had any kids. That's all. Maybe Ronnie was already dead, in a way he died to me a long time ago, so long that I can't remember what his last words were or what he was ever really like if he was ever like anything.

All I think is that I killed Ronnie and left him.

And it felt good.

After, I smoked one last cigarette in honor of all those three a.m thoughts, grabbed my coat, touched up my lipstick, and went out to find Davey.

I was in such a fog that I didn't even get into the Bentley, I just made use of my camel's ankles and wandered towards The Lew—but I was stopped in my tracks about halfway there by a celebratory mob, with none other than The Dain parading front and center.

I let myself gape as they went by, and I knew there was no pretty thinking left. The Dain had gotten up. Davey had lost. Probably gone down around the same time as the radio got smashed. He didn't have it in him. I wanted to beat myself for ever thinking he did. I kept walking until I saw him cowering in the shadows, his friends leaving his side, a huge half-filled bottle in his hand.

"Look, hon, I tried..." he started to say as soon as I got close.

I sized him up quickly, trying to make myself think of his hands against my face, the anger I could always sense inside of him, his funny curls slipping like butter between my fingers, but now all I could see were his eyes, looking at me with keenness that seemed all too familiar. I knew then, I knew I had to walk away for his own good before I felt too strong for him, before I took him over.

"Keep drinking," I heard myself say. "Stay in the stairwells and alleys and maybe if you watch yourself you can keep the rest of the rats company. I don't need you anymore."

It came out cold and certain and I knew he was scared because he had been found out, and I was more than he could ever take. I let him listen to my shoes say goodbye as my steps echoed down the street, and kept my eyes ahead on the only flickering lamp post left alive in this god-forsaken place.

And now it's now, and all I can think of is how good murder feels. Now all I can think about is how sick it is that, after finding something that brings me joy of that kind of purity, I can't ever have it again. I'm like a white bride on her wedding night; there's blood on the sheets but it's all over and you better remember how it felt because it's gone for good. And that leaves only one last thing, one last thrill, one last way to bring back the buzz—but it's different, and it's quick, and it's curtains.

So here I am, wandering the back alleys like a mangy cat in a swank coat, not even a wolf in sheep's clothing. I wouldn't even go so far as to pay myself that respect. I can still feel the cold metal against my body and I shiver with dread and expectancy to know that there're two bullets left, and that soon it's gonna be my well-polished, sweet face splashed on the dirty walls of the city.

Good, I think.

This town could use a little something pretty.

Up ahead I see a gangly bastard looting through the garbage can like a cat nosing for a junebug. He looks up at me and gives me the go-over. I touch my hand to my side. Two bullets, right? At least I won't be alone.

I guess all I can say is that I hope when they find me and what's left of the schmuck that I take down with my ship, I hope they don't care. I hope they chalk it up to the sand in my heart, the fog, the ocean, the gun that made me feel like a real woman. I hope they don't think about it too much. I hope it's two pudgy police detectives that stand over me, and I hope one says to the other when they see me lying in the red, "Seen it all before, Joe. It was just one of those dead days."

END

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by Katrina M. Barnett

EXCUSE ME, BUT THERE'S A KIDNEY IN MY SOUP

by

j.a. kazimer

When j.a. kazimer isn't reading, she spends her time writing urban fantasies and crime fiction with a dark comic twist. Originally from Cleveland, Ohio, she escaped at a young age, and now lives in Denver, Colorado, where she received a master's degree in forensic psychology, and has worked as a PI, bartender, and most recently at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics.

“What the fuck?” Shane Morris said, upon waking, naked, in a kidney-shaped bathtub filled with ice. He blinked, trying to remember how he ended up there. *Vegas...Dan's bachelor party...a strip club somewhere on the Strip...a leather-clad brunette with a butterfly tattoo...*

He started to rise from the icy water, but a sharp, intense pain in his back doubled him over like Jenna Jameson at a porn convention. The agony raced along his spine and into his soggy brain. He slid backwards into the arctic water, letting out a girlish scream. Water sloshed over the edge of the tub. It soaked the dirty floor and his clothing folded neatly in a pile by the door.

Oh, God, I don't want to die.

He thought of Pam, of her sweet smile and kind eyes. She would be devastated. He pictured her standing over his coffin, tears staining her wind burned cheeks. Water welled in his own eyes as he remembered her face last Christmas when he'd finally gotten the guts to propose. He'd never felt more like a hero. The wealth of commendations and awards he'd received since joining the Los Angeles Fire Department meant nothing in contrast to the pride in her eyes.

He fought waves of nausea. Bile rose in his throat, spewing from his blue-tinted lips in a technicolor rainbow of stale whiskey, and cheap Las Vegas Buffet fare. The splatter of it against the bathroom tiles echoed in the small room like a gunshot.

“The phone...” Grasping the heart-shaped towel rack above his head, he pulled himself up a few inches. Beads of sweat popped out along his hairline, drenching his already damp head. He reached for the courtesy phone next to the shower. Why hotels put a phone in the john remained a mystery—like black holes or the female orgasm—but for once, he was thankful. Stretching his athlete's body, his fingers caressed the edge of the phone cord.

So close....

His palm, slick with icy water and sweat, touched the receiver and a chorus of halleluiahs rang through his disoriented brain. With shaking fingers he pressed the number 9. The receiver slipped tumbling towards the floor. He grabbed for it. Luck was on his side. The phone halted millimeters from the floor. However Newton's Third Law snuck up and bit Shane in the ass. The receiver flew back at his head, smacking him with enough force to send him spiraling into the frigid water.

Blood dripped from a gash directly above his eyes, and the water turned a pallid pink. Quickly, it began changing from pale pink, to dusty rose, to blood red. He rubbed his head—a thin trail of blood dripped from his fingertips.

Something was terribly wrong....

He glanced down at the rapidly color-shifting water, noting the darkest red was coming from the rear. Urban legends and horror movies flashed through his mind. He slowly twisted his arms behind him, feeling along his lower back with trepidation. Half-assed Frankenstein stitches held his pruney skin closed over a six-inch incision, a slit directly over where his right kidney used to be. Shane's blood curdling shriek of horror echoed around the bathroom, down the hotel hallway and to the casino floor eight stories below.

* * * * *

Twelve hours earlier....

"This is it, boys. In two short days, our friend, Dan, here," Shane drunkenly gestured to the ruddy faced guy getting a lap dance a few feet away, "will make the worst mistake of his life."

A chorus of laughter and hear, hears echoed around the strip club, as complete strangers joined in the festivities.

"To Dan," Shane raised a shot glass filled with amber colored liquid, "you dumb fuck." He threw back the shot, grimacing at the taste of the cheap, watered down whiskey. He'd had too much already. His brain felt moldy, and his stomach burned. Suck it up, he ordered himself, don't puss out.

Dan slurped whipped cream from the inside of a blonde haired strippers thighs. He spit trails of white confectioners foam. "You guys are the best."

"Another round." Shane motioned to the topless barmaid. She ignored him, so he took matters into his own hands and stumbled to the bar. He waved his hands in the air to attract her attention. "I need fourteen shots of whiskey."

"Make it fifteen," a sultry voice from the barstool on his right purred.

He turned to face the woman and nearly fell over. She was amazing with long raven hair and dark mocha lips. “Fifteen it is.” A string of drool slipped from the corner of his numbed lips.

The bartender rolled her eyes, pouring the requested drinks.

“So what’s a handsome guy,” the black-haired woman paused looking him over, “like you doing in a place like this?”

Shane couldn’t believe his good fortune. He was in Sin City, and a woman beautiful enough to grace the cover of Playboy was chatting him up. He thought of Pam, and her sweet, kind eyes. Guilt rose inside him as he thought of their last night together. He’d promised to behave—not to drink too much or sleep with strippers. She could trust him, he vowed, this time he would keep his word. No more secrets or lies. He was on the straight and narrow.

“My friend, Dan, is getting married,” he said, trying not to stare down the woman’s black leather halter-top.

“Lucky me.” She crossed her long, tan legs, running a hand up her leather skirt.

His mouth went dry, as did his resistance.

“I’m Shane.” His hand shook as she took it in her manicured one.

What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, right?

“Nice to meet you.” She stroked his palm with a red talon. “Gina. So Shane, are you single or is there a Mrs. Shane waiting at home?”

“I’m not married.” He evaded the real question. What Pam didn’t know couldn’t hurt him. Besides, this was harmless flirtation, nothing more...

“Can you keep a secret?” She licked her lips.

He nodded, waiting.

She leaned close to him. “I love a man in uniform.” She trailed her finger along his LAFD patch on his polo shirt. He’d discovered that chicks were suckers for firefighters soon after joining the department. They got wet just thinking about the pressure hose.

His blood pressure rose when Gina’s tongue darted between her teeth, and licked her lips. Her saliva glistened in the strobe lights making him imagine her lips wrapped around his...

“Shane, who’s the beauty?” Ross, Dan’s best man and older brother leered at Gina. A player since birth, Ross knew he was irresistible to woman. He had money, good looks, and a Mercedes. *What else did a man need?* Shane hated him on principle, and that hatred became personal when Gina flashed Ross a flirty smile.

“Get lost,” Shane mouthed. “Mine.”

Ross grinned, and sat in the empty seat on Gina’s other side. She gave him a smile, and promptly turned her back on him in favor of Shane.

“What do you say we get out of here?” She trailed her nail along her plump mouth.

God, yes, his mind begged. “I don’t have that much money...” *How much was a Vegas hooker?* He mentally counted his wallet. *Would she take credit?*

She pulled back. “I don’t want your money. I’m not a prostitute.”

Oh, he’d fucked up now. “I didn’t mean to offend you...”

But she didn’t look offended, she looked intrigued. Her pale blue eyes widened with desire. She stood, and leaned close to him. “Do you have a hotel room?”

He nodded, numbly. “At the Excalibur.”

“Meet me in the lobby in fifteen minutes,” she took a step to the door, over her shoulder she whispered, “don’t make me wait.”

As she walked away, he noticed a blue butterfly tattoo on the right side of her lower back, just below her kidney. The wings dipped below the supple leather of her skirt, tempting him to follow her anywhere.

* * * * *

“Bitch,” Shane whispered, blinking his teary eyes. She’d lured him away, drugged him, and stole his kidney but a part of him still wanted her, desired to taste her deceitful mouth.

“Son,” a medic said, holding a plastic tube in Shane’s nose, “you need to stay as still as possible until we know the extent of the...injury.”

Extent of his injury? His fucking kidney was gone. That was the extent of his injury. How much more did the medic need to know? Shane’s teeth began to chatter, and not from the ice bath. What if she’d taken more than his kidney? Quickly, he groped underneath the thin cotton sheet.

“Thank God.” He released his testicles. Everything below his waist was numb from the icy water. His balls had headed north for the winter, but they seemed intact.

The ambulance attendant didn’t even blink. This was Vegas after all. “Son, is there anyone you’d like me to call?”

“Pam.” What was he going to say to her? How would he explain a missing kidney? “Call my fiancé, Pam. But don’t tell her what happened, make something up. Tell her I was in an accident or something.”

“I can’t lie for you.” The medic shook his graying head. “Why don’t I tell her you’ve been taken to the hospital, and leave it at that?”

“I just don’t understand.” Tears gathered in Shane’s eyes. “Why did this happen to me?”

The attendant shot something into the I.V. connected to Shane’s arm. “Right place at the wrong time. That’s how these kidney thieves work. You’re lucky. Last week I had a guy who’d had both kidneys and his liver removed...poor bastard...”

Shane stopped listening, and let the morphine take him away. His last conscious thought was, *‘I wonder what blood type Ross is?’*

* * * * *

“Oh, baby, I got here as soon as I could. What happened?”

Pam stood over Shane as he returned to the land of the living two hours later. The numbness was gone, replaced with a bone-cold chill. His body ached, like he’d gone five rounds with Bruce Lee. Pam looked frazzled, her silken blonde hair mussed, and eyes red-rimmed. The drive from Los Angeles must have taken its toll.

Blinking against the harsh florescent lights of the hospital emergency room, he croaked, “I don’t know. I can’t remember a thing...”

Liar.

“Nothing?” Pam bit her bottom lip.

The gesture was familiar, but it sent a chill through him. Didn’t she believe him?

“We were at a club,” he paused, glancing at her with veiled eyes, “a dance club. I was drinking lemon water...someone must have spiked it. Next thing I know, it’s morning and I’m in a tub filled with ice.”

“But that’s an urban legend.” Pam frowned, touching her soft, warm hand to his pale brow. “Things like that just don’t happen in real life.”

Anger rushed through him. “They don’t? I’m missing a fucking kidney. How much more real do things get?”

She stepped back, as if he’d struck her. Instantly, he regretted the outburst. None of this was Pam’s fault. She was a victim, just as much as he was. Poor, sweet Pam...

“I’m sorry, baby,” he whispered. “It’s been a long day.”

He took her hand in his, and she smiled. A loving, warm smile that made him feel like as long as she was by his side nothing else mattered. “I love you, you know that right?”

“I know.” She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

A doctor in surgical scrubs entered the examination room. He was handsome in a dirty, bad boy way, with a devilish smile. Pam took notice, and Shane's temper flared. How dare she ogle some doctor while he was lying wounded on the table a foot away?

"Good news." The doctor checked Shane's chart.

"Good news," Shane scoffed. "Someone sliced me open and stole my organs and you say good news? What the hell kind of doctor are you?"

"A first-class one." The doctor grinned. "As a matter of fact, I am so good that it only took me three minutes to figure out someone is playing a nasty joke on you." He laughed.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Shane sat up, and waves of pain shot through him. "This is no joke. I'm dying here."

"Honey, please." Pam gripped his arm, trying to urge him back down. "You'll hurt yourself."

"Right," the doctor said. "We wouldn't want you to hurt yourself."

His tone was much too sarcastic for Shane's taste. "Tell me what the hell is going on?"

"Well, it looks like you were drugged and while you were out; someone gave you a nice clean incision on your outer right flank. They then proceeded to sew it up with fishing line and a butterfly bandage."

"Are you saying this was all a joke? That I still have two functioning kidneys?"

Happiness rushed through Shane. He would live!

"Yep."

"But what about all the blood?"

The doctor's smile widened. "Who knows? Cow's blood maybe."

Shane fell back against the pillows, his heart filled with a mixture of anger and relief. A joke. It was all a bad joke. I bet Dan and the guys are laughing their asses off right now, he thought. He'd pay them back. One way or another, he'd get revenge.

"Thanks doc." Shane suddenly felt a lot warmer about the man. "When can I get out of here?"

"We're going to have to remove the stitches and clean the wound, but it shouldn't take more than a few minutes." The doctor paused, staring intently at Pam. "I imagine you'll be back to yourself within the hour."

The doctor finished cleaning and examining the wound.

"I'll write you a prescription for some antibiotics. Keep it clean and dry, and if it starts to get infected see your family doctor."

“Thank you,” Pam gushed.

“You’re very welcome.” His smile was a bit friendlier than Shane liked. “I’ll send in a nurse with your discharge papers.”

He gave Pam another meaningful glance and left.

After the door closed behind the doctor, Shane said, “Some joke.”

“Why would someone do that to you?” Pam eyes were downcast.

A prickly sensation of guilt rose within him. Pam deserved better. If he wasn’t careful he’d lose her. From now on, he would remain faithful. No more one night stands in cheap motel rooms, or fucking drunk girls in the back alleys.

