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JOSH PACHTER
MYSTERY AUTHOR

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“The Night of Power” was originally published in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine* (September 1986).

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A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

This series of free ebooks is designed to promote authors you may not have tried before. In this case, Josh Pachter.

Josh broke into the mystery field in 1968 with “E.Q. Griffen Earns His Name”—but I’ll let him tell that story in his own intro, which follows this one. Since that time he has regularly produced mystery stories for magazines and anthologies, including the critically acclaimed “Mahboob Chaudri” series (collected by Wildside Press in paperback as *The Tree of Life: The Mahboob Chaudri Mystery Stories* and in ebook form as *The Mahboob Chaudri Mystery MEGAPACK®*).

He is also well known as a translator of fiction and nonfiction from Dutch to English. His translation of Janwillem van de Wetering’s “There Goes Ravelaar” (*EQMM*, January 1985) was nominated for the prestigious Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Short Story of its year, and, since *EQMM* inaugurated its regular “Passport to Crime” feature in 2002, more than a dozen Dutch and Belgian authors have been introduced to American readers via his translations.

An avid traveler, Pachter lived overseas from 1979 to 1991, teaching for the University of Maryland on US military bases in Germany, The Netherlands, England, Spain, Italy, Greece, Bahrain, Kuwait and Pakistan. He continues to journey internationally with his wife Laurie (a writer/editor for a Federal agency in Washington, DC) and daughter Rebecca (an attorney in Phoenix, AZ).

If you’re not already familiar with his work, here’s your chance to discover what you’ve been missing. This book contains four complete stories, one co-authored with Rebecca K. Jones (who also happens to be Josh’s daughter). So read on...and be prepared: you’re going to want to hunt down more of Josh Pachter’s work when you’re done.

Enjoy!

—John Betancourt
Publisher, Wildside Press LLC
www.wildsidepress.com

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

In 1968, at the age of 16, I sold a short story, “E.Q. Griffin Earns His Name,” to *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine’s* “Department of First Stories,” making me the second-youngest author ever to appear in the pages of EQMM. Since then, I’ve contributed some 70 additional stories to EQMM, *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine* and many other publications, with numerous stories reprinted in various “Year’s Best” anthologies and other collections.

I’m probably best known for the Mahboob Chaudri series, set in the Middle Eastern island emirate of Bahrain and featuring a Pakistani member of the Bahraini national police force. The Chaudri stories were originally published in the ’80s and early ’90s in *EQMM*, *AHMM*, and elsewhere; when Bill Pronzini selected one of them for inclusion in his classic volume, *The Ethnic Detectives* (Dodd, Mead & Company, 1985), he called Chaudri “one of crime fiction’s most delightful new detectives.” In 2015, Wildside Press collected all 10 of the Chaudri stories in a single volume; it was released to enthusiastic reviews as *The Tree of Life* in paperback and *The Mahboob Chaudri Mystery MEGAPACK®* as an ebook.

In addition to the Chaudri series and my standalone work, I have co-authored some two dozen collaborative stories with a rogue’s gallery of writing partners including Edward D. Hoch, John Lutz, Dan J. Marlowe, Michael Avallone, Patricia McGerr, Jon L. Breen, Francis M. Nevins and many more. *Partners in Crime*, a collection of these collaborative stories, is in the works.

In November 2015, Simon & Schuster published *Styx*, a zombie cop novel I co-wrote with Belgian author Bavo Dhooge.

Meanwhile, in my day job, I am the assistant dean for communication studies and theater at Northern Virginia Community College’s Loudoun Campus, where I teach interpersonal and intercultural

communication, public speaking and film appreciation. I also volunteer as a teacher of film studies and literature at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute.

I hope you'll enjoy these free sampler of my work -- many thanks to John Betancourt at Wildside for putting it together! -- and will look for more of my stories, collaborations and translations in upcoming issues of *EQMM*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine* and elsewhere. I don't have an author page on Facebook, and I'm not much of a tweeter, but you can find out more about me—and read several more of my stories for free—on my website, joshpachter.com.

—Josh Pachter

TRY THESE BOOKS BY JOSH PACHTER

MYSTERY

The Mahboob Chaudri Mystery MEGAPACK®
(published in trade paperback as *The Tree of Life*)
Partners in Crime (forthcoming)

MYSTERY/HORROR

Styx (written with Bavo Dhooge)

THE NIGHT OF POWER

Originally published in *Ellery Queen's
Mystery Magazine*, September 1986.

The burning in his lungs was a hawk with sharpened claws, and it tore at his flesh with cruel anger.

Ana aouz cigara, he thought, his throat parched, his breathing hoarse. *I must have a cigarette!*

But it was Ramadan, the month of Saum, and the Holy Quran commanded all able-bodied adult Muslims to “eat and drink until so much of the dawn appears that a white thread may be distinguished from a black, then keep the fast completely until night.”