“I don’t know, sweetheart.” He gave her a brave smile. “I’m sure it was just a joke that got out of hand. You know how Dan is. The guy has no sense of when to draw the line.”

“Right,” she said, and Shane wasn’t sure she believed him.

“So let’s get out--,” Shane began. His voice cracked as the nurse entered the room. Her long black hair was twisted into a ponytail, and her mocha chocolate lips were outlined with coral pink lip-gloss, but he recognized her instantly. Gina. Fuck.

“Honey, would you mind waiting outside?” Shane asked Pam quietly.

Gina grinned, a slow sensual one that made the blood pressure cuff on Shane’s arm beep in response. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Shane muttered.

“Do you two know each other?” Pam glanced between them.

“No!” Shane shouted.

“What? She doesn’t look familiar?” Pam leaned closer to him.

He glanced at Pam, eyebrows raised in affected confusion. “What do you mean?” Denial was the best offense in his mind.

“This is Virginia.” Pam moved to the other woman.

“It’s...nice to meet you,” he stuttered, “Virginia.”

“My sister, Virginia.” Pam laughed as the color drained from Shane’s face. “Didn’t I tell you she lived in Vegas? I could have sworn I’d mentioned it.”

“No,” he croaked out.

“Hmm, must have slipped my mind.” Pam paused, a spiteful grin turning her kind eyes, cold and black. “Now why wouldn’t I have mentioned it...? After all, we don’t keep secrets from each other, do we?”

END

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RAISING THE DEAD

by

Patricia Abbott

*Patricia Abbott has published more than 60 stories in literary and crime zines. Her story, **My Hero**, won a Derringer Award in 2008. She has forthcoming print stories in **Between The Dark And The Daylight**, and **Damn Near Dead II** and another in **Sex, Thugs, And Rock And Roll**. She lives and works in Detroit. This is her second appearance in **The Back Alley**, and we hope to see her around here many more times.*

Violet made a meager living working freelance. She also took her own photographs, often gruesome pictures that had attracted little more than outraged stares.

“They’re missing—well, I don’t know exactly what,” Ted, a local gallery owner told her when only one of the dozen he’d hung sold. “Look, both the angle and the lighting is static. And in Detroit, you only need to look out the window to see scenes like this. Maybe in San Diego or Palm Springs you’d have something.” He picked up a photograph of the Seville Apartments, the one that had sold him on her months before. Part of the building seemed to melt into the earth as a cruel, sluggish dismemberment took place. “I like this one though I’m not sure why. You’ve caught something here. An inexorability perhaps?”

She shrugged and took him home to bed where her eyes drifted up to the ornate mirror over her bed as he went about his business. Her super had hung it for her between lewd glances and stifled smirks the week she moved in—years ago now. Oddly, Ted never noticed. There was a pelt of reddish fur running from his neck to his ass. It looked like she was screwing a fox. Their lovemaking was further punctuated by the guy upstairs running on his treadmill, their bodies instinctively picking up the thumping rhythm.

“Come back when you have something new,” Ted said, on his way down the steps. She wasn’t sure if he meant photographs or sex.

* * * * *

Unlike Ted, her current boyfriend, Bill Fontenel, had noticed the mirror immediately. He was an undertaker Violet had met at a funeral on the eastside of Detroit.

“Did you hang that thing up there for the aesthetics?” Bill asked when he saw the mirror. She nodded, pleased that he both got it and didn’t mind it. Most men seemed to think she’d placed it there as an evaluation tool.

Afterwards her thoughts returned to the funeral. “He was an elegant man.”

“Dead people aren’t elegant,” Bill told her, massaging the scar on her hip absentmindedly. “But they’re closer to it after I spend some time with them.”

“Is that your niche?” she asked, shifting her position. “Why people come to you, I mean?”

He nodded. “The ones who never looked good in life—the ugly ones, the messed-up ones, the ravaged ones, get my best work. That’s the deal. If they look good resting in my house, how can death be so bad?”

“Are you trying to convince their families or yourself?”

“You,” he said, finding the spot again.

“You’ll never convince me.”

* * * * *

It was nearly two when the phone rang one night. “Yeah,” she said, grabbing her cell. “And you better not be some barroom drunk!”

“No, it’s me. Can you drive down here?”

“Right now?” she asked, looking at the clock again.

Since it wasn’t like Bill to make unusual demands, she went quickly.

“Down in the prep room.” he said, leading the way. She hadn’t even known till then exactly what they called it—the place where he prepared the dead. The stink—formaldehyde, she guessed—was overwhelming. Few tools were evident although surgical masks, scalpels, and incisors rested on a stand. “He’s over here,” Bill said, walking toward a stainless steel table where a covered corpse rested.

“Whoa,” she said. “Not someone I know, is it?”

Bill shook his head, and pulling the cover back, gradually exposed the body of young black man dressed in a maroon and black-striped shirt with a pair of skimpy black shorts. His spiked shoes were well-worn, and his knees were wrapped in bandages—the type athletes wore.

“Young,” she said, stepping forward.

“Twenty-four.” He made a small adjustment to the hands.

She peered down. It was impossible to believe there’d ever been a beating heart beneath this inert chest. Yet there was a stateliness about him despite the almost comical uniform. “What happened?”

“Someone ran into him at a rugby match—a truck of a halfback. Turned out our fellow had an aneurysm. Never knew what hit him.”

“They really want him laid out in shorts with wrapped knees? His family, I mean.”

“His uniform,” Bill told her, his eyes still on the body. “His team mates will be expecting it.” He looked at her. “Okay, here’s the thing. His parents—they’re over in Manchester, England—they want a picture.”

“Isn’t that a strange request?” But the idea of taking his picture was making her fingers itch already.

“They haven’t seen him in a few years. Came over to attend college and stayed on. I’m sending him back, but the coffin will be closed.”

“You should have told me to bring my camera,” she said suddenly, looking around.

“I have a camera. Usually Ron does it, but he’s on vacation. And this guy’s not gonna wait till Ron gets back.”

“I’ll bring my Deardorff next time. It takes terrific formal shots for an—occasion—like this.” She was already thinking of it. That there’d be more pictures of dead people.

Together they stretched Reggie out again, propping him up slightly.

Later, in the darkroom, she was amazed at how much she liked the pictures as the images rose up like Lazarus in her soup. The camera had invested the corpse with even more grandeur than Bill’s handiwork had done. The photos were beautiful, but eerie—grotesque. She hadn’t known she liked grotesque.

“His friends really dug the pictures,” Bill told her a few days later. “Or maybe that’s the wrong word.” He thought a second. “They admired them. You did good work, baby.” He was lying in her bed, examining himself in the mirror, pinching flesh recently thickened at his waist. He was propped up against the headboard—several pillows under his neck, legs crossed, a crossword puzzle half-done.

“I’d like to try it again, Bill. I think I know how to make the shots more striking. I could shoot from a ladder—well, a stepstool perhaps. Maybe make the lighting more dramatic. And certainly use the Deardorff.”

Bill looked at her. “Hey, you really got off on it, huh? I’ll have to ask the families first.”

“I don’t guess there’s anyone down there right now?”

He stood up and grabbing his shirt, began buttoning it. “Woman in her nineties. Want her picture?”

She shook her head. “I think I’ll stick to younger men. Say men under forty. They’re prettier.” She paused. “Maybe it’ll make a statement.” When he didn’t say anything, she added. “The way they die here.”

“I didn’t know you made statements.”

“So you’ll let me know when you have... someone?” She was out of bed, straightening the sheets, trying not to seem too eager.

He nodded. “Remember though, I can’t just let you shoot them without permission. And it might not work out every time. Things can move pretty fast.”

“I’m always around.”

“That’s true,” he admitted. “You *are* always around.”

“Think they’ll mind? The families, I mean.”

“We’ll find out.”

“I think I can make something out of this.”

This time she’d clear Ted’s walls.

* * * * *

Both of them were surprised at how few people objected. Most clients willingly signed the standardized release Bill’s attorney drew up. They usually asked for a complimentary copy of the photo—through Bill, of course. She never met them.

Maybe they asked for the pictures because the men were still young and beautiful. Most had died in a car accident, a gang shooting, and one later from wounds suffered in a roadside attack in Iraq. To her eye, every face bore a slightly surprised look. Death had tripped them up, taken them at an unexpected time—when their chin was still firm, their skin smooth, their lips full.

Her subjects were African-American since Bill’s clientele, along with Bill himself, was black. She hadn’t thought of doing all black portraits, but it seemed right. She took eight portraits in two months—never imagining the number would mount so quickly, taking each picture on a stepladder from the same angle since the height created a certain mood.

Bill was always there—watching. More and more she admired his skill in making someone dead seem—if not alive—at least someone to be reckoned with. A certain vibrancy rose from the bodies, an aura she thought of as afterdeath as she watched the images rise in her darkroom.

The men were dressed elegantly. If the decedents at most funerals seemed dressed for church, Bill's loved ones looked like they were going to the opera, to a grand ball, a wedding reception, Mardi Gras. They wore top hats and tuxedos in peacock colors, shirts and ties in a satiny texture and hue. Bill refused to dress them in gang regalia, but sometimes allowed rap costumes or athletic uniforms if the family requested it.

"They're going to the Party," Bill told her. "That's how I think of it."

Violet quickly got used to seeing dead bodies—was surprised, in fact, at how little it bothered her. Bill taught her how to apply makeup, (or cosmetics in his parlance), how to dress their hair and beards. Their fingernails. "You're a natural," he told her. "I'll let you do me when the time comes."

"I'm not taking the camula to you— if that's what you mean," she joked, looking at the instrument used for embalmment. She'd only watched the embalming process once—and only for a few minutes—since it could take hours.

"Ron can do that part. He's the ghoul, and you're the artiste."

"You're not dying any time soon, Bill. You're young."

"So were your subjects," he reminded her.

* * * * *

Violet had been sitting on the eight finished photographs for a month when she ran into Ted in the post office. "Hey," he said. "How you doing, Miss Violet. Still snapping hotels on their way to the wrecking ball?"

She shook her head. "I've been to my last implosion. Hey, I wonder if you'd like to see what I've been up to recently."

"Now is good."

Back in her apartment, Ted stood looking silently at the photographs. "Shit," he said. "This stuff's gonna to make you. It'll be the best work I've ever hung. Talk about edgy. You're on the ledge of edge. You could probably get a show in Chicago." He put a finger to his lips. "Forget I said that. Have any more?"

She shook her head. "Things have been slow."

Ted laughed sharply. "Wow, you've gotten jaded." He looked at the portraits again. "Well, eight's not quite enough. You could make them bigger, but I don't know. Size seems right. Let's say ten at least, though a dozen would be even better. Damn, I have a nice hole in the schedule next month. Too bad."

“Not too bad! Put me on the schedule.” Her heart was pounding.

His hand was on the doorknob. “I’d have to start advertising in next week or so to make it pay off.”

“We’re coming up on Halloween. Things always happen then. This is Detroit.” Her voice grew shrill. “I’ll have the ten, don’t worry.” It meant everything to her, this chance to be reckoned with.

* * * * *

Except no one died. It felt like a broken promise, no dead bodies on Halloween in Detroit. The day after, she called Bill early. “Anything going on?” she asked.

“Nothing for you.” There was annoyance in his voice and not for the first time.

“I thought with Halloween...”

“Look, I’ve got a little girl waiting...”

“Oh, God, a little girl?” She couldn’t use a little girl, God knows.

He misunderstood, of course and his tone softened. “Never stood a chance.”

“That’s so sad,” she said, getting it in time. She paused and counted to three. “Can you come over later?”

He came over. “I thought you’d forgotten how nice this was,” he said. “Lately I’ve been feeling like your pimp—‘cept I’m procuring bodies instead of Johns. And it gets me down—a black man bringing black men to a white lady.”

She decided to take a chance. “Look, Bill, I have an opportunity for a show. This guy with a gallery in Ferndale saw my stuff and loved it.” She looked at his down-turned mouth. “Jeez, Bill, why do you think I’ve been taking these pictures?”

He sighed. “I know, I know. But it’s all you think about lately.” He looked up at the ceiling as the guy upstairs began his nightly routine. “Christ! Just what I need. My head’s already pounding. Are you ever going to talk to him about pickin’ another time to do that?”

“I’ll talk to him” she said. “And look, after I get the last two photos, I’ll find something else.”

“Two and that’s it?” He took his eyes off the ceiling long enough to look skeptical. “Anyway, I’m not sure you’ll be able to stop. Maybe it’ll be kids with cancer or hookers with prosthetic limbs, but it’s bound to be something. Something dead or near dead.”

“I’m getting bored with it,” she lied. “There’s only so much you can do with the deceased.”

“Tell that to a necrophiliac.”

* * * * *

Her ninth photograph was a teenager. The youngest yet, barely sixteen and a star athlete. He’d caught an errant bullet in the head in a gang hit. Her palms were wet with excitement when Bill called to tell her the kid was in his prep room. “Listen, his parents don’t want him identified if you show his portrait in some gallery.”

“I’ve never asked for any of their names, Bill. I just assigned each a number.”

“You gave them numbers, huh? They’re just bodies to you, aren’t they?”

“They *are* just bodies, Bill. What else could they be?”

“They could be loved ones.”

“I don’t think you get it, Bill. I’m trying to do something here, too. You’re making your living from the dead. Why can’t I?” She shrugged and took the photographs quickly, sensing his impatience.

“See you tonight?” she asked at the door. He paused and then nodded. She had to keep him on her side—for a little longer at least.

* * * * *

Ted called later. “Look, Vi,” he said as soon as she picked up the phone. “My lawyer says you need to get a waiver from this undertaker too—not just the families. Get him to sign off on it. Acknowledge that the pictures are yours alone, that he won’t ask for a share in any future profits. It’s not just about the money either. No telling when he might get scruples,” Ted sighed into the receiver. “I wish I’d thought of this angle earlier. Anyway, I’m messengering the waiver to you now. Have him sign it and get it right back to me.”

“What?” she asked, not quite understanding. “Bill wouldn’t ask for money. He’s not like—”

“What if you’re suddenly famous?” Ted broke in. “Raking it in. Can you be sure he won’t want his cut?”

She paused. “I guess not.” She couldn’t imagine handing Bill that document. He’d storm out of the room.

“Alright then,” Ted said finally, his voice recapturing its natural calm. “Any luck on the last picture? I can’t wait much longer.”

“I’m working on it.”

* * * * *

When they finished making love, Bill half-dozing under the light throw, she threw on a robe and headed for the kitchen. “Just relax, baby,” she said. “I’ve got everything under control.” She was still struggling with lighting the broiler when she heard the sound of that damned treadmill going upstairs. “Sorry, Bill,” she called out. “Thought we were done with that damned treadmill.”

“I’m used to it,” Bill called back. “It’s background music—the big drum roll at the end.” It sounded like her neighbor was descending through the ceiling. There was some sort of roaring sound—maybe from inside the air shaft? But quickly the roar, or really a sort of cracking, splitting sound grew loud enough that she knew it had to be inside her apartment. She bolted through the living room and looked into her bedroom just in time to see the mirror pull away from the bedroom ceiling and drop with frightening velocity onto the bed. It plunged the eleven feet as if it had been fired, the full weight hitting directly below, which was where Bill lay.