The sick were temporarily exempt from fasting, as were nursing and pregnant women and travelers making long journeys, though they were all obliged to make up any of the 30 days they missed for such reasons as soon after the end of the month as they were able. Only the very young and the very old were fully excused from participation.

He had no reason not to fast, so he tasted no food in spite of his hunger, his cracked lips touched no water in spite of the heat of the day, and—worst of all—the packet of cigarettes in the pocket of his *thobe* remained unopened, and its cellophane wrapper crinkled in laughter at his suffering as he caressed it with longing fingers.

He looked out the plate-glass windows of the great Presidential Hotel, past the green-tiled roofs and golden central dome of the Guest Palace to the sea, where the sun's nether rim flamed but a centimeter above the slate-gray waters of Gudabiyah Bay. He watched without appreciation as the fireball extinguished itself in the Gulf and brilliant streaks of salmon and orange and brightest yellow washed

across the ivory sky. He clenched his teeth and waited impatiently as darkness fell, and the *imams* peered solemnly at their white and black threads in the gathering dusk.

Then at last, at 8:07 PM, the signal canon sounded. Almost instantly there was a cigarette between his lips and he was drawing its soothing smoke deep within himself, blessing the Almighty for having given him the strength to conduct himself faithfully throughout the day.

Praise Allah, he thought, *only three days more and I am free of this torture for another year!*

When he had smoked his cigarette down to the filter, he stubbed it out in an ashtray and crossed the lobby to the doors of the Al-Wazmiyyah Coffee Shop. The room was already crowded, but he filled a plate with *mezzah* and *ouzi* and *kofta kebabs* from the *Iftar* buffet and found an empty table by the window. He ate slowly and sparingly and drank three glasses of cool spring water, then he left the restaurant and, after a brief stop to pick up the object he needed, rode the elevator to the sixth floor of the hotel.

The corridor was deserted—all the Presidential's guests but one, he felt certain, were downstairs at the buffet, even the Westerners, who had been cautioned not to eat in public during the daylight hours as a sign of respect to Ramadan and to the Muslims observing the fast. He walked quickly down the hallway to the fire door, let himself through it, and climbed the last two flights of stairs to the hotel's top floor.

Here, too, there was no one to be seen, no one to see him as he crept along the thick brown carpeting to the door marked 613. He put his left ear and the fingertips of his right hand to the wood and listened intently. There was nothing to be heard from within. His hand darted into the pocket of his *thobe*, not for his cigarettes this time but for the ring of keys, which he clasped tightly in his fist to keep them from jangling as he drew them forth.

He selected one key from the dozen on the ring and fitted it soundlessly into the lock set into the doorknob. He held his breath as he turned the key, turned the knob, and swung the door inward

just enough to allow himself to slip through the opening and ease it shut behind him.

The room was dark, illuminated only by the faint glow of the hotel's exterior lighting that filtered in through the drapery covering the single window.

He waited. The only noises in the room were the gentle hum of the air conditioner and the deafening pounding of his heart. When his eyes had adjusted to the almost-blackness, he was able to make out the shape in the left-hand bed, imagined he could actually *see* the one thin blanket rising and falling with the breathing of the figure who lay there asleep.

He stole across the room to the side of the bed and reached once more into his *thobe's* deep side pocket.

When his hand reappeared, he was holding neither cigarettes nor keys. He was holding a small black revolver that glittered evilly in the diffused light admitted by the curtains, and his hand was steady as he touched it to the temple of the sleeping man in the bed.

* * * *

Mahboob Chaudri's temples throbbed and his pulse raced with exasperation as he stood looking down at the dead man.

"Where in the name of the Prophet is his clothing?" he demanded of no one, though there were four other people in the room to hear him. There were angrier words in Chaudri's mind, but he was able to bite them back before they escaped his lips. *Fasting is only one half of faith*, he reminded himself. During the month of Saum, hostile behavior was also to be avoided—as were lying, backbiting, slander, the swearing of false oaths, and the glance of passion. So it was written, and—a devout believer—so Mahboob Chaudri would comport himself, the better to avoid distraction from the pious attention to God that was the meaning of Ramadan. It was not easy for him to calm his thoughts, but he held them inside his mouth with the tip of his index finger as he returned his gaze to the bed.

The dead man was completely naked, covered only by a light blanket of a blue several shades paler than his eyes. He was a Westerner,

a Caucasian, but his skin was richly tanned. He had close-cropped blond hair, a fine Roman nose, and what Jennifer Blake under happier circumstances would have called a dishy moustache. There was a small black hole just above his left temple, and the blood that drenched his pillow was still damp.

The Pakistani turned away in disgust. In spite of the air conditioning, he was hot and sticky in his olive-green Public Security uniform. There was a line of perspiration on his upper lip.

“Where are his *trousers*?” he exclaimed, fighting to keep his voice below a shout. “His shirt? His shoes and stockings? Where is his billfold? Where are his *papers*?”

“The murderer—” Abdulaziz Shaheen began, but Chaudri cut him off.

“Yes, yes, of course. The murderer has taken everything away with him, including the gun and the keys they used to let themselves into this room.”

“But, *why*?” said Jennifer Blake, a willowy brunette in a trim gold-and-white suit with a nametag on one lapel that identified her as the hotel’s night receptionist.

“So that we would not be able to determine the victim’s identity, of course.” Chaudri had been called away from his *Iftar* meal at the Juffair Police Barracks to investigate a report of a gunshot at the Presidential Hotel, and he was tired and hungry after a long day of fasting.

“That’s not what I meant.” The Blake woman frowned, her cultured British tone beginning to broaden under the strain of the evening’s events. “It’s bloody well obvious that’s why his kit was taken off, excuse my French. What I meant was, why was he *here*?”

“Yes,” said Mirza Hussain from a straight-backed chair by the low couch where the receptionist, Shaheen, and an elderly woman bundled up in a terrycloth bathrobe were all sitting. “That is exactly what I have been asking myself all along. Why was this man sleeping in room 613 in the first place? Why, for that matter, was he in the hotel at all?”

“He was not a guest?” asked Chaudri.

“I never checked him in,” Jennifer Blake said firmly. “Not to-night nor any other night.”

“Mr. Hussain? Mr. Shaheen?”

Although the Presidential was part of a large American chain, it was—like all major hotels in the emirate—run by Bahrainis and staffed by a mixture of British expatriates, Indians, and Pakistanis. Mirza Hussain was general manager, Abdulaziz Shaheen chief of security.

Both men were native Bahrainis, both now wore the traditional Arabic long white *thobes* and red-and-white-checkered *ghutras*, but there the resemblance between them ended. Hussain was built along the lines of the country’s ruler, Sheikh Isa bin Sulman al-Khalifa; he was small in height but rather portly, with golden skin, a graying moustache and chin beard, and wise black eyes behind the glittering lenses of a pair of spectacles with thin golden rims. Shaheen was muscularly built and clean shaven and olive-complected, a decade younger and a full head taller than his superior.

“I have never seen him before,” said Hussain, with an uncomfortable glance at the lifeless figure on the bed. “Perhaps Miss Ramsey or Miss Messenger checked him in during one of the other shifts.”

The security chief shook his head. “I don’t think he was a guest,” he said, and paused to draw deeply on the cigarette held between the thumb and index finger of his right hand. When he spoke again, wisps of smoke puffed from his mouth along with his words. “But of course I can’t be certain. It should be easy enough to find out.”

“You yourself do not recognize him?” Chaudri persisted.

“No. I have no idea who he was. But whether he was a guest here or not, he had no business in this particular room, that much is certain.”

“And why is that?”

It was Mirza Hussain who answered. “Standard hotel practice, *mahsool*. Sometimes important visitors drop in on us unexpectedly. We must always have space available to accommodate them. So, no matter how fully booked up we may be, we keep this one room

vacant in case of an emergency. It is never rented out in the ordinary way.”

Chaudri made an irritated grimace and turned back to the dead man in the bed. “Then what were you doing here sleeping?” he muttered. “What is it you were doing in room 613, where you ought not to have been at all, asleep so early on a Ramadan evening? And who is it who shot you, by all that is holy? Why were you here, and why were you killed, and by whom?” He curled his nut-brown hands into fists and rubbed wearily at his eyes. “All right,” he sighed, “let us begin at the beginning. Frau Jurkeit?”

The older woman in the bathrobe stirred restlessly on the green leather sofa. “I am in ze room next door,” she said, her English heavily accented. “Room 611. I am here in Manama wiss ze trade delegation from Bonn. We were to meet in ze coffee zhop downstairs for dinner at 8:30, but I twisted my ankle as I was dressing and decided to dine alone in my room. I ordered a—how do you say it?—a cutlet from room service.” She glared disapprovingly at Mirza Hussain. “It was undercooked. Tomorrow I shall recommend zat we try ze Hilton instead. Just after nine o’clock I heard ze shot from zis room.”

Chaudri took a pad from the pocket of his uniform jacket and made a note. “And what did you do then?”

“I called down to ze desk and reported what I had heard to, I assume, zis young woman.”

“You did not look out into the corridor?”

“Certainly not!”

“Ah, yes,” Chaudri remembered. “Your ankle.”

“*Mein Gott*, it had nuzzing to do wiss my ankle! Someone is shooting a gun, do you sink I am sticking my head outside for a better look?”

“No, no,” he said quickly. “Of course not. Miss Blake?”

The receptionist brushed a stray lock of hair into place and took up the story. “It was three past nine when I spoke with Frau Jurkeit, I checked the time as I hung up the phone. I immediately rang Mr. Shaheen’s office, but he wasn’t there at the moment. Then I tried Mr.