He was propped up in her bed, his head cushioned by pillows. His face, which registered some small surprise, was untouched. It seemed too ludicrous to be true. Surely he’d shrug the mirror aside, dump it onto the floor and smile over at her. But the weight of the mirror must have killed him instantly or possibly induced an immediate heart attack. She watched helplessly as small pieces of paint or plaster began to rain on top of the mirror and Bill. His hair turned white from the downpour in seconds—like some terrible aging process had been set into motion. Sickeningly, inappropriately, the sound of the fucking treadmill continued relentlessly above her. Her neighbor had no idea of what lay below him. It was the bolts that gave way, not the ceiling itself. Violet stood there counting the beats of her heart or the thumps of the treadmill; she wasn’t sure which.

Finally breaking loose from her stupor, she raced across the room, managing with great exertion, to slide the mirror off Bill. She cleared the plaster away as the tears fell hard and fast. And suddenly she was screaming, throwing herself on him, and begging him not to be dead. And still the treadmill continued its march above her.

White dust had covered her when she finally rose. Tears stung her throat, plugged by a final pent-up scream. With great effort, she stopped crying. Like an automaton, and despite what her heart told her, she went for her camera, setting it up as fast as she could, adding the light bar, finding the proper stool to stand on, making the necessary adjustments. Bill would need a little makeup, she thought stonily, looking through the viewfinder.

She walked into the bathroom and grabbed her makeup case, still on the sink from her own preparations for the evening. She didn't have the range of cosmetics Bill kept for this work; her cover-up was really too light for a black man. In the mirror, some harridan stared back at her. She was screaming, of course, but only in her head.

She returned to her work. Bill was naked and she had the sense he must be left as undisturbed as possible. She shot a dozen pictures, then a dozen more, memorizing his body as she'd never done in life. She shot until her eyes were blurry with the effort. She shot until she knew she had to move on and finish up her job here. The rest of it, the part she couldn't bear.

So she cleaned Bill of the makeup, carefully stripping away the evidence of her intrusion, making him look like any dead man at the scene of an accident. After that, she sat still for ten minutes, composing herself. Then she walked across the room, found the business card near the phone, and called Ted. She knew he wasn't the right person to call first, but she did it anyway.

END

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NOVEL BY FRANK NORRIS

New York Times, April 12, 1914

Review of *Vandover and The Brute*, by Frank Norris, Doubleday and Page, Inc.

Something over a decade ago, William Dean Howells quoted, apropos of Frank Norris' work

'The unfinished window in Aladdin's palace

Unfinished must remain'

and added words of keen regret that it must be so – that a man who had not only shown signs of possessing actual genius, but who in earnestness and singleness of purpose stood out giant-wise among American writers, should have left us, his message only half-delivered. And now, after praise and blame are for the most part alike silent, the long arm of coincidence reaches back across the years and rescues for us a few words more.

Vandover and The Brute was written nearly twenty years ago, almost simultaneously we are told with *McTeague*. Plots and ideas for other novels supervened, and *Vandover* unrevised, and temporarily shelved. At the time of the San Francisco earthquake and fire the manuscript was in a storage warehouse that burned to the ground. It's contents, though, strange to say, thrown out, hit or miss into a vacant lot, escaped injury, and in the course of time the crate containing the manuscript found a resting place in another storehouse, where it remained for years, unlabeled, unidentified, awaiting a claimant. Only recently has the mystery been solved, and the manuscript, from which even the author's name had been cut, possibly by some autograph seeker, has been recognized at unquestionably the long-missing work of the long-dead author.

It is only fair to say, in extenuation of the not infrequent roughnesses and crudenesses in the book, that it appears to be practically the author's first draft. In the ordinary course of events it would have been subjected to much chiseling and polishing before it was presented to the public, which of course, it has not received. The idea of the novel is so big, however, it stands so firmly upon the fundamental things in human nature, that we may well confine ourselves to a consideration of Mister Norris's intent in the matter and let the details of its execution go.

It is the story of a sensitive, artistically inclined boy, with –to begin with—a very small Brute indeed hidden in the recesses of his soul. But there was no one, unfortunately, to warn him it was a Brute – instead, everybody ignored the fact that it was there at all—and it grew bigger. And as it grew bigger the boy, *Vandover*, grew weaker, until finally he became completely Brute, and to all intents and purposes there was no mere *Vandover*. Briefly and baldly, that is all there is to it—but that is all there is to the tragedy of a large part of the human race.

There have been many tales told of the multiple personalities which sleep in us, of which probably the most gripping is Stevenson's famous romance. But all such stories have one fundamental weakness, looked at as moral documents: they are stories of fatality, not of cause and effect. The manifestations of multiple personality bear no relation to the man's voluntary inward life, which is all of him that really matters.

Vandover, on the other hand, is a story of growth, of evolution. In spite of our modern theorists on freedom—who aren't so very modern after all; one Nero was a consistent expositor of the cult—genuine growth, in the sense of desirable growth, is conditioned by inhibition, by restraint. Where these are lacking, something else grows; something invariably ugly, melancholy, and finally destructive—the brute in man. It is not merely a coincidence that every primitive race has its legend of the alternative from a living human being, the wer-animal.

It may be objected that the hero's final lapse into one of the most horrible of all forms of madness is inartistic; that it reduces the parable to too concrete a form, and overemphasizes the already obvious moral. Perhaps; yet one cannot help feeling that in a story of this sort there is something deeper than literary values to consider, and that the author's instinct was right. The figure of Vandover in his seizures, naked, four-footed, running up and down his room, his head low and swinging, is unspeakably frightful, yet it knits up his past and his future in the mind of the reader as nothing else could do. It makes the twilight of history articulate and links its cry of instinctive terror to the warning of the science of today.

One wonders what the reception of this book would have been had Frank Norris devoted himself to its completion and publication twenty years ago. One thing is certain, it would have created a tremendous sensation. At that time, the social evil had not become a fashionable topic of dinner-table conversation, and the episode of Flossie and young Haight, minor as it is, would have been a veritable bombshell. This episode, by the way, is a blemish, not because it dealt with the subject of "Damaged Goods" before "Damaged Goods" was thought of, but because it is unnecessary and out of balance. The main theme of the book, the usurpation of the throne of man's soul by the wolf of desire, is strong enough to stand alone, so strong, indeed, that the intrusion of a distracting motive is as irritating as the buzzing of a fly at a funeral.

It shows how far we have traveled from the standards of twenty years ago that *Vandover and The Brute* will find few readers today to question its morality, or even its propriety. Frank Norris, to whom art meant truth, and truth art, would be glad to know (and perhaps he does) that his first book, the book he must have loved, and to which he perhaps dreamed of returning when he should have perfected a method worthy of it, appears at last in a time which judges it, not by conventional and artificial standards, but on the simple basis of the truth there is in it, and the quality of the technique. The latter, as we have explained before, it is not only kinder but fairer to leave undiscussed, though there are parts, notably the description of the shipwreck, that are superbly written; the truth in it will speak for itself.

END

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McTEAGUE

Part Five

by

FRANK NORRIS

Classic Noir

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

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

The Story So Far:

McTeague, a hulking, slow-witted former car-boy in a silver mine, has opened a sham dentist parlor on Polk Street in late nineteenth century San Francisco. Schooled only by observing an itinerant dental butcher, and some superficial readings of 'Allen's Practical Dentist' books, he engages mostly in pulling teeth and administering gas (most likely ether or nitrous oxide). His best friend, budding socialist Marcus Schouler, introduces him to a distant cousin, Trina Sieppe. Trina has a broken tooth which needs mending. While Trina is waiting to have the tooth fixed, McTeague's housekeeper Maria Macapa sells her a lottery ticket. McTeague determines that Trina's tooth can't be saved, and he has to pull it and the one next to it and fashion replacements for them. It's an operation that takes a couple of weeks and several visits to complete. At a final session, he is forced to place her under anesthesia with gas. While she is asleep, McTeague is seized by an impulse that he fights mightily, but unsuccessfully. Yielding to what he calls his 'brute', McTeague kisses Trina forcefully. Ashamed, he returns to his work, and when Trina awakens she tells him that she 'never felt a thing'. McTeague, perhaps out of guilt, immediately- if somewhat roughly- proposes marriage to Trina. She becomes very upset, refuses his proposal, and begins to vomit.

As it happens, Marcus Schouler is also in love with Trina, a fact which McTeague knew even as he kissed her and asked her to marry him. As he lies in his dental parlor, guilt-ridden, he isn't aware that Maria Macapa is robbing him blind, taking instruments and dental gold foil to sell to a Jewish pawnbroker named Zerkow.

McTeague joins with Marcus one afternoon, while Marcus - who works as an assistant for Grannis, the dog doctor - is walking some of Grannis' 'patients'. Over a couple of beers, Marcus asks McTeague what is bothering him. After considerable persuasion, McTeague confesses that he loves Trina Sieppe. Marcus realizes that McTeague would marry Trina that very afternoon if she would have him, but Marcus does not think that he himself cares for her that much. He tells McTeague that he will 'pull out', and make way for McTeague to court Trina, in the interest of their friendship. McTeague is overcome with emotion.

To cheer his friend up, Marcus plays a trick on him. He demonstrates how he can put an entire billiards ball in his mouth. McTeague is dumbstruck. Marcus takes the ball out, and then challenges McTeague to do the same thing. He does, but the ball becomes stuck. McTeague begins to panic, until the ball comes loose of its own accord. Laughing over the joke, Marcus suggests that McTeague begin his courtship of Trina as soon as possible. In a piece of foreshadowing, Marcus points to two dogs snarling at each other through a picket fence and says, "By damn they don't love each other. Just listen; wouldn't that make a fight if the two got together? Have to try it some day."

Having received his friend's blessing, McTeague begins to court Trina. Because her family is from the Old World, all his dates with her are taken as family outings – picnics at the bay, family suppers at her home, and a memorable trip to Schuetzen Park across the bay. After that trip, he begins to see her every Sunday and Wednesday, and one day she meets him at the train without her family. They take a walk, and McTeague confesses to Trina his deepest desire – to have a large gilded tooth mounted outside his dental parlor to announce to one and all his profession.

Once again McTeague asks Trina to marry him, and he kisses her. Alarmed, she takes off and returns to her home, where she asks her mother what she should do. Trina can't decide whether to marry McTeague – on the one hand she finds herself aroused by him, but she is also frightened by his size and rare outbursts of temper. She realized at last that McTeague had awakened the Woman in her, and that she was, for better or worse, irrevocably bonded to him.

Marcus suggests to McTeague that he take Trina to the theater – something that would be a completely novel experience for both of them. McTeague takes Trina and her family to the theater in San Francisco. Never having seen a vaudeville show before, McTeague is amazed at all the different acts, and only leaves reluctantly when Trina's young brother August wets the pants of his new Lord Fauntleroy suit.

Upon returning to McTeague's dental parlors, where McTeague intends to treat the family to dinner, they are called down by Maria Macapa, who excitedly proclaims that Trina's lottery ticket had the winning number, and that she has won five thousand dollars! Everyone is excited, except for Marcus Schouler, who realizes that by giving Trina up to save his friendship with McTeague, he has also given up any chance of sharing in his cousin's amazing new wealth.

"You fool, you fool, Marcus Schouler! (he exclaims) If you'd kept Trina you'd have had that money. You might have had it yourself. You've thrown away your chance in life -- to give up the girl, yes -- but this," he stamped his foot with rage -- "to throw five thousand dollars out of the window -- to stuff it into the pockets of someone else, when it might have been yours, when you might have had Trina AND the money -- and all for what? Because we were pals . Oh, 'pals' is all right -- but five thousand dollars -- to have played it right into his hands -- God DAMN the luck!"

Over the next two months, Trina and McTeague prepare for their impending wedding. McTeague has big plans for the five thousand dollars Trina won in the lottery—a new house, lavish furnishings, feasts—but it soon becomes evident that Trina is frugal, and satisfied with a small monthly dividend from investing the money. She finally invests in her Uncle Oelbermann's toy store in the Mission District, at an interest rate of six percent.

Marcus Schouler, in the mean time, has grown more and more resentful about losing his chance at Trina's money. He picks arguments with McTeague, claiming that the dentist owes him money, and then refusing it when McTeague offers to pay him back. McTeague is distressed and puzzled over what he might have done to insult his dear friend. Finally, during one particularly vehement argument in a bar, Marcus demands part of the five thousand dollars as a reward for bringing McTeague and Trina together. When McTeague refuses, Marcus breaks McTeague's pipe, and throws a knife at him.

Trina has a surprise for McTeague, however. She brings him a present one day—a huge gilded tooth to go over the door of his dentist studios, the very tooth he had dreamed of placing there.

On the eve of the wedding, Trina's mother brings McTeague and Marcus together in her home and demands that they reconcile. They do so, and become friends again. Trina is still upset at Marcus for demanding part of the money, and declares, "It's mine! All mine!" She immediately relents, however, and amends her declaration by saying, "That is, it's ours."

McTeague and Trina are married, and Marcus makes quite a show of congratulating Trina on her nuptials. However, when it comes time for Trina's family to return to Oakland, she panics, and tells her mother that she is afraid. Her mother attempts to comfort her, and then the family leaves her alone with McTeague. When he attempts to embrace her, she panics again, and can only tell him that she is frightened by the sheer size and power of him. He professes his love for her again, and she yields willingly to him.

As she embraces him, she says, "You must be good to me -- very, very good to me, dear -- for you're all that I have in the world now."

It doesn't take long for problems to arise in McTeague's and Trina's marriage, and—as is often the case—their troubles tend to revolve around money. Trina has a large nest egg of over five thousand dollars, but also seems very reluctant to spend any of it. Fearful of losing her money, she has become miserly. McTeague finds a house they can rent, for thirty-five dollars a month plus water, but Trina says that they can't afford it, despite the fact that McTeague's dentist parlors are flourishing. McTeague signs a contract for the house anyway, which infuriates Trina. They have a terrible argument. Later, regretting her part in it, she decides to give McTeague ten dollars. However, when she pulls out her money from her bedroom chest, she finds rationalizations not to part with a single coin.

McTeague recovers quickly from the conflict, and suggests that they go to Scheutzen Park for another picnic. The picnic turns into a multi-family affair, and even Marcus Schouler comes along. The men decide to engage in a wrestling contest. When all the preliminary matches are completed, the only two men left to wrestle for the win are McTeague and Marcus. They wrestle, and McTeague thinks he has pinned Marcus. As he celebrates, Marcus—who prides himself on his wrestling ability and is enraged that the simple giant dentist might have bettered him, protests that it was not a legitimate pin, and that McTeague must give him a second chance. The other men agree, and McTeague and Marcus wrestle a second time. This time, Marcus bites of the lobe of McTeague's ear. McTeague, whose brutish nature lies just under his placid, good-natured surface, loses control and becomes furious, intending to kill Marcus. The other men and Trina try to intervene, as McTeague grasps Marcus's arm and snaps it like a twig. Finally, Trina is able to reach McTeague by appealing to his medical expertise, asking him how to stop the bleeding from his damaged ear. The picnic breaks into two groups—one working on setting Marcus's broken arm, and the other watching Trina attending to McTeague's bleeding ear.

All at once, Trina's cousin Selina begins to giggle hysterically, and cries out with a peal of laughter: "Oh, what a way for our picnic to end!"