Hussain, but he didn't pick up, either. So I did what I ought to have done straightaway, I expect—”

“You rang up the Manama Directorate,” Chaudri completed the woman's sentence for her. “And the officer you spoke with reported to the Investigation Officer, and the Investigation Officer sent for me. And by the time I arrived here at the hotel, you had located Mr. Shaheen and Mr. Hussain, and you gentlemen had already come up to this room and let yourselves in, and discovered....”

He let his voice trail away and indicated the body in the bed with a wave of his hand. He worked his jaw thoughtfully from side to side and went on. “And discovered a naked man in a room where he ought never to have been, shot to death by an unknown assailant who then took all the victim's clothing and other belongings away with him when he left.”

“It seems incredible,” said Abdulaziz Shaheen. “What will you do now, *mahsool*?”

The Pakistani clapped his hands together decisively. “Now,” he said, “I will begin to earn the salary which the Public Security Force is so generously paying me.”

* * * *

It was almost midnight, and Mahboob Chaudri was alone in the room with Abdulaziz Shaheen. Mirza Hussain had gone down to his second-floor office, where he had promised to keep himself available in case his further presence should be required. Jennifer Blake was back at her post. In a few moments, she would be relieved by Gillian Messenger, who would be on duty at the reception desk until 8 AM. Frau Jurkeit had long since returned to her own room next door. Even the body of the murder victim was gone.

Much had happened during the last two hours. Two and three at a time, the Presidential Hotel's entire night staff and those members of the daytime and graveyard shifts the security chief had been able to reach by phone had paraded in and out of room 613 for a look at the dead man. Yousif Albaharna, the daytime doorman, thought he might have seen him entering the hotel that afternoon, but all

Westerners looked more or less alike to him, he admitted sadly, and he could not be sure. No one else could remember ever having seen the man before, and both Gillian Messenger and Leslie Ramsey were certain they had not checked him in as a guest.

The Forensic Medical Officer had arrived shortly after 11, had examined the body, had confirmed that death had resulted from a single shot to the head from a small-caliber weapon, had grudgingly agreed that the victim had most probably been asleep at the time the shot was fired, had stood around impatiently while the final groups of hotel employees filed past the corpse, and then at last had instructed two uniformed *natoors* to carry it away on a stretcher. He would perform an autopsy in the morning, he announced, and then he was off.

Mahboob Chaudri had been kept almost continuously busy. He had interrogated the staff. He had conferred with the FMO. He had supervised the activities of the team of photographers and fingerprint men sent out by the Criminal Investigations Division. He had gone down to the lobby and verified that both of the keys to room 613 were present in the room's mail slot on the wall behind the reception counter, where they belonged. There were several sets of passkeys available to the maids, and the manager and security chief each had a set of his own, of course, but these, too, he had been able to account for.

It seemed improbable that the dead man and his murderer had entered the room together. A more likely explanation of the sequence of events was that the victim had let himself in, either with a skeleton key or by springing the lock with a strip of celluloid, and had then undressed and gone to sleep. The murderer had followed some time later on, had committed his crime and gone away with the dead man's belongings, unaware that there was anyone next door to hear the fatal gunshot and report it.

Thus far Mahboob Chaudri had proceeded with his investigation and with his thinking, and now he sat with Abdulaziz Shaheen and sipped gratefully at the strong Arabic coffee that Mirza Hussain had sent up for their refreshment. There was a bowl of fresh dates next to

the fluted *dallah* on the room-service dolly, and the fruit had happily dulled the edges of Chaudri's hunger.

The security chief lit a cigarette from the butt of his last one and slipped the almost-empty packet back into the pocket of his *thobe*. "If only we could put a name to the man," he grumbled. "If we knew who he was, that might tell us why he was here in the hotel, in this room. And if we knew why he was here, that might tell us why he was killed, and who it was who shot him."

"In the morning," said Chaudri, "we will circulate his photograph around the embassies, the banks, the Western companies, and hopefully someone will recognize him. But all that must wait for business hours. If only there was something else we could be doing *now*."

"What a night to feel powerless," Shaheen growled, "on this, the most powerful night of the year."

Mahboob Chaudri looked up from his thoughts. In the flurry of activity surrounding the murder, he had forgotten that this 27th night of Ramadan was *Lailat al Qadr*, "the Night of Power," when the first teachings of the Holy Quran were revealed to the Prophet of Islam for the guidance of his followers.

"This night better than a thousand months," Chaudri quoted, "when angels and spirits descend to the Earth, and it is peace until the rising of the dawn."

He got impatiently to his feet and began to pace the deep golden carpet, his hands clasped fitfully behind his back.

"Well, for once the blessed Book is mistaken," he said. "There has been no peace for *me* this night, oh, dearie me, no. And there will *be* no peace for me, not until I locate the gun and identify the villain whose finger pulled its trigger, not even should all the angels and spirits in Heaven choose this very moment to begin their descent."