Chapter 12

"Now, then, Maria," said Zerkow, his cracked, strained voice just rising above a whisper, hitching his chair closer to the table, "now, then, my girl, let's have it all over again. Tell us about the gold plate -- the service. Begin with, 'There were over a hundred pieces and every one of them gold.'"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Zerkow," answered Maria. "There never was no gold plate, no gold service. I guess you must have dreamed it."

Maria and the red-headed Polish Jew had been married about a month after the McTeague's picnic which had ended in such lamentable fashion. Zerkow had taken Maria home to his wretched hovel in the alley back of the flat, and the flat had been obliged to get another maid of all work. Time passed, a month, six months, a whole year went by. At length Maria gave birth to a child, a wretched, sickly child, with not even strength enough nor wits enough to cry. At the time of its birth Maria was out of her mind, and continued in a state of dementia for nearly ten days. She recovered just in time to make the arrangements for the baby's burial. Neither Zerkow nor Maria was much affected by either the birth or the death of this little child. Zerkow had welcomed it with pronounced disfavor, since it had a mouth to be fed and wants to be provided for. Maria was out of her head so much of the time that she could scarcely remember how it looked when alive. The child was a mere incident in their lives, a thing that had come undesired and had gone

unregretted. It had not even a name; a strange, hybrid little being, come and gone within a fortnight's time, yet combining in its puny little body the blood of the Hebrew, the Pole, and the Spaniard.

But the birth of this child had peculiar consequences. Maria came out of her dementia, and in a few days the household settled itself again to its sordid regime and Maria went about her duties as usual. Then one evening, about a week after the child's burial, Zerkow had asked Maria to tell him the story of the famous service of gold plate for the hundredth time.

Zerkow had come to believe in this story infallibly. He was immovably persuaded that at one time Maria or Maria's people had possessed these hundred golden dishes. In his perverted mind the hallucination had developed still further. Not only had that service of gold plate once existed, but it existed now, entire, intact; not a single burnished golden piece of it was missing. It was somewhere, somebody had it, locked away in that leather trunk with its quilted lining and round brass locks. It was to be searched for and secured, to be fought for, to be gained at all hazards. Maria must know where it was; by dint of questioning, Zerkow would surely get the information from her. Some day, if only he was persistent, he would hit upon the right combination of questions, the right suggestion that would disentangle Maria's confused recollections. Maria would tell him where the thing was kept, was concealed, was buried, and he would go to that place and secure it, and all that wonderful gold would be his forever and forever. This service of plate had come to be Zerkow's mania.

On this particular evening, about a week after the child's burial, in the wretched back room of the Junk shop, Zerkow had made Maria sit down to the table opposite him -- the whiskey bottle and the red glass tumbler with its broken base between them -- and had said:

"Now, then, Maria, tell us that story of the gold dishes again."

Maria stared at him, an expression of perplexity coming into her face.

"What gold dishes?" said she.

"The ones your people used to own in Central America. Come on, Maria, begin, begin." The Jew craned himself forward, his lean fingers clawing eagerly at his lips.

"What gold plate?" said Maria, frowning at him as she drank her whiskey. "What gold plate? I don't know what you're talking about, Zerkow."

Zerkow sat back in his chair, staring at her.

"Why, your people's gold dishes, what they used to eat off of. You've told me about it a hundred times."

"You're crazy, Zerkow," said Maria. "Push the bottle here, will you?"

"Come, now," insisted Zerkow, sweating with desire, "come, now, my girl, don't be a fool; let's have it, let's have it. Begin now, 'There were more'n a hundred pieces, and every one of 'em gold.' Oh, YOU know; come on, come on."

"I don't remember nothing of the kind," protested Maria, reaching for the bottle. Zerkow snatched it from her.

"You fool!" he wheezed, trying to raise his broken voice to a shout. "You fool! Don't you dare try an' cheat ME, or I'll DO for you. You know about the gold plate, and you know where it is." Suddenly he pitched his voice at the prolonged rasping shout with which he made his street cry. He rose to his feet, his long, prehensile fingers curled into fists. He was menacing, terrible in his rage. He leaned over Maria, his fists in her face.

"I believe you've got it!" he yelled. "I believe you've got it, an' are hiding it from me. Where is it, where is it? Is it here?"

he rolled his eyes wildly about the room. "Hey? hey?" he went on, shaking Maria by the shoulders. "Where is it? Is it here? Tell me where it is. Tell me, or I'll do for you!"

"It ain't here," cried Maria, wrenching from him. "It ain't anywhere. What gold plate? What are you talking about? I don't remember nothing about no gold plate at all."

No, Maria did not remember. The trouble and turmoil of her mind consequent upon the birth of her child seemed to have readjusted her disordered ideas upon this point. Her mania had come to a crisis, which in subsiding had cleared her brain of its one illusion. She did not remember. Or it was possible that the gold plate she had once remembered had had some foundation in fact, that her recital of its splendors had been truth, sound and sane. It was possible that now her FORGETFULNESS of it was some form of brain trouble, a relic of the dementia of childbirth. At all events Maria did not remember; the idea of the gold plate had passed entirely out of her mind, and it was now Zerkow who labored under its hallucination. It was now Zerkow, the raker of the city's muck heap, the searcher after gold, that saw that wonderful service in the eye of his perverted mind. It was he who could now describe it in a language almost eloquent. Maria had been content merely to remember it; but Zerkow's avarice goaded him to a belief that it was still in existence, hid somewhere, perhaps in that very house, stowed away there by Maria. For it stood to reason, didn't it, that Maria could not have described it with such wonderful accuracy and such careful detail unless she had seen it recently -- the day before, perhaps, or that very day, or that very hour, that very HOUR?

"Look out for yourself," he whispered, hoarsely, to his wife. "Look out for yourself, my girl. I'll hunt for it, and hunt for it, and hunt for it, and some day I'll find it -- I will, you'll see -- I'll find it, I'll find it; and if I don't, I'll find a way that'll make you tell me where it is. I'll make you speak -- believe me, I will, I will, my girl -- trust me for that."

And at night Maria would sometimes wake to find Zerkow gone from the bed, and would see him burrowing into some corner by the light of his dark-lantern and would hear him mumbling to himself: "There were more'n a hundred pieces, and every one of 'em gold -- when the leather trunk was opened it fair dazzled your eyes -- why, just that punch-bowl was worth a fortune, I guess; solid, solid, heavy, rich, pure gold, nothun but gold, gold, heaps and heaps of it -- what a glory! I'll find it yet, I'll find it. It's here somewheres, hid somewheres in this house."

At length his continued ill success began to exasperate him. One day he took his whip from his junk wagon and thrashed Maria with it, gasping the while, "Where is it, you beast? Where is it? Tell me where it is; I'll make you speak."

"I don' know, I don' know," cried Maria, dodging his blows. "I'd tell you, Zerkow, if I knew; but I don' know nothing about it. How can I tell you if I don' know?"

Then one evening matters reached a crisis. Marcus Schouler was in his room, the room in the flat just over McTeague's "Parlors" which he had always occupied. It was between eleven and twelve o'clock. The vast house was quiet; Polk Street outside was very still, except for the occasional whirr and trundle of a passing cable car and the persistent calling of ducks and geese in the deserted market directly opposite. Marcus was in his shirt sleeves, perspiring and swearing with exertion as he tried to get all his belongings into an absurdly inadequate trunk. The room was in great confusion. It looked as though Marcus was about to move. He stood in front of his trunk, his precious silk hat in its hat-box in his hand. He was raging at the perverseness of a pair of boots that refused to fit in his trunk, no matter how he arranged them.

"I've tried you SO, and I've tried you SO," he exclaimed fiercely, between his teeth, "and you won't go." He began to swear horribly, grabbing at the boots with his free hand. "Pretty soon I won't take you at all; I won't, for a fact."

He was interrupted by a rush of feet upon the back stairs and a clamorous pounding upon his door. He opened it to let in Maria Macapa, her hair dishevelled and her eyes starting with terror.

"Oh, MISTER Schouler," she gasped, "lock the door quick. Don't let him get me. He's got a knife, and he says sure he's going to do for me, if I don't tell him where it is."

"Who has? What has? Where is what?" shouted Marcus, flaming with excitement upon the instant. He opened the door and peered down the dark hall, both fists clenched, ready to fight -- he did not know whom, and he did not know why.

"It's Zerkow," wailed Maria, pulling him back into the room and bolting the door, "and he's got a knife as long as THAT. Oh, my Lord, here he comes now! Ain't that him? Listen."

Zerkow was coming up the stairs, calling for Maria.

"Don't you let him get me, will you, Mister Schouler?" gasped Maria.

"I'll break him in two," shouted Marcus, livid with rage. "Think I'm afraid of his knife?"

"I know where you are," cried Zerkow, on the landing outside. "You're in Schouler's room. What are you doing in Schouler's room at this time of night? Come outa there; you oughta be ashamed. I'll do for you yet, my girl. Come outa there once, an' see if I don't."

"I'll do for you myself, you dirty Jew," shouted Marcus, unbolting the door and running out into the hall.

"I want my wife," exclaimed the Jew, backing down the stairs. "What's she mean by running away from me and going into your room?"

"Look out, he's got a knife!" cried Maria through the crack of the door.

"Ah, there you are. Come outa that, and come back home," exclaimed Zerkow.

"Get outa here yourself," cried Marcus, advancing on him angrily. "Get outa here."

"Maria's gotta come too."

"Get outa here," vociferated Marcus, "an' put up that knife. I see it; you needn't try an' hide it behind your leg. Give it to me, anyhow," he shouted suddenly, and before Zerkow was aware, Marcus had wrenched it away. "Now, get outa here."

Zerkow backed away, peering and peeping over Marcus's shoulder.

"I want Maria."

"Get outa here. Get along out, or I'll PUT you out." The street door closed. The Jew was gone.

"Huh!" snorted Marcus, swelling with arrogance. "Huh! Think I'm afraid of his knife? I ain't afraid of ANYBODY," he shouted pointedly, for McTeague and his wife, roused by the clamor, were peering over the banisters from the landing above. "Not of anybody," repeated Marcus.

Maria came out into the hall.

"Is he gone? Is he sure gone?"

"What was the trouble?" inquired Marcus, suddenly.

"I woke up about an hour ago," Maria explained, "and Zerkow wasn't in bed; maybe he hadn't come to bed at all. He was down on his knees by the sink, and he'd pried up some

boards off the floor and was digging there. He had his dark-lantern. He was digging with that knife, I guess, and all the time he kept mumbling to himself, 'More'n a hundred pieces, an' every one of 'em gold; more'n a hundred pieces, an' every one of 'em gold.' Then, all of a sudden, he caught sight of me. I was sitting up in bed, and he jumped up and came at me with his knife, an' he says, 'Where is it? Where is it? I know you got it hid somewhere. Where is it? Tell me or I'll knife you.' I kind of fooled him and kept him off till I got my wrapper on, an' then I run out. I didn't dare stay."

"Well, what did you tell him about your gold dishes for in the first place?" cried Marcus.

"I never told him," protested Maria, with the greatest energy. "I never told him; I never heard of any gold dishes. I don't know where he got the idea; he must be crazy."

By this time Trina and McTeague, Old Grannis, and little Miss Baker -- all the lodgers on the upper floors of the flat -- had gathered about Maria. Trina and the dentist, who had gone to bed, were partially dressed, and Trina's enormous mane of black hair was hanging in two thick braids far down her back. But, late as it was, Old Grannis and the retired dressmaker had still been up and about when Maria had aroused them.

"Why, Maria," said Trina, "you always used to tell us about your gold dishes. You said your folks used to have them."

"Never, never, never!" exclaimed Maria, vehemently. "You folks must all be crazy. I never HEARD of any gold dishes."

"Well," spoke up Miss Baker, "you're a queer girl, Maria; that's all I can say." She left the group and returned to her room. Old Grannis watched her go from the corner of his eye, and in a few moments followed her, leaving the group as unnoticed as he had joined it. By degrees the flat quieted down again. Trina and McTeague returned to their rooms.

"I guess I'll go back now," said Maria. "He's all right now. I ain't afraid of him so long as he ain't got his knife."

"Well, say," Marcus called to her as she went down stairs, "if he gets funny again, you just yell out; I'LL hear you. I won't let him hurt you."

Marcus went into his room again and resumed his wrangle with the refractory boots. His eye fell on Zerkow's knife, a long, keen-bladed hunting-knife, with a buckhorn handle. "I'll take you along with me," he exclaimed, suddenly. "I'll just need you where I'm going."

Meanwhile, old Miss Baker was making tea to calm her nerves after the excitement of Maria's incursion. This evening she went so far as to make tea for two, laying an extra place on the other side of her little teatable, setting out a cup and saucer and one of the Gorham silver spoons. Close upon the other side of the partition Old Grannis bound uncut numbers of the "Nation."

"Do you know what I think, Mac?" said Trina, when the couple had returned to their rooms. "I think Marcus is going away."

"What? What?" muttered the dentist, very sleepy and stupid, "what you saying? What's that about Marcus?"

"I believe Marcus has been packing up, the last two or three days. I wonder if he's going away."

"Who's going away?" said McTeague, blinking at her.

"Oh, go to bed," said Trina, pushing him goodnaturedly. "Mac, you're the stupidest man I ever knew."

But it was true. Marcus was going away. Trina received a letter the next morning from her mother. The carpet-cleaning and upholstery business in which Mr. Sieppe had involved himself was going from bad to worse. Mr. Sieppe had even been obliged to put a mortgage upon their house. Mrs. Sieppe didn't know what was to become of them all. Her husband had even begun to talk of emigrating to New Zealand. Meanwhile, she informed Trina that Mr. Sieppe had finally come across a man with whom Marcus could "go in with on a ranch," a cattle ranch in the southeastern portion of the State. Her ideas were vague upon the subject, but she knew that Marcus was wildly enthusiastic at the prospect, and was expected down before the end of the month. In the meantime, could Trina send them fifty dollars?

"Marcus IS going away, after all, Mac," said Trina to her husband that day as he came out of his "Parlors" and sat down to the lunch of sausages, mashed potatoes, and chocolate in the sitting-room.

"Huh?" said the dentist, a little confused. "Who's going away? Schouler going away? Why's Schouler going away?"

Trina explained. "Oh!" growled McTeague, behind his thick mustache, "he can go far before I'LL stop him."

"And, say, Mac," continued Trina, pouring the chocolate, "what do you think? Mamma wants me -- wants us to send her fifty dollars. She says they're hard up."

"Well," said the dentist, after a moment, "well, I guess we can send it, can't we?"

"Oh, that's easy to say," complained Trina, her little chin in the air, her small pale lips pursed. "I wonder if mamma thinks we're millionaires?"

"Trina, you're getting to be regular stingy," muttered McTeague. "You're getting worse and worse every day."

"But fifty dollars is fifty dollars, Mac. Just think how long it takes you to earn fifty dollars. Fifty dollars! That's two months of our interest."

"Well," said McTeague, easily, his mouth full of mashed potato, "you got a lot saved up."

Upon every reference to that little hoard in the brass match-safe and chamois-skin bag at the bottom of her trunk, Trina bridled on the instant.

"Don't TALK that way, Mac. 'A lot of money.' What do you call a lot of money? I don't believe I've got fifty dollars saved."

"Hoh!" exclaimed McTeague. "Hoh! I guess you got nearer a hundred AN' fifty. That's what I guess YOU got."

"I've NOT, I've NOT," declared Trina, "and you know I've not. I wish mamma hadn't asked me for any money. Why can't she be a little more economical? I manage all right. No, no, I can't possibly afford to send her fifty."

"Oh, pshaw! What WILL you do, then?" grumbled her husband.

"I'll send her twenty-five this month, and tell her I'll send the rest as soon as I can afford it."

"Trina, you're a regular little miser," said McTeague.

"I don't care," answered Trina, beginning to laugh. "I guess I am, but I can't help it, and it's a good fault."

Trina put off sending this money for a couple of weeks, and her mother made no mention of it in her next letter. "Oh, I guess if she wants it so bad," said Trina, "she'll speak about it again." So she again postponed the sending of it. Day by day she put it off. When her mother asked her for it a second time, it seemed harder than ever for Trina to part with even half the sum requested. She answered her mother, telling her that they were very hard up themselves for that month, but that she would send down the amount in a few weeks.

"I'll tell you what we'll do, Mac," she said to her husband, "you send half and I'll send half; we'll send twenty-five dollars altogether. Twelve and a half apiece. That's an idea. How will that do?"

"Sure, sure," McTeague had answered, giving her the money. Trina sent McTeague's twelve dollars, but never sent the twelve that was to be her share. One day the dentist happened to ask her about it.

"You sent that twenty-five to your mother, didn't you?" said he.

"Oh, long ago," answered Trina, without thinking.

In fact, Trina never allowed herself to think very much of this affair. And, in fact, another matter soon came to engross her attention.

One Sunday evening Trina and her husband were in their sitting-room together. It was dark, but the lamp had not been lit. McTeague had brought up some bottles of beer from the "Wein Stube" on the ground floor, where the branch post-office used to be. But they had not opened the beer. It was a warm evening in summer. Trina was sitting on McTeague's lap in the bay window, and had looped back the Nottingham curtains so the two could look out into the darkened street and watch the moon coming up over the glass roof of the huge public baths. On occasions they sat like this for an hour or so, "philandering," Trina cuddling herself down upon McTeague's enormous body, rubbing her cheek against the grain of his unshaven chin, kissing the bald spot on the top of his head, or putting her fingers into his ears and eyes. At times, a brusque access of passion would seize upon her, and, with a nervous little sigh, she would clasp his thick red neck in both her small arms and whisper in his ear:

"Do you love me, Mac, dear? Love me BIG, BIG? Sure, do you love me as much as you did when we were married?"

Puzzled, McTeague would answer: "Well, you know it, don't you, Trina?"

"But I want you to SAY so; say so always and always."

"Well, I do, of course I do."

"Say it, then."

"Well, then, I love you."

"But you don't say it of your own accord."

"Well, what -- what -- what -- I don't understand," stammered the dentist, bewildered.

There was a knock on the door. Confused and embarrassed, as if they were not married, Trina scrambled off McTeague's lap, hastening to light the lamp, whispering, "Put on your coat, Mac, and smooth your hair," and making gestures for him to put the beer bottles out of sight. She opened the door and uttered an exclamation.

"Why, Cousin Mark!" she said. McTeague glared at him, struck speechless, confused beyond expression. Marcus Schouler, perfectly at his ease, stood in the doorway, smiling with great affability.

"Say," he remarked, "can I come in?"

Taken all aback, Trina could only answer:

"Why -- I suppose so. Yes, of course -- come in."

"Yes, yes, come in," exclaimed the dentist, suddenly, speaking without thought. "Have some beer?" he added, struck with an idea.

"No, thanks, Doctor," said Marcus, pleasantly.

McTeague and Trina were puzzled. What could it all mean? Did Marcus want to become reconciled to his enemy? "I know." Trina said to herself. "He's going away, and he wants to borrow some money. He won't get a penny, not a penny." She set her teeth together hard.

"Well," said Marcus, "how's business, Doctor?"

"Oh," said McTeague, uneasily, "oh, I don' know. I guess -- I guess," he broke off in helpless embarrassment. They had all sat down by now. Marcus continued, holding his hat and his cane -- the black wand of ebony with the gold top presented to him by the "Improvement Club."

"Ah!" said he, wagging his head and looking about the sitting-room, "you people have got the best fixed rooms in the whole flat. Yes, sir; you have, for a fact." He glanced from the lithograph framed in gilt and red plush -- the two little girls at their prayers -- to the "I'm Grandpa" and "I'm Grandma" pictures, noted the clean white matting and the gay worsted tidies over the chair backs, and appeared to contemplate in ecstasy the framed photograph of McTeague and Trina in their wedding finery.

"Well, you two are pretty happy together, ain't you?" said he, smiling good-humoredly.

"Oh, we don't complain," answered Trina.

"Plenty of money, lots to do, everything fine, hey?"

"We've got lots to do," returned Trina, thinking to head him off, "but we've not got lots of money."

But evidently Marcus wanted no money.

"Well, Cousin Trina," he said, rubbing his knee, "I'm going away."

"Yes, mamma wrote me; you're going on a ranch."

"I'm going in ranching with an English duck," corrected Marcus. "Mr. Sieppe has fixed things. We'll see if we can't raise some cattle. I know a lot about horses, and he's ranched some before -- this English duck. And then I'm going to keep my eye open for a political chance down there. I got some introductions from the President of the Improvement Club. I'll work things somehow, oh, sure."

"How long you going to be gone?" asked Trina.

Marcus stared.

"Why, I ain't EVER coming back," he vociferated. "I'm going to-morrow, and I'm going for good. I come to say good-by."

Marcus stayed for upwards of an hour that evening. He talked on easily and agreeably, addressing himself as much to McTeague as to Trina. At last he rose.

"Well, good-by, Doc."

"Good-by, Marcus," returned McTeague. The two shook hands.

"Guess we won't ever see each other again," continued Marcus. "But good luck to you, Doc. Hope some day you'll have the patients standing in line on the stairs."

"Huh! I guess so, I guess so," said the dentist.

"Good-by, Cousin Trina."

"Good-by, Marcus," answered Trina. "You be sure to remember me to mamma, and papa, and everybody. I'm going to make two great big sets of Noah's ark animals for the twins on their next birthday; August is too old for toys. But you can tell the twins that I'll make them some great big animals. Good-by, success to you, Marcus."

"Good-by, good-by. Good luck to you both."

"Good-by, Cousin Mark."

"Good-by, Marcus."

He was gone.

Chapter 13

One morning about a week after Marcus had left for the southern part of the State, McTeague found an oblong letter thrust through the letter-drop of the door of his "Parlors." The address was typewritten. He opened it. The letter had been sent from the City Hall and was stamped in one corner with the seal of the State of California, very official; the form and file numbers superscribed.

McTeague had been making fillings when this letter arrived. He was in his "Parlors," pottering over his movable rack underneath the bird cage in the bay window. He was making "blocks" to be used in large proximal cavities and "cylinders" for commencing fillings. He heard the postman's step in the hall and saw the envelopes begin to shuttle

themselves through the slit of his letter-drop. Then came the fat oblong envelope, with its official seal, that dropped flatwise to the floor with a sodden, dull impact.

The dentist put down the broach and scissors and gathered up his mail. There were four letters altogether. One was for Trina, in Selina's "elegant" handwriting; another was an advertisement of a new kind of operating chair for dentists; the third was a card from a milliner on the next block, announcing an opening; and the fourth, contained in the fat oblong envelope, was a printed form with blanks left for names and dates, and addressed to McTeague, from an office in the City Hall. McTeague read it through laboriously. "I don' know, I don' know," he muttered, looking stupidly at the rifle manufacturer's calendar. Then he heard Trina, from the kitchen, singing as she made a clattering noise with the breakfast dishes. "I guess I'll ask Trina about it," he muttered.

He went through the suite, by the sitting-room, where the sun was pouring in through the looped backed Nottingham curtains upon the clean white matting and the varnished surface of the melodeon, passed on through the bedroom, with its framed lithographs of round-cheeked English babies and alert fox terriers, and came out into the brick-paved kitchen. The kitchen was clean as a new whistle; the freshly blackened cook stove glowed like a negro's hide; the tins and porcelain-lined stew-pans might have been of silver and of ivory. Trina was in the centre of the room, wiping off, with a damp sponge, the oilcloth table-cover, on which they had breakfasted. Never had she looked so pretty. Early though it was, her enormous tiara of swarthy hair was neatly combed and coiled, not a pin was so much as loose. She wore a blue calico skirt with a white figure, and a belt of imitation alligator skin clasped around her small, firmly-corseted waist; her shirt waist was of pink linen, so new and crisp that it crackled with every movement, while around the collar, tied in a neat knot, was one of McTeague's lawn ties which she had appropriated. Her sleeves were carefully rolled up almost to her shoulders, and nothing could have been more delicious than the sight of her small round arms, white as milk, moving back and forth as she sponged the table-cover, a faint touch of pink coming and going at the elbows as they bent and straightened. She looked up quickly as her husband entered, her narrow eyes alight, her adorable little chin in the air; her lips rounded and opened with the last words of her song, so that one could catch a glint of gold in the fillings of her upper teeth.

The whole scene -- the clean kitchen and its clean brick floor; the smell of coffee that lingered in the air; Trina herself, fresh as if from a bath, and singing at her work; the morning sun, striking obliquely through the white muslin half-curtain of the window and spanning the little kitchen with a bridge of golden mist -- gave off, as it were, a note of gayety that was not to be resisted. Through the opened top of the window came the noises of Polk Street, already long awake. One heard the chanting of street cries, the shrill calling of children on their way to school, the merry rattle of a butcher's cart, the brisk noise of hammering, or the occasional prolonged roll of a cable car trundling heavily past, with a vibrant whirring of its jostled glass and the joyous clanging of its bells.

"What is it, Mac, dear?" said Trina.

McTeague shut the door behind him with his heel and handed her the letter. Trina read it through. Then suddenly her small hand gripped tightly upon the sponge, so that the water started from it and dripped in a little pattering deluge upon the bricks.

The letter -- or rather printed notice -- informed McTeague that he had never received a diploma from a dental college, and that in consequence he was forbidden to practise his profession any longer. A legal extract bearing upon the case was attached in small type.

"Why, what's all this?" said Trina, calmly, without thought as yet.

"I don' know, I don' know," answered her husband.

"You can't practise any longer," continued Trina, -- "'is herewith prohibited and enjoined from further continuing -- -- '" She re-read the extract, her forehead lifting and puckering. She put the sponge carefully away in its wire rack over the sink, and drew up a chair to the table, spreading out the notice before her. "Sit down," she said to McTeague. "Draw up to the table here, Mac, and let's see what this is."

"I got it this morning," murmured the dentist. "It just now came. I was making some fillings -- there, in the 'Parlors,' in the window -- and the postman shoved it through the door. I thought it was a number of the 'American System of Dentistry' at first, and when I'd opened it and looked at it I thought I'd better -- -- "

"Say, Mac," interrupted Trina, looking up from the notice, "DIDN'T you ever go to a dental college?"

"Huh? What? What?" exclaimed McTeague.

"How did you learn to be a dentist? Did you go to a college?"

"I went along with a fellow who came to the mine once. My mother sent me. We used to go from one camp to another. I sharpened his excavators for him, and put up his notices in the towns -- stuck them up in the post-offices and on the doors of the Odd Fellows' halls. He had a wagon."

"But didn't you never go to a college?"

"Huh? What? College? No, I never went. I learned from the fellow."

Trina rolled down her sleeves. She was a little paler than usual. She fastened the buttons into the cuffs and said:

"But do you know you can't practise unless you're graduated from a college? You haven't the right to call yourself, 'doctor.'"

McTeague stared a moment; then:

"Why, I've been practising ten years. More -- nearly twelve."

"But it's the law."

"What's the law?"

"That you can't practise, or call yourself doctor, unless you've got a diploma."

"What's that -- a diploma?"

"I don't know exactly. It's a kind of paper that -- that -- oh, Mac, we're ruined." Trina's voice rose to a cry.

"What do you mean, Trina? Ain't I a dentist? Ain't I a doctor? Look at my sign, and the gold tooth you gave me. Why, I've been practising nearly twelve years."

Trina shut her lips tightly, cleared her throat, and pretended to resettle a hair-pin at the back of her head.

"I guess it isn't as bad as that," she said, very quietly. "Let's read this again. 'Herewith prohibited and enjoined from further continuing -- --'" She read to the end.

"Why, it isn't possible," she cried. "They can't mean -- oh, Mac, I do believe -- pshaw!" she exclaimed, her pale face flushing. "They don't know how good a dentist you are. What difference does a diploma make, if you're a first-class dentist? I guess that's all right. Mac, didn't you ever go to a dental college?"

"No," answered McTeague, doggedly. "What was the good? I learned how to operate; wa'n't that enough?"

"Hark," said Trina, suddenly. "Wasn't that the bell of your office?" They had both heard the jangling of the bell that McTeague had hung over the door of his "Parlors." The dentist looked at the kitchen clock.

"That's Vanovitch," said he. "He's a plumber round on Sutter Street. He's got an appointment with me to have a bicuspid pulled. I got to go back to work." He rose.

"But you can't," cried Trina, the back of her hand upon her lips, her eyes brimming. "Mac, don't you see? Can't you understand? You've got to stop. Oh, it's dreadful! Listen." She hurried around the table to him and caught his arm in both her hands.

"Huh?" growled McTeague, looking at her with a puzzled frown.

"They'll arrest you. You'll go to prison. You can't work -- can't work any more. We're ruined."

Vanovitch was pounding on the door of the sitting-room.

"He'll be gone in a minute," exclaimed McTeague.

"Well, let him go. Tell him to go; tell him to come again."

"Why, he's got an APPOINTMENT with me," exclaimed McTeague, his hand upon the door.

Trina caught him back. "But, Mac, you ain't a dentist any longer; you ain't a doctor. You haven't the right to work. You never went to a dental college."

"Well, suppose I never went to a college, ain't I a dentist just the same? Listen, he's pounding there again. No, I'm going, sure."

"Well, of course, go," said Trina, with sudden reaction. "It ain't possible they'll make you stop. If you're a good dentist, that's all that's wanted. Go on, Mac; hurry, before he goes."

McTeague went out, closing the door. Trina stood for a moment looking intently at the bricks at her feet. Then she returned to the table, and sat down again before the notice, and, resting her head in both her fists, read it yet another time. Suddenly the conviction seized upon her that it was all true. McTeague would be obliged to stop work, no matter how good a dentist he was. But why had the authorities at the City Hall waited this long before serving the notice? All at once Trina snapped her fingers, with a quick flash of intelligence.

"It's Marcus that's done it," she cried.

It was like a clap of thunder. McTeague was stunned, stupefied. He said nothing. Never in his life had he been so taciturn. At times he did not seem to hear Trina when she spoke to him, and often she had to shake him by the shoulder to arouse his attention. He would sit apart in his "Parlors," turning the notice about in his enormous clumsy fingers, reading it stupidly over and over again. He couldn't understand. What had a clerk at the City Hall to do with him? Why couldn't they let him alone?

"Oh, what's to become of us NOW?" wailed Trina. "What's to become of us now? We're paupers, beggars -- and all so sudden." And once, in a quick, inexplicable fury, totally unlike anything that McTeague had noticed in her before, she had started up, with fists and teeth shut tight, and had cried, "Oh, if you'd only KILLED Marcus Schouler that time he fought you!"