And at that very moment, Mahboob Chaudri ceased his restless pacing. "To begin their descent to Earth," he said slowly, staring down at the faint impression in the empty bed that showed him where the dead man had lain.

Then, to the amazement of Abdulaziz Shaheen, he grabbed up his peaked uniform cap from the nightstand between the two beds and dashed from the room without another word.

* * * *

Milling crowds of men in long white *thobes* and women in veils and long black *abbas* thronged the Baniotbah Road as Chaudri wheeled his dusty Land Rover out of the Presidential Hotel's parking lot and headed north toward the Muharraq Causeway. Andalus Park was filled with picnickers, and children splashed in the fountains as wide awake and gleeful as if it were the middle of the afternoon rather than the middle of the night. But this was Ramadan, and Bahrain's Islamic population would celebrate with food and drink and gaiety till long after dark, then sleep for several hours and arise to celebrate again until *Sahari*, when the first light appeared in the east and the *muezzin's* call to dawn prayer announced that it was time to resume their fasting with the ritual of *Niyya*, the renewal of intention.

The crowds thinned out as he swung across the Khawr al Qulayah waterway, then picked up once more when he reached Muharraq Island. He left the Land Rover in a no-parking zone at the entrance to the International Airport's main terminal building and welcomed the rush of cool air that greeted him as he stepped through the glass doors.

As always, the terminal was buzzing with activity. Day and night had no meaning here: Bahrain was a refueling point for flights connecting the Western world with the Far East, and there was a constant ebb and flow of transit passengers whiling away the hours between legs of their journeys, in addition to the frequent takeoff and landing of planes beginning or terminating their runs in the emirate. As Chaudri paused in the teeming passenger hall to get his bearings, the information boards above his head showed the arrival of a Korean Airlines flight bringing construction workers from Seoul and the imminent departure of an Air France 727 returning bankers, corporate executives, and diplomats to Paris.

When he found the small glass-walled checkpoint he was looking for, a solicitous *natoor* listened to his request and handed him a thick bundle of white cards. He went through the stack carefully, and when he had examined them all he shuffled back to the middle of the pile and removed a single card. He read it again, and a third time, and then he put it in his pocket and returned the rest of the cards to the *natoor* and drove back into Manama to the Police Fort at Al Qalah, where he closed himself up in a tiny investigator's cubicle and placed a long-distance telephone call to a distant city where it was still late the previous afternoon.

* * * *

"I appreciate your staying on so late," said Mahboob Chaudri, as they stepped off the elevator into the quietly tasteful lobby of the Presidential Hotel. "So early, I suppose I should be saying—it will be dawn in another few hours. Which way is it we are going?"

"This way." Mirza Hussain led him past the entrance to the Al Wazmiyyah Coffee Shop (still open, but practically deserted now), past the reception desk (where Gillian Messenger stood diligently at her post), and down a broad corridor lined with boutiques, a newsstand, a hairdresser, all dark and long since closed for the night. "I am responsible for whatever happens at this hotel," he said as they walked. "Never before has such a terrible thing taken place here. Naturally I stayed."

"It is almost over now," Chaudri told him reassuringly. They were at the end of the corridor, facing a heavy wooden door marked "Abdulaziz Shaheen, Chief of Security" in both Arabic and English.

Chaudri knocked loudly, then twisted the doorknob and walked in without waiting for a response. The Presidential's security chief was seated behind a cluttered desk, a half-smoked cigarette in his hand. He had apparently been reading through the contents of the file folder lying open on the desk before him, but he closed it at their entrance and pushed it casually off to one side. His dark face was drawn and tired, and there were shadows beneath his deep-set black eyes.

“Mr. Shaheen,” said Chaudri, “we’ve come to talk with you about the murder.”

Shaheen nodded silently and waved them to a pair of chairs. He put his cigarette to his lips and inhaled deeply.

“According to the stories of Frau Jurkeit and Miss Blake,” Chaudri began, “the death shot was fired at approximately nine o’clock last evening. Now, of all the puzzling questions this crime presents, the question which has been interesting me the most is this one: why was this man in bed, probably asleep, at that rather early hour of the evening? The simplest answer would be that he was in bed because he was tired. But why was he tired? During Ramadan, both Arabs and nonbelievers keep late hours as a rule—and even were it not Ramadan, nine o’clock is rather early for a man of that age to be sleeping, isn’t it?”

“Not necessarily,” Mirza Hussain frowned. “If he had had a busy day, he might well have decided to go to sleep early. But why here in my hotel? He was not a guest. He had no business here. He most certainly had no business in room 613.”

“Yes, yes,” said Chaudri. “But still the question bothered me. Then, an hour ago, you said something which supplied a possible answer, Mr. Shaheen.”

“About the Night of Power, you mean?”

“Indeed. You reminded me that tonight, the 27th night of Ramadan, is *Lailat al Qadr*, and it struck me that perhaps our victim had just recently descended to Earth, like the angels and spirits written of in the Holy Quran—not in a winged chariot from Heaven, no, but in a silver bird from some other time zone. Though it was only nine in the evening to us when he died, if he was a new arrival from, say, the United States or Canada, his inner clock would have insisted that it was, for him, the middle of the night. Perhaps that was why he was in bed when his murderer found him in room 613.”

Abdulaziz Shaheen stubbed out his cigarette carefully and took a fresh packet from the top drawer of his desk. He left the drawer open, Chaudri noticed, stripped off the cellophane and peeled back the foil, and tapped the packet against his forefinger. “So you think

he was a newcomer to Bahrain?" he asked, as he flicked a thin gold lighter into flame.

"I know he was. When I left you in such a rush, I drove out to the airport and found the officer in charge of Customs and Immigration. He gave me all of the disembarkation cards filled out by the passengers who arrived in Bahrain yesterday afternoon. Those cards are containing quite a bit of information: name of the arriving passenger, home address, employer, reason for visit to the emirate, and so on. One of yesterday's cards caught my eye. It was made out in the name of Stephen Kimble, an American, and his employer was given as Presidential Hotels International, with an address in California, in the USA."

Abdulaziz Shaheen breathed out a cloud of smoke that masked the expression on his face for a moment.

"I placed a phone call to the Presidential chain's Los Angeles headquarters," Chaudri went on. "It was still daytime there, and I was able to speak with a Mr. Deming, who recognized my description of our unfortunate corpse and identified him as a company executive named Stephen Kimble and told me exactly why Mr. Kimble had been sent to Bahrain."

It happened so swiftly that, had Mahboob Chaudri not been waiting for the movement, he would certainly have missed it. Abdulaziz Shaheen's hand darted into his opened desk drawer and came out holding a .25-caliber Browning automatic pistol. His dark face was cold and hard as he jumped up from his chair with the gun in his fist.

"I must insist that you keep both your hands in sight," he said, his voice tight and strained. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hussain, but I really must insist."

Mirza Hussain sat very still, one hand in the pocket of his *thobe*. His eyes told a tale of infinite weariness and sorrow. At last, with a deep sigh, he took his hand from his pocket. He was holding a packet of cigarettes and a plastic lighter. He lit a cigarette for himself and held out the packet to Chaudri.

"No, no," the Pakistani shook his head. "I am not a smoker. It is, I think, an evil habit. But it does not seem to have interfered with

your reflexes, Mr. Shaheen. I'm glad I stopped in to see you on my way up to the second floor and warned you of what to expect from this visit. Now, if you will give me your pistol, I will hold it while you are seeing what else is to be found in Mr. Hussain's cavernous pockets."

"You are thinking of the murder weapon?" Hussain smiled grimly. "I don't have it here, gentlemen. Perhaps I should have brought it with me, after all. But it is back in my office, in my closet—in Stephen Kimble's suitcase."

* * * *

"You were embezzling money from the hotel," said Chaudri flatly, when Abdulaziz Shaheen had confirmed that the manager's pockets were indeed empty, save for a ring of passkeys and a handkerchief.

"Yes. Never very much at a time. Always small amounts, small amounts. But over the last three years I have diverted almost fifty thousand dinars into my private account. I was very careful. I thought it would be impossible for anyone to discover what I had done. Apparently I was wrong."

"Embezzlement," remarked Mahboob Chaudri, "is also an evil habit. More evil than smoking, since it does harm not only to oneself but to others as well. But I am interrupting. Please forgive me and go on with what you were saying."

Hussain told his story matter-of-factly. There was nothing in his manner to indicate that he saw anything out of the ordinary in the events he was describing. "Kimble flew in yesterday afternoon," he said. "He took a taxi from the airport and came directly to my office without stopping at the reception desk. We spoke for a few moments only. He was exhausted from his journey, and I took him up to 613 and let him in with my passkey. He did not tell me why he had come—we would talk further in the morning, he said—but I knew. The home office had found out about the missing money. He had come to investigate, and he was sure to learn that I was the thief. If only I could have another few days, I thought, I could get my affairs in order and get out of the country before anyone was the wiser."

“So you killed him,” said Abdulaziz Shaheen.

Hussain looked down at the glowing tip of his cigarette. “Yes. I waited until *Iftar* was well under way, when I could be certain that the sixth floor would be deserted, then I went upstairs and let myself back into the room. It was dark, he was sound asleep. I shot him. Then I gathered his belongings and put them in his suitcase with the gun and brought it down to my office.”

“You realized that if we knew who he was,” Chaudri suggested, “we would quickly learn the reason for his visit to Bahrain. And that would tell us it was you who had the only motive for killing him.”