McTeague had continued his work, acting from sheer force of habit; his sluggish, deliberate nature, methodical, obstinate, refusing to adapt itself to the new conditions.

"Maybe Marcus was only trying to scare us," Trina had said. "How are they going to know whether you're practising or not?"

"I got a mould to make to-morrow," McTeague said, "and Vanovitch, that plumber round on Sutter Street, he's coming again at three."

"Well, you go right ahead," Trina told him, decisively; "you go right ahead and make the mould, and pull every tooth in Vanovitch's head if you want to. Who's going to know? Maybe they just sent that notice as a matter of form. Maybe Marcus got that paper and filled it in himself."

The two would lie awake all night long, staring up into the dark, talking, talking, talking.

"Haven't you got any right to practise if you've not been to a dental college, Mac? Didn't you ever go?" Trina would ask again and again.

"No, no," answered the dentist, "I never went. I learnt from the fellow I was apprenticed to. I don't know anything about a dental college. Ain't I got a right to do as I like?" he suddenly exclaimed.

"If you know your profession, isn't that enough?" cried Trina.

"Sure, sure," growled McTeague. "I ain't going to stop for them."

"You go right on," Trina said, "and I bet you won't hear another word about it."

"Suppose I go round to the City Hall and see them," hazarded McTeague.

"No, no, don't you do it, Mac," exclaimed Trina. "Because, if Marcus has done this just to scare you, they won't know anything about it there at the City Hall; but they'll begin to ask you questions, and find out that you never HAD graduated from a dental college, and you'd be just as bad off as ever."

"Well, I ain't going to quit for just a piece of paper," declared the dentist. The phrase stuck to him. All day long he went about their rooms or continued at his work in the "Parlors," growling behind his thick mustache: "I ain't going to quit for just a piece of paper. No, I ain't going to quit for just a piece of paper. Sure not."

The days passed, a week went by, McTeague continued his work as usual. They heard no more from the City Hall, but the suspense of the situation was harrowing. Trina was actually sick with it. The terror of the thing was ever at their elbows, going to bed with them, sitting down with them at breakfast in the kitchen, keeping them company all through the day. Trina dared not think of what would be their fate if the income derived from McTeague's practice was suddenly taken from them. Then they would have to fall back on the interest of her lottery money and the pittance she derived from the manufacture of the Noah's ark animals, a little over thirty dollars a month. No, no, it was

not to be thought of. It could not be that their means of livelihood was to be thus stricken from them.

A fortnight went by. "I guess we're all right, Mac," Trina allowed herself to say. "It looks as though we were all right. How are they going to tell whether you're practising or not?"

That day a second and much more peremptory notice was served upon McTeague by an official in person. Then suddenly Trina was seized with a panic terror, unreasoned, instinctive. If McTeague persisted they would both be sent to a prison, she was sure of it; a place where people were chained to the wall, in the dark, and fed on bread and water.

"Oh, Mac, you've got to quit," she wailed. "You can't go on. They can make you stop. Oh, why didn't you go to a dental college? Why didn't you find out that you had to have a college degree? And now we're paupers, beggars. We've got to leave here -- leave this flat where I've been -- where WE'VE been so happy, and sell all the pretty things; sell the pictures and the melodeon, and -- Oh, it's too dreadful!"

"Huh? Huh? What? What?" exclaimed the dentist, bewildered. "I ain't going to quit for just a piece of paper. Let them put me out. I'll show them. They -- they can't make small of me."

"Oh, that's all very fine to talk that way, but you'll have to quit."

"Well, we ain't paupers," McTeague suddenly exclaimed, an idea entering his mind. "We've got our money yet. You've got your five thousand dollars and the money you've been saving up. People ain't paupers when they've got over five thousand dollars."

"What do you mean, Mac?" cried Trina, apprehensively.

"Well, we can live on THAT money until -- until -- until -- " he broke off with an uncertain movement of his shoulders, looking about him stupidly.

"Until WHEN?" cried Trina. "There ain't ever going to be any 'until.' We've got the INTEREST of that five thousand and we've got what Uncle Oelbermann gives me, a little over thirty dollars a month, and that's all we've got. You'll have to find something else to do."

"What will I find to do?"

What, indeed? McTeague was over thirty now, sluggish and slow-witted at best. What new trade could he learn at this age?

Little by little Trina made the dentist understand the calamity that had befallen them, and McTeague at last began cancelling his appointments. Trina gave it out that he was sick.

"Not a soul need know what's happened to us," she said to her husband.

But it was only by slow degrees that McTeague abandoned his profession. Every morning after breakfast he would go into his "Parlors" as usual and potter about his instruments, his dental engine, and his washstand in the corner behind his screen where he made his moulds. Now he would sharpen a "hoe" excavator, now he would busy himself for a whole hour making "mats" and "cylinders." Then he would look over his slate where he kept a record of his appointments.

One day Trina softly opened the door of the "Parlors" and came in from the sitting-room. She had not heard McTeague moving about for some time and had begun to wonder what he was doing. She came in, quietly shutting the door behind her.

McTeague had tidied the room with the greatest care. The volumes of the "Practical Dentist" and the "American System of Dentistry" were piled upon the marble-top centre-table in rectangular blocks. The few chairs were drawn up against the wall under the steel engraving of "Lorenzo de' Medici" with more than usual precision. The dental engine and the nickelled trimmings of the operating chair had been furbished till they shone, while on the movable rack in the bay window McTeague had arranged his instruments with the greatest neatness and regularity. "Hoe" excavators, pluggers, forceps, pliers, corundum disks and burrs, even the boxwood mallet that Trina was never to use again, all were laid out and ready for immediate use.

McTeague himself sat in his operating chair, looking stupidly out of the windows, across the roofs opposite, with an unseeing gaze, his red hands lying idly in his lap. Trina came up to him. There was something in his eyes that made her put both arms around his neck and lay his huge head with its coarse blond hair upon her shoulder.

"I -- I got everything fixed," he said. "I got everything fixed an' ready. See, everything ready an' waiting, an' -- an' -- an' nobody comes, an' nobody's ever going to come any more. Oh, Trina!" He put his arms about her and drew her down closer to him.

"Never mind, dear; never mind," cried Trina, through her tears. "It'll all come right in the end, and we'll be poor together if we have to. You can sure find something else to do. We'll start in again."

"Look at the slate there," said McTeague, pulling away from her and reaching down the slate on which he kept a record of his appointments. "Look at them. There's Vanovitch at two on Wednesday, and Loughhead's wife Thursday morning, and Heise's little girl Thursday afternoon at one-thirty; Mrs. Watson on Friday, and Vanovitch again Saturday morning early -- at seven. That's what I was to have had, and they ain't going to come. They ain't ever going to come any more."

Trina took the little slate from him and looked at it ruefully.

"Rub them out," she said, her voice trembling; "rub it all out;" and as she spoke her eyes brimmed again, and a great tear dropped on the slate. "That's it," she said; "that's the way

to rub it out, by me crying on it." Then she passed her fingers over the tear-blurred writing and washed the slate clean. "All gone, all gone," she said.

"All gone," echoed the dentist. There was a silence. Then McTeague heaved himself up to his full six feet two, his face purpling, his enormous mallet-like fists raised over his head. His massive jaw protruded more than ever, while his teeth clicked and grated together; then he growled:

"If ever I meet Marcus Schouler -- " he broke off abruptly, the white of his eyes growing suddenly pink.

"Oh, if ever you DO," exclaimed Trina, catching her breath.

Chapter 14

"Well, what do you think?" said Trina.

She and McTeague stood in a tiny room at the back of the flat and on its very top floor. The room was whitewashed. It contained a bed, three cane-seated chairs, and a wooden washstand with its washbowl and pitcher. From its single uncurtained window one looked down into the flat's dirty back yard and upon the roofs of the hovels that bordered the alley in the rear. There was a rag carpet on the floor. In place of a closet some dozen wooden pegs were affixed to the wall over the washstand. There was a smell of cheap soap and of ancient hair-oil in the air.

"That's a single bed," said Trina, "but the landlady says she'll put in a double one for us. You see -- -- "

"I ain't going to live here," growled McTeague.

"Well, you've got to live somewhere," said Trina, impatiently.

"We've looked Polk Street over, and this is the only thing we can afford."

"Afford, afford," muttered the dentist. "You with your five thousand dollars, and the two or three hundred you got saved up, talking about 'afford.' You make me sick."

"Now, Mac," exclaimed Trina, deliberately, sitting down in one of the cane-seated chairs; "now, Mac, let's have this thing -- -- "

"Well, I don't figure on living in one room," growled the dentist, sullenly. "Let's live decently until we can get a fresh start. We've got the money."

"Who's got the money?"

"WE'VE got it."

"We!"

"Well, it's all in the family. What's yours is mine, and what's mine is yours, ain't it?"

"No, it's not; no, it's not," cried Trina, vehemently. "It's all mine, mine. There's not a penny of it belongs to anybody else. I don't like to have to talk this way to you, but you just make me. We're not going to touch a penny of my five thousand nor a penny of that little money I managed to save -- that seventy-five."

"That TWO hundred, you mean."

"That SEVENTY-FIVE. We're just going to live on the interest of that and on what I earn from Uncle Oelbermann -- on just that thirty-one or two dollars."

"Huh! Think I'm going to do that, an' live in such a room as this?"

Trina folded her arms and looked him squarely in the face.

"Well, what ARE you going to do, then?"

"Huh?"

"I say, what ARE you going to do? You can go on and find something to do and earn some more money, and THEN we'll talk."

"Well, I ain't going to live here."

"Oh, very well, suit yourself. I'M going to live here."

"You'll live where I TELL you," the dentist suddenly cried, exasperated at the mincing tone she affected.

"Then YOU'LL pay the rent," exclaimed Trina, quite as angry as he.

"Are you my boss, I'd like to know? Who's the boss, you or I?"

"Who's got the MONEY, I'd like to know?" cried Trina, flushing to her pale lips. "Answer me that, McTeague, who's got the money?"

"You make me sick, you and your money. Why, you're a miser. I never saw anything like it. When I was practising, I never thought of my fees as my own; we lumped everything in together."

"Exactly; and I'M doing the working now. I'm working for Uncle Oelbermann, and you're not lumping in ANYTHING now. I'm doing it all. Do you know what I'm doing, McTeague? I'm supporting you."

"Ah, shut up; you make me sick."

"You got no RIGHT to talk to me that way. I won't let you. I -- I won't have it." She caught her breath. Tears were in her eyes.

"Oh, live where you like, then," said McTeague, sullenly.

"Well, shall we take this room then?"

"All right, we'll take it. But why can't you take a little of your money an' -- an' -- sort of fix it up?"

"Not a penny, not a single penny."

"Oh, I don't care WHAT you do." And for the rest of the day the dentist and his wife did not speak.

This was not the only quarrel they had during these days when they were occupied in moving from their suite and in looking for new quarters. Every hour the question of money came up. Trina had become more niggardly than ever since the loss of McTeague's practice. It was not mere economy with her now. It was a panic terror lest a fraction of a cent of her little savings should be touched; a passionate eagerness to continue to save in spite of all that had happened. Trina could have easily afforded better quarters than the single whitewashed room at the top of the flat, but she made McTeague believe that it was impossible.

"I can still save a little," she said to herself, after the room had been engaged; "perhaps almost as much as ever. I'll have three hundred dollars pretty soon, and Mac thinks it's only two hundred. It's almost two hundred and fifty; and I'll get a good deal out of the sale."

But this sale was a long agony. It lasted a week. Everything went -- everything but the few big pieces that went with the suite, and that belonged to the photographer. The melodeon, the chairs, the black walnut table before which they were married, the extension table in the sitting-room, the kitchen table with its oilcloth cover, the framed lithographs from the English illustrated papers, the very carpets on the floors. But Trina's heart nearly broke when the kitchen utensils and furnishings began to go. Every pot, every stewpan, every knife and fork, was an old friend. How she had worked over them! How clean she had kept them! What a pleasure it had been to invade that little brick-paved kitchen every morning, and to wash up and put to rights after breakfast, turning on the hot water at the sink, raking down the ashes in the cook-stove, going and coming over the warm bricks, her head in the air, singing at her work, proud in the sense of her proprietorship and her

independence! How happy had she been the day after her marriage when she had first entered that kitchen and knew that it was all her own! And how well she remembered her raids upon the bargain counters in the house-furnishing departments of the great downtown stores! And now it was all to go. Some one else would have it all, while she was relegated to cheap restaurants and meals cooked by hired servants. Night after night she sobbed herself to sleep at the thought of her past happiness and her present wretchedness. However, she was not alone in her unhappiness.

"Anyhow, I'm going to keep the steel engraving an' the stone pug dog," declared the dentist, his fist clenching. When it had come to the sale of his office effects McTeague had rebelled with the instinctive obstinacy of a boy, shutting his eyes and ears. Only little by little did Trina induce him to part with his office furniture. He fought over every article, over the little iron stove, the bed-lounge, the marble-topped centre table, the whatnot in the corner, the bound volumes of "Allen's Practical Dentist," the rifle manufacturer's calendar, and the prim, military chairs. A veritable scene took place between him and his wife before he could bring himself to part with the steel engraving of "Lorenzo de' Medici and His Court" and the stone pug dog with its goggle eyes.

"Why," he would cry, "I've had 'em ever since -- ever since I BEGAN; long before I knew you, Trina. That steel engraving I bought in Sacramento one day when it was raining. I saw it in the window of a second-hand store, and a fellow GAVE me that stone pug dog. He was a druggist. It was in Sacramento too. We traded. I gave him a shaving-mug and a razor, and he gave me the pug dog."

There were, however, two of his belongings that even Trina could not induce him to part with.

"And your concertina, Mac," she prompted, as they were making out the list for the second-hand dealer. "The concertina, and -- oh, yes, the canary and the bird cage."

"No."

"Mac, you MUST be reasonable. The concertina would bring quite a sum, and the bird cage is as good as new. I'll sell the canary to the bird-store man on Kearney Street."

"No."

"If you're going to make objections to every single thing, we might as well quit. Come, now, Mac, the concertina and the bird cage. We'll put them in Lot D."

"No."

"You'll have to come to it sooner or later. I'M giving up everything. I'm going to put them down, see."

"No."

And she could get no further than that. The dentist did not lose his temper, as in the case of the steel engraving or the stone pug dog; he simply opposed her entreaties and persuasions with a passive, inert obstinacy that nothing could move. In the end Trina was obliged to submit. McTeague kept his concertina and his canary, even going so far as to put them both away in the bedroom, attaching to them tags on which he had scrawled in immense round letters, "Not for Sale."

One evening during that same week the dentist and his wife were in the dismantled sitting-room. The room presented the appearance of a wreck. The Nottingham lace curtains were down. The extension table was heaped high with dishes, with tea and coffee pots, and with baskets of spoons and knives and forks. The melodeon was hauled out into the middle of the floor, and covered with a sheet marked "Lot A," the pictures were in a pile in a corner, the chenille portieres were folded on top of the black walnut table. The room was desolate, lamentable. Trina was going over the inventory; McTeague, in his shirt sleeves, was smoking his pipe, looking stupidly out of the window. All at once there was a brisk rapping at the door.