“I thought I was safe. Unless room 613 is in use, the maids clean it only once a week. It would be days before the body was discovered, I felt certain, and by then I would be safely away. It never struck me that there might be anyone else on the sixth floor when I fired the shot. I never stopped to consider that you would be able to trace him through Customs and Immigration without his papers. I must have been mad. If I had thought of that, I would never have killed him. I would have dropped everything and fled.”

Mahboob Chaudri got to his feet. “But criminals never think of everything,” he said. “Not even wise men think of everything. Perhaps it is their remembering that fact which makes them wise.”

* * * *

“In another hour it will be *Niyya*,” said Mirza Hussain, lighting a cigarette. “I’d better smoke now, while it is still permitted.”

Chaudri marveled at the state of the man’s mind, at the idea that he felt it acceptable to embezzle money during the month of Ramadan, felt it permissible to commit murder then or at any other time, but would be careful to avoid food, drink, and tobacco during the daylight hours as if he were truly a devout Muslim.

They were standing in the warm night air in front of the Presidential Hotel’s main entrance, waiting for a Public Security van to come and take Hussain away. The streets were almost empty, the city was asleep. But shortly the Islamic population would begin to awaken, in time to enjoy another meal before the time of fasting began.

“Listen to me, *mahsool*,” said Mirza Hussain softly. “I have perhaps ten thousand dinars hidden away at my home. If we were to go there, you and I, I could give you half of that money and use the other half to make my escape. You could say that I broke away from you, that you chased after me but lost me in the darkness. No one would ever know the truth.”

Chaudri did not respond.

“Five thousand dinars,” the murderer continued. “That is a great deal of money, *mahsool*. It is, I imagine, more than your beautiful green uniform earns you in an entire year. Does my proposal not even tempt you?”

Chaudri considered the question. In fact, five thousand dinars was slightly more than he earned as a policeman in *two* years. It was enough to make the down payment on the bungalow in Jhang-Maghiana he was planning to build for Shazia and the children. It was enough to allow him to return to Pakistan much earlier than he had ever dreamed possible.

Was he tempted? Was he resisting temptation now, or was his mind truly pure?

The answer came to him with the clarity of polished crystal.

“No,” he said firmly, truthfully. “Your proposal is not tempting me, Mr. Hussain. It is not tempting me at all.”

It was still quite dark, but soon the sky would begin to lighten. Soon it would be possible to distinguish a white thread from a black, soon the *muezzin* would call the faithful to the renewal of their fast, soon the Night of Power would draw to a close.

Mahboob Ahmed Chaudri took in a deep breath as he stood there before the great hotel with his prisoner at his side. He could feel the power enter his body, his lungs, his very being—the power of a thousand months. He raised his gaze to the heavens and offered up a silent prayer of thanksgiving and joy. As his lips formed the unspoken words, a shooting star arced across the sky and lost itself in the velvet infinity of the night.

A great sense of peace descended around him and into him, a peace Mahboob Chaudri knew would last until—no, *beyond*—the rising of the dawn.

HISTORY ON THE BEDROOM WALL

Written with Rebecca K. Jones

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I'll never believe it was just a coincidence, not if I live to be 40. Somehow, I'm convinced, Ani *knew*.

It was a quarter after seven on the last Saturday morning of fall semester. I was putting the finishing touches on my Physiological Psychology term project, which had been due on Friday—the day after Katie dumped me. Fortunately, Professor Griffen was a good guy, and he'd given me a 24-hour extension. I had three and a half of those hours left to cross my t's and dot my i's.

I'd been listening to a *lot* of Ani DiFranco since the split—Katie had turned me on to her, and despite our split, I still really liked Ani's music.

“Love is a piano dropped from a fourth-story window,” she sang, “and you were in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

I had my stereo whispering for once, instead of blaring. There'd been a big party over at the Ross Townhouses the night before, but I'd been squirreled away in my friend Geetika's senior thesis carrel in the library, struggling to find the last connections between the neural structures involved in love and addiction, so I'd skipped it. This had been the last big party of the term, though, so I imagine most everyone else had been there. Now, just after 7 AM, it was quiet on Stew 2, a co-ed hall, and all signs pointed to it remaining quiet until 11 or so, which was why the assertive knock at my door took me by surprise. Except for Dee, who was by then surely folded

into the full lotus position in Hepburn Lounge, everyone else in the dorm ought to have been sleeping it off.

“Come in,” I called, not looking up from my laptop.

The knock sounded again, louder this time.

Annoyed, I pushed away from my desk and went to the door.

Standing in the hall was a complete stranger. How had he gotten into the building? The Mid-wide access-card system had recently been changed to 24-hour security, and now only students, faculty and campus police could enter Middlebury College’s dormitories without an escort. The stranger wasn’t in uniform—he wore a conservative gray suit and held a snap-brim hat in his right hand—so I knew he wasn’t a campus cop. He was old, too old to be a dad, and there was a scowl on his lined face which seemed somehow more sad than threatening.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

“I’m looking for Ally,” he said, leaning forward against the door jamb. “She in?”