"Come in," called Trina, apprehensively. Now-a-days at every unexpected visit she anticipated a fresh calamity. The door opened to let in a young man wearing a checked suit, a gay cravat, and a marvellously figured waistcoat. Trina and McTeague recognized him at once. It was the Other Dentist, the debonair fellow whose clients were the barbers and the young women of the candy stores and soda-water fountains, the poser, the wearer of waistcoats, who bet money on greyhound races.

"How'do?" said this one, bowing gracefully to the McTeagues as they stared at him distrustfully.

"How'do? They tell me, Doctor, that you are going out of the profession."

McTeague muttered indistinctly behind his mustache and glowered at him.

"Well, say," continued the other, cheerily, "I'd like to talk business with you. That sign of yours, that big golden tooth that you got outside of your window, I don't suppose you'll have any further use for it. Maybe I'd buy it if we could agree on terms."

Trina shot a glance at her husband. McTeague began to glower again.

"What do you say?" said the Other Dentist.

"I guess not," growled McTeague.

"What do you say to ten dollars?"

"Ten dollars!" cried Trina, her chin in the air.

"Well, what figure DO you put on it?"

Trina was about to answer when she was interrupted by McTeague.

"You go out of here."

"Hey? What?"

"You go out of here."

The other retreated toward the door.

"You can't make small of me. Go out of here."

McTeague came forward a step, his great red fist clenching. The young man fled. But half way down the stairs he paused long enough to call back:

"You don't want to trade anything for a diploma, do you?"

McTeague and his wife exchanged looks.

"How did he know?" exclaimed Trina, sharply. They had invented and spread the fiction that McTeague was merely retiring from business, without assigning any reason. But evidently every one knew the real cause. The humiliation was complete now. Old Miss Baker confirmed their suspicions on this point the next day. The little retired dressmaker came down and wept with Trina over her misfortune, and did what she could to encourage her. But she too knew that McTeague had been forbidden by the authorities from practising. Marcus had evidently left them no loophole of escape.

"It's just like cutting off your husband's hands, my dear," said Miss Baker. "And you two were so happy. When I first saw you together I said, 'What a pair!'"

Old Grannis also called during this period of the breaking up of the McTeague household.

"Dreadful, dreadful," murmured the old Englishman, his hand going tremulously to his chin. "It seems unjust; it does. But Mr. Schouler could not have set them on to do it. I can't quite believe it of him."

"Of Marcus!" cried Trina. "Hoh! Why, he threw his knife at Mac one time, and another time he bit him, actually bit him with his teeth, while they were wrestling just for fun. Marcus would do anything to injure Mac."

"Dear, dear," returned Old Grannis, genuinely pained. "I had always believed Schouler to be such a good fellow."

"That's because you're so good yourself, Mr. Grannis," responded Trina.

"I tell you what, Doc," declared Heise the harness-maker, shaking his finger impressively at the dentist, "you must fight it; you must appeal to the courts; you've been practising too long to be debarred now. The statute of limitations, you know."

"No, no," Trina had exclaimed, when the dentist had repeated this advice to her. "No, no, don't go near the law courts. I know them. The lawyers take all your money, and you lose your case. We're bad off as it is, without lawing about it."

Then at last came the sale. McTeague and Trina, whom Miss Baker had invited to her room for that day, sat there side by side, holding each other's hands, listening nervously to the turmoil that rose to them from the direction of their suite. From nine o'clock till dark the crowds came and went. All Polk Street seemed to have invaded the suite, lured on by the red flag that waved from the front windows. It was a fete, a veritable holiday, for the whole neighborhood. People with no thought of buying presented themselves. Young women -- the candy-store girls and florist's apprentices -- came to see the fun, walking arm in arm from room to room, making jokes about the pretty lithographs and mimicking the picture of the two little girls saying their prayers.

"Look here," they would cry, "look here what she used for curtains -- NOTTINGHAM lace, actually! Whoever thinks of buying Nottingham lace now-a-days? Say, don't that JAR you?"

"And a melodeon," another one would exclaim, lifting the sheet. "A melodeon, when you can rent a piano for a dollar a week; and say, I really believe they used to eat in the kitchen."

"Dollarn-half, dollarn-half, dollarn-half, give me two," intoned the auctioneer from the second-hand store. By noon the crowd became a jam. Wagons backed up to the curb outside and departed heavily laden. In all directions people could be seen going away from the house, carrying small articles of furniture -- a clock, a water pitcher, a towel rack. Every now and then old Miss Baker, who had gone below to see how things were progressing, returned with reports of the foray.

"Mrs. Heise bought the chenille portieres. Mister Ryer made a bid for your bed, but a man in a gray coat bid over him. It was knocked down for three dollars and a half. The German shoe-maker on the next block bought the stone pug dog. I saw our postman going away with a lot of the pictures. Zerkow has come, on my word! the rags-bottles-sacks man; he's buying lots; he bought all Doctor McTeague's gold tape and some of the instruments. Maria's there too. That dentist on the corner took the dental engine, and wanted to get the sign, the big gold tooth," and so on and so on. Cruellest of all, however, at least to Trina, was when Miss Baker herself began to buy, unable to resist a bargain. The last time she came up she carried a bundle of the gay tidies that used to hang over the chair backs.

"He offered them, three for a nickel," she explained to Trina, "and I thought I'd spend just a quarter. You don't mind, now, do you, Mrs. McTeague?"

"Why, no, of course not, Miss Baker," answered Trina, bravely.

"They'll look very pretty on some of my chairs," went on the little old dressmaker, innocently. "See." She spread one of them on a chair back for inspection. Trina's chin quivered.

"Oh, VERY pretty," she answered.

At length that dreadful day was over. The crowd dispersed. Even the auctioneer went at last, and as he closed the door with a bang, the reverberation that went through the suite gave evidence of its emptiness.

"Come," said Trina to the dentist, "let's go down and look -- take a last look."

They went out of Miss Baker's room and descended to the floor below. On the stairs, however, they were met by Old Grannis. In his hands he carried a little package. Was it possible that he too had taken advantage of their misfortunes to join in the raid upon the suite?

"I went in," he began, timidly, "for -- for a few moments. This" -- he indicated the little package he carried -- "this was put up. It was of no value but to you. I -- I ventured to bid it in. I thought perhaps" -- his hand went to his chin, "that you wouldn't mind; that -- in fact, I bought it for you -- as a present. Will you take it?" He handed the package to Trina and hurried on. Trina tore off the wrappings.

It was the framed photograph of McTeague and his wife in their wedding finery, the one that had been taken immediately after the marriage. It represented Trina sitting very erect in a rep armchair, holding her wedding bouquet straight before her, McTeague standing at her side, his left foot forward, one hand upon her shoulder, and the other thrust into the breast of his "Prince Albert" coat, in the attitude of a statue of a Secretary of State.

"Oh, it WAS good of him, it WAS good of him," cried Trina, her eyes filling again. "I had forgotten to put it away. Of course it was not for sale."

They went on down the stairs, and arriving at the door of the sitting-room, opened it and looked in. It was late in the afternoon, and there was just light enough for the dentist and his wife to see the results of that day of sale. Nothing was left, not even the carpet. It was a pillage, a devastation, the barrenness of a field after the passage of a swarm of locusts. The room had been picked and stripped till only the bare walls and floor remained. Here where they had been married, where the wedding supper had taken place, where Trina had bade farewell to her father and mother, here where she had spent those first few hard months of her married life, where afterward she had grown to be happy and contented, where she had passed the long hours of the afternoon at her work of whittling, and where she and her husband had spent so many evenings looking out of the window before the lamp was lit -- here in what had been her home, nothing was left but echoes and the emptiness of complete desolation. Only one thing remained. On the wall between the windows, in its oval glass

frame, preserved by some unknown and fearful process, a melancholy relic of a vanished happiness, unsold, neglected, and forgotten, a thing that nobody wanted, hung Trina's wedding bouquet.

Chapter 15

Then the grind began. It would have been easier for the McTeagues to have faced their misfortunes had they befallen them immediately after their marriage, when their love for each other was fresh and fine, and when they could have found a certain happiness in helping each other and sharing each other's privations. Trina, no doubt, loved her husband more than ever, in the sense that she felt she belonged to him. But McTeague's affection for his wife was dwindling a little every day -- HAD been dwindling for a long time, in fact. He had become used to her by now. She was part of the order of the things with which he found himself surrounded. He saw nothing extraordinary about her; it was no longer a pleasure for him to kiss her and take her in his arms; she was merely his wife. He did not dislike her; he did not love her. She was his wife, that was all. But he sadly missed and regretted all those little animal comforts which in the old prosperous life Trina had managed to find for him. He missed the cabbage soups and steaming chocolate that Trina had taught him to like; he missed his good tobacco that Trina had educated him to prefer; he missed the Sunday afternoon walks that she had caused him to substitute in place of his nap in the operating chair; and he missed the bottled beer that she had induced him to drink in place of the steam beer from Frenna's. In the end he grew morose and sulky, and sometimes neglected to answer his wife when she spoke to him. Besides this, Trina's avarice was a perpetual annoyance to him. Oftentimes when a considerable alleviation of this unhappiness could have been obtained at the expense of a nickel or a dime, Trina refused the money with a pettishness that was exasperating.

"No, no," she would exclaim. "To ride to the park Sunday afternoon, that means ten cents, and I can't afford it."

"Let's walk there, then."

"I've got to work."

"But you've worked morning and afternoon every day this week."

"I don't care, I've got to work."

There had been a time when Trina had hated the idea of McTeague drinking steam beer as common and vulgar.

"Say, let's have a bottle of beer to-night. We haven't had a drop of beer in three weeks."

"We can't afford it. It's fifteen cents a bottle."

"But I haven't had a swallow of beer in three weeks."

"Drink STEAM beer, then. You've got a nickel. I gave you a quarter day before yesterday."

"But I don't like steam beer now."

It was so with everything. Unfortunately, Trina had cultivated tastes in McTeague which now could not be gratified. He had come to be very proud of his silk hat and "Prince Albert" coat, and liked to wear them on Sundays. Trina had made him sell both. He preferred "Yale mixture" in his pipe; Trina had made him come down to "Mastiff," a five-cent tobacco with which he was once contented, but now abhorred. He liked to wear clean cuffs; Trina allowed him a fresh pair on Sundays only. At first these deprivations angered McTeague. Then, all of a sudden, he slipped back into the old habits (that had been his before he knew Trina) with an ease that was surprising. Sundays he dined at the car conductors' coffee-joint once more, and spent the afternoon lying full length upon the bed, crop-full, stupid, warm, smoking his huge pipe, drinking his steam beer, and playing his six mournful tunes upon his concertina, dozing off to sleep towards four o'clock.

The sale of their furniture had, after paying the rent and outstanding bills, netted about a hundred and thirty dollars. Trina believed that the auctioneer from the second-hand store had swindled and cheated them and had made a great outcry to no effect. But she had arranged the affair with the auctioneer herself, and offset her disappointment in the matter of the sale by deceiving her husband as to the real amount of the returns. It was easy to lie to McTeague, who took everything for granted; and since the occasion of her trickery with the money that was to have been sent to her mother, Trina had found falsehood easier than ever.

"Seventy dollars is all the auctioneer gave me," she told her husband; "and after paying the balance due on the rent, and the grocer's bill, there's only fifty left."

"Only fifty?" murmured McTeague, wagging his head, "only fifty? Think of that."

"Only fifty," declared Trina. Afterwards she said to herself with a certain admiration for her cleverness:

"Couldn't save sixty dollars much easier than that," and she had added the hundred and thirty to the little hoard in the chamois-skin bag and brass match-box in the bottom of her trunk.

In these first months of their misfortunes the routine of the McTeagues was as follows: They rose at seven and breakfasted in their room, Trina cooking the very meagre meal on an oil stove. Immediately after breakfast Trina sat down to her work of whittling the Noah's ark animals, and McTeague took himself off to walk down town. He had by the greatest good luck secured a position with a manufacturer of surgical instruments, where his manual dexterity in the making of excavators, pluggers, and other dental contrivances

stood him in fairly good stead. He lunched at a sailor's boarding-house near the water front, and in the afternoon worked till six. He was home at six-thirty, and he and Trina had supper together in the "ladies' dining parlor," an adjunct of the car conductors' coffee-joint. Trina, meanwhile, had worked at her whittling all day long, with but half an hour's interval for lunch, which she herself prepared upon the oil stove. In the evening they were both so tired that they were in no mood for conversation, and went to bed early, worn out, harried, nervous, and cross.

Trina was not quite so scrupulously tidy now as in the old days. At one time while whittling the Noah's ark animals she had worn gloves. She never wore them now. She still took pride in neatly combing and coiling her wonderful black hair, but as the days passed she found it more and more comfortable to work in her blue flannel wrapper. Whittlings and chips accumulated under the window where she did her work, and she was at no great pains to clear the air of the room vitiated by the fumes of the oil stove and heavy with the smell of cooking. It was not gay, that life. The room itself was not gay. The huge double bed sprawled over nearly a fourth of the available space; the angles of Trina's trunk and the washstand projected into the room from the walls, and barked shins and scraped elbows. Streaks and spots of the "non-poisonous" paint that Trina used were upon the walls and wood-work. However, in one corner of the room, next the window, monstrous, distorted, brilliant, shining with a light of its own, stood the dentist's sign, the enormous golden tooth, the tooth of a Brobdingnag.

One afternoon in September, about four months after the McTeagues had left their suite, Trina was at her work by the window. She had whittled some half-dozen sets of animals, and was now busy painting them and making the arks. Little pots of "non-poisonous" paint stood at her elbow on the table, together with a box of labels that read, "Made in France." Her huge clasp-knife was stuck into the under side of the table. She was now occupied solely with the brushes and the glue pot. She turned the little figures in her fingers with a wonderful lightness and deftness, painting the chickens Naples yellow, the elephants blue gray, the horses Vandyke brown, adding a dot of Chinese white for the eyes and sticking in the ears and tail with a drop of glue. The animals once done, she put together and painted the arks, some dozen of them, all windows and no doors, each one opening only by a lid which was half the roof. She had all the work she could handle these days, for, from this time till a week before Christmas, Uncle Oelbermann could take as many "Noah's ark sets" as she could make.

Suddenly Trina paused in her work, looking expectantly toward the door. McTeague came in.

"Why, Mac," exclaimed Trina. "It's only three o'clock. What are you home so early for? Have they discharged you?"

"They've fired me," said McTeague, sitting down on the bed.

"Fired you! What for?"

"I don' know. Said the times were getting hard an' they had to let me go."

Trina let her paint-stained hands fall into her lap.

"OH!" she cried. "If we don't have the HARDEST luck of any two people I ever heard of. What can you do now? Is there another place like that where they make surgical instruments?"

"Huh? No, I don' know. There's three more."

"Well, you must try them right away. Go down there right now."

"Huh? Right now? No, I'm tired. I'll go down in the morning."

"Mac," cried Trina, in alarm, "what are you thinking of? You talk as though we were millionaires. You must go down this minute. You're losing money every second you sit there." She goaded the huge fellow to his feet again, thrust his hat into his hands, and pushed him out of the door, he obeying the while, docile and obedient as a big cart horse. He was on the stairs when she came running after him.

"Mac, they paid you off, didn't they, when they discharged you?"

"Yes."

"Then you must have some money. Give it to me."

The dentist heaved a shoulder uneasily.

"No, I don' want to."

"I've got to have that money. There's no more oil for the stove, and I must buy some more meal tickets to-night."

"Always after me about money," muttered the dentist; but he emptied his pockets for her, nevertheless.

"I -- you've taken it all," he grumbled. "Better leave me something for car fare. It's going to rain."

"Pshaw! You can walk just as well as not. A big fellow like you 'fraid of a little walk; and it ain't going to rain."

Trina had lied again both as to the want of oil for the stove and the commutation ticket for the restaurant. But she knew by instinct that McTeague had money about him, and she did not intend to let it go out of the house. She listened intently until she was sure

McTeague was gone. Then she hurriedly opened her trunk and hid the money in the chamois bag at the bottom.

The dentist presented himself at every one of the makers of surgical instruments that afternoon and was promptly turned away in each case. Then it came on to rain, a fine, cold drizzle, that chilled him and wet him to the bone. He had no umbrella, and Trina had not left him even five cents for car fare. He started to walk home through the rain. It was a long way to Polk Street, as the last manufactory he had visited was beyond even Folsom Street, and not far from the city front.

By the time McTeague reached Polk Street his teeth were chattering with the cold. He was wet from head to foot. As he was passing Heise's harness shop a sudden deluge of rain overtook him and he was obliged to dodge into the vestibule for shelter. He, who loved to be warm, to sleep and to be well fed, was icy cold, was exhausted and footsore from tramping the city. He could look forward to nothing better than a badly-cooked supper at the coffee-joint -- hot meat on a cold plate, half done suet pudding, muddy coffee, and bad bread, and he was cold, miserably cold, and wet to the bone. All at once a sudden rage against Trina took possession of him. It was her fault. She knew it was going to rain, and she had not let him have a nickel for car fare -- she who had five thousand dollars. She let him walk the streets in the cold and in the rain. "Miser," he growled behind his mustache. "Miser, nasty little old miser. You're worse than old Zerkow, always nagging about money, money, and you got five thousand dollars. You got more, an' you live in that stinking hole of a room, and you won't drink any decent beer. I ain't going to stand it much longer. She knew it was going to rain. She KNEW it. Didn't I TELL her? And she drives me out of my own home in the rain, for me to get money for her; more money, and she takes it. She took that money from me that I earned. 'Twasn't hers; it was mine, I earned it -- and not a nickel for car fare. She don't care if I get wet and get a cold and DIE. No, she don't, as long as she's warm and's got her money." He became more and more indignant at the picture he made of himself. "I ain't going to stand it much longer," he repeated.

"Why, hello, Doc. Is that you?" exclaimed Heise, opening the door of the harness shop behind him. "Come in out of the wet. Why, you're soaked through," he added as he and McTeague came back into the shop, that reeked of oiled leather. "Didn't you have any umbrella? Ought to have taken a car."

"I guess so -- I guess so," murmured the dentist, confused. His teeth were chattering.

"YOU'RE going to catch your death-a-cold," exclaimed Heise. "Tell you what," he said, reaching for his hat, "come in next door to Frenna's and have something to warm you up. I'll get the old lady to mind the shop." He called Mrs. Heise down from the floor above and took McTeague into Joe Frenna's saloon, which was two doors above his harness shop.

"Whiskey and gum twice, Joe," said he to the barkeeper as he and the dentist approached the bar.

"Huh? What?" said McTeague. "Whiskey? No, I can't drink whiskey. It kind of disagrees with me."

"Oh, the hell!" returned Heise, easily. "Take it as medicine. You'll get your death-a-cold if you stand round soaked like that. Two whiskey and gum, Joe."

McTeague emptied the pony glass at a single enormous gulp.

"That's the way," said Heise, approvingly. "Do you good." He drank his off slowly.

"I'd -- I'd ask you to have a drink with me, Heise," said the dentist, who had an indistinct idea of the amenities of the barroom, "only," he added shamefacedly, "only -- you see, I don't believe I got any change." His anger against Trina, heated by the whiskey he had drunk, flamed up afresh. What a humiliating position for Trina to place him in, not to leave him the price of a drink with a friend, she who had five thousand dollars!

"Sha! That's all right, Doc," returned Heise, nibbling on a grain of coffee. "Want another? Hey? This my treat. Two more of the same, Joe."

McTeague hesitated. It was lamentably true that whiskey did not agree with him; he knew it well enough. However, by this time he felt very comfortably warm at the pit of his stomach. The blood was beginning to circulate in his chilled finger-tips and in his soggy, wet feet. He had had a hard day of it; in fact, the last week, the last month, the last three or four months, had been hard. He deserved a little consolation. Nor could Trina object to this. It wasn't costing a cent. He drank again with Heise.

"Get up here to the stove and warm yourself," urged Heise, drawing up a couple of chairs and cocking his feet upon the guard. The two fell to talking while McTeague's draggled coat and trousers smoked.

"What a dirty turn that was that Marcus Schouler did you!" said Heise, wagging his head. "You ought to have fought that, Doc, sure. You'd been practising too long." They discussed this question some ten or fifteen minutes and then Heise rose.

"Well, this ain't earning any money. I got to get back to the shop." McTeague got up as well, and the pair started for the door. Just as they were going out Ryer met them.

"Hello, hello," he cried. "Lord, what a wet day! You two are going the wrong way. You're going to have a drink with me. Three whiskey punches, Joe."

"No, no," answered McTeague, shaking his head. "I'm going back home. I've had two glasses of whiskey already."

"Sha!" cried Heise, catching his arm. "A strapping big chap like you ain't afraid of a little whiskey."

"Well, I -- I -- I got to go right afterwards," protested McTeague.

About half an hour after the dentist had left to go down town, Maria Macapa had come in to see Trina. Occasionally Maria dropped in on Trina in this fashion and spent an hour or so chatting with her while she worked. At first Trina had been inclined to resent these intrusions of the Mexican woman, but of late she had begun to tolerate them. Her day was long and cheerless at the best, and there was no one to talk to. Trina even fancied that old Miss Baker had come to be less cordial since their misfortune. Maria retailed to her all the gossip of the flat and the neighborhood, and, which was much more interesting, told her of her troubles with Zerkow.

Trina said to herself that Maria was common and vulgar, but one had to have some diversion, and Trina could talk and listen without interrupting her work. On this particular occasion Maria was much excited over Zerkow's demeanor of late.

"He's gettun worse an' worse," she informed Trina as she sat on the edge of the bed, her chin in her hand. "He says he knows I got the dishes and am hidun them from him. The other day I thought he'd gone off with his wagon, and I was doin' a bit of ir'ning, an' by an' by all of a sudden I saw him peeping at me through the crack of the door. I never let on that I saw him, and, honest, he stayed there over two hours, watchun everything I did. I could just feel his eyes on the back of my neck all the time. Last Sunday he took down part of the wall, 'cause he said he'd seen me making figures on it. Well, I was, but it was just the wash list. All the time he says he'll kill me if I don't tell."

"Why, what do you stay with him for?" exclaimed Trina. "I'd be deathly 'fraid of a man like that; and he did take a knife to you once."

"Hoh! HE won't kill me, never fear. If he'd kill me he'd never know where the dishes were; that's what HE thinks."

"But I can't understand, Maria; you told him about those gold dishes yourself."

"Never, never! I never saw such a lot of crazy folks as you are."

"But you say he hits you sometimes."

"Ah!" said Maria, tossing her head scornfully, "I ain't afraid of him. He takes his horsewhip to me now and then, but I can always manage. I say, 'If you touch me with that, then I'll NEVER tell you.' Just pretending, you know, and he drops it as though it was red hot. Say, Mrs. McTeague, have you got any tea? Let's make a cup of tea over the stove."

"No, no," cried Trina, with niggardly apprehension; "no, I haven't got a bit of tea." Trina's stinginess had increased to such an extent that it had gone beyond the mere hoarding of money. She grudged even the food that she and McTeague ate, and even brought away half loaves of bread, lumps of sugar, and fruit from the car conductors' coffee-joint. She hid these pilferings away on the shelf by the window, and often managed

to make a very creditable lunch from them, enjoying the meal with the greater relish because it cost her nothing.

"No, Maria, I haven't got a bit of tea," she said, shaking her head decisively. "Hark, ain't that Mac?" she added, her chin in the air. "That's his step, sure."

"Well, I'm going to skip," said Maria. She left hurriedly, passing the dentist in the hall just outside the door. "Well?" said Trina interrogatively as her husband entered. McTeague did not answer. He hung his hat on the hook behind the door and dropped heavily into a chair.

"Well," asked Trina, anxiously, "how did you make out, Mac?"

Still the dentist pretended not to hear, scowling fiercely at his muddy boots.

"Tell me, Mac, I want to know. Did you get a place? Did you get caught in the rain?"

"Did I? Did I?" cried the dentist, sharply, an alacrity in his manner and voice that Trina had never observed before.

"Look at me. Look at me," he went on, speaking with an unwonted rapidity, his wits sharp, his ideas succeeding each other quickly. "Look at me, drenched through, shivering cold. I've walked the city over. Caught in the rain! Yes, I guess I did get caught in the rain, and it ain't your fault I didn't catch my death-a-cold; wouldn't even let me have a nickel for car fare."

"But, Mac," protested Trina, "I didn't know it was going to rain."

The dentist put back his head and laughed scornfully. His face was very red, and his small eyes twinkled. "Hoh! no, you didn't know it was going to rain. Didn't I TELL you it was?" he exclaimed, suddenly angry again. "Oh, you're a DAISY, you are. Think I'm going to put up with your foolishness ALL the time? Who's the boss, you or I?"

"Why, Mac, I never saw you this way before. You talk like a different man."

"Well, I AM a different man," retorted the dentist, savagely. "You can't make small of me ALWAYS."

"Well, never mind that. You know I'm not trying to make small of you. But never mind that. Did you get a place?"

"Give me my money," exclaimed McTeague, jumping up briskly. There was an activity, a positive nimbleness about the huge blond giant that had never been his before; also his stupidity, the sluggishness of his brain, seemed to be unusually stimulated.

"Give me my money, the money I gave you as I was going away."

"I can't," exclaimed Trina. "I paid the grocer's bill with it while you were gone."

"Don't believe you."

"Truly, truly, Mac. Do you think I'd lie to you? Do you think I'd lower myself to do that?"

"Well, the next time I earn any money I'll keep it myself."

"But tell me, Mac, DID you get a place?"

McTeague turned his back on her.

"Tell me, Mac, please, did you?"

The dentist jumped up and thrust his face close to hers, his heavy jaw protruding, his little eyes twinkling meanly.

"No," he shouted. "No, no, NO. Do you hear? NO."

Trina cowered before him. Then suddenly she began to sob aloud, weeping partly at his strange brutality, partly at the disappointment of his failure to find employment.

McTeague cast a contemptuous glance about him, a glance that embraced the dingy, cheerless room, the rain streaming down the panes of the one window, and the figure of his weeping wife.

"Oh, ain't this all FINE?" he exclaimed. "Ain't it lovely?"

"It's not my fault," sobbed Trina.

"It is too," vociferated McTeague. "It is too. We could live like Christians and decent people if you wanted to. You got more'n five thousand dollars, and you're so damned stingy that you'd rather live in a rat hole -- and make me live there too -- before you'd part with a nickel of it. I tell you I'm sick and tired of the whole business."

An allusion to her lottery money never failed to rouse Trina.

"And I'll tell you this much too," she cried, winking back the tears. "Now that you're out of a job, we can't afford even to live in your rat hole, as you call it. We've got to find a cheaper place than THIS even."

"What!" exclaimed the dentist, purple with rage. "What, get into a worse hole in the wall than this? Well, we'll SEE if we will. We'll just see about that. You're going to do just as I tell you after this, Trina McTeague," and once more he thrust his face close to hers.

"I know what's the matter," cried Trina, with a half sob; "I know, I can smell it on your breath. You've been drinking whiskey."

"Yes, I've been drinking whiskey," retorted her husband. "I've been drinking whiskey. Have you got anything to say about it? Ah, yes, you're RIGHT, I've been drinking whiskey. What have YOU got to say about my drinking whiskey? Let's hear it."

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" sobbed Trina, covering her face with her hands. McTeague caught her wrists in one palm and pulled them down. Trina's pale face was streaming with tears; her long, narrow blue eyes were swimming; her adorable little chin upraised and quivering.

"Let's hear what you got to say," exclaimed McTeague.

"Nothing, nothing," said Trina, between her sobs.

"Then stop that noise. Stop it, do you hear me? Stop it." He threw up his open hand threateningly. "STOP!" he exclaimed.

Trina looked at him fearfully, half blinded with weeping. Her husband's thick mane of yellow hair was disordered and rumped upon his great square-cut head; his big red ears were redder than ever; his face was purple; the thick eyebrows were knotted over the small, twinkling eyes; the heavy yellow mustache, that smelt of alcohol, drooped over the massive, protruding chin, salient, like that of the carnivora; the veins were swollen and throbbing on his thick red neck; while over her head Trina saw his upraised palm, callused, enormous.

"Stop!" he exclaimed. And Trina, watching fearfully, saw the palm suddenly contract into a fist, a fist that was hard as a wooden mallet, the fist of the old-time car-boy. And then her ancient terror of him, the intuitive fear of the male, leaped to life again. She was afraid of him. Every nerve of her quailed and shrank from him. She choked back her sobs, catching her breath.

"There," growled the dentist, releasing her, "that's more like. Now," he went on, fixing her with his little eyes, "now listen to me. I'm beat out. I've walked the city over -- ten miles, I guess -- an' I'm going to bed, an' I don't want to be bothered. You understand? I want to be let alone." Trina was silent.

"Do you HEAR?" he snarled.

"Yes, Mac."

The dentist took off his coat, his collar and necktie, unbuttoned his vest, and slipped his heavy-soled boots from his big feet. Then he stretched himself upon the bed and rolled over towards the wall. In a few minutes the sound of his snoring filled the room.

Trina craned her neck and looked at her husband over the footboard of the bed. She saw his red, congested face; the huge mouth wide open; his unclean shirt, with its frayed wristbands; and his huge feet encased in thick woollen socks. Then her grief and the sense of her unhappiness returned more poignant than ever. She stretched her arms out in front of her on her work-table, and, burying her face in them, cried and sobbed as though her heart would break.

The rain continued. The panes of the single window ran with sheets of water; the eaves dripped incessantly. It grew darker. The tiny, grimy room, full of the smells of cooking and of "non-poisonous" paint, took on an aspect of desolation and cheerlessness lamentable beyond words. The canary in its little gilt prison chattered feebly from time to time. Sprawled at full length upon the bed, the dentist snored and snored, stupefied, inert, his legs wide apart, his hands lying palm upward at his sides.

At last Trina raised her head, with a long, trembling breath. She rose, and going over to the washstand, poured some water from the pitcher into the basin, and washed her face and swollen eyelids, and rearranged her hair. Suddenly, as she was about to return to her work, she was struck with an idea.

"I wonder," she said to herself, "I wonder where he got the money to buy his whiskey." She searched the pockets of his coat, which he had flung into a corner of the room, and even came up to him as he lay upon the bed and went through the pockets of his vest and trousers. She found nothing.

"I wonder," she murmured, "I wonder if he's got any money he don't tell me about. I'll have to look out for that."

TO BE CONTINUED

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