“Ally? No, sorry,” I said, “there’s no Ally here.”

“Sign says Ally,” he frowned, pointing at one of the postings on my door.

I glanced at the cardboard square and laughed. “Ally,” I explained, “as in the Allied Powers. Not like a deserted alley. It’s a job description, not a name. My name’s Maxine—everybody calls me Max—and I’m officially a Junior Counselor and unofficially an Ally, what we call a ‘safe space,’ which means kids on the floor who want to talk about their sexuality without fear of being judged can come to me. All us Residential Life staff members are Allies, it’s sort of part of the job.” I caught myself before launching into an op/ed piece on the importance of education and acceptance in the gay community and got back to the point. “Who are *you*?” I demanded. “What do you want? And how did you—?”

“I’m Detective Branigan, Max,” he interrupted, flipping open a leather wallet and showing me a gold shield with the words “Burlington PD” on it. “I’m with the Homicide Bureau.”

I took a step back into my room, away from him. “H-homicide?” I stammered. “What—what are you doing *here*?”

His scowl deepened. “I’m sorry to have to be the one to tell you this, Max, but one of the ‘kids’ on this hall died sometime last night.”

“Died?” I repeated, bewildered. “One of mine? Are you—are you sure?”

He nodded sadly. “I’m sure. Her roommate found the body and called it in. She’s already identified her, but, since you’re the JC on the floor, well, we’d like you to confirm the identification before we notify the parents.”

There were a hundred questions I probably should have asked, but somehow I couldn’t think of any of them.

One of my girls was *dead*? I had no idea how to react, how to respond. This was something they hadn’t covered in my JC training.

My heart pounding dully in my chest, I followed him as he left my doorway and walked next door to the women’s bathroom.

Usually deserted at this early hour on a weekend, the bathroom now was bustling with activity. In the middle of a circle of policemen, a white sheet covered what had to be the dead girl’s body.

Detective Branigan moved to the figure’s head and pulled the sheet away from her face. At first, all my mind could absorb was that she was completely naked.

And then the piano finished its four-story freefall and slammed into me.

The dead girl was Katie.

* * * *

The next several hours went by in a blur. Someone—it must have been me, although I don’t remember—called a floor meeting and told the rest of the hall. We were all in shock, of course, completely devastated. I think everyone cried, even Jake, our token football player. I know I did.

Afterwards, Gavin started planning a memorial service for Katie—which Katie herself would have found way ironic. The day before, early Friday afternoon, Gavin had stormed into my room,

totally upset. He and Katie had gone to lunch together, he'd told me, as they did every Friday, and in the salad line at Proctor he'd asked her out to dinner.

"On a date?" Katie'd said. "Have you lost your mind?"

And then she'd laughed at him.

Gavin, of course, had been mortified. He'd dropped his tray and sped back to Stewart, heading immediately to my room to tell me what had happened and ask for my advice.

Maybe I shouldn't admit this—I certainly didn't say it to Gavin—but I was secretly pleased. Katie had dumped me on Thursday afternoon, claiming she was tired of hiding, tired of not being able to tell her friends about our relationship. If anyone had found out that I was dating one of my freshmen, though—well, I would have been fired, for starters, probably bounced out of the dorm and possibly even suspended from school. I'd believed Katie when she'd told me that that was the reason she was breaking up with me, and her refusal to go out with Gavin was reassuring. I told myself that, as soon as the year was over and my JC obligations were history, we could go back to the way things had been between us, pick up where we'd left off. That's why I'd let her keep the red Hingham Hockey sweatshirt she'd swiped off my chair one chilly October evening when we'd been watching a DVD in my room.

Anyway, once I'd finally convinced Gavin that this was not the end of his undergraduate love life, I'd booted him out of my room. As I ushered him out the door, I spotted Ethan, his roommate, disappearing down the hall.

Perfect. How much of our conversation had that little sneak overheard?

* * * *

Later, after the floor meeting, by the time I remembered Professor Griffen's paper, my deadline extension had come and gone. My heart wasn't even *near* it, let alone in it, but I managed to focus enough to finish proofreading the last couple pages and email it off

to him with an explanation. I was pretty sure he'd understand—and, if not, well, whatever.

Late Saturday afternoon, I was lying on my bed, still in shock. Katie was dead. She was *dead*. And the policeman who was investigating her death was a Homicide cop. Was it possible that she'd been *murdered*?

I was curled up in the fetal position, cupping my iPod in my hands, watching a video of her I'd taken late one night with my digital camera's video-capture mode.

Late nights were the only times we had ever really been able to be alone. She'd wait for her roommate Dee to fall asleep and the hallway to clear, then slip silently past Gavin and Ethan's room and the bathroom and into mine, where we'd sit up till all hours, mostly just *talking* about everything under the sun, until it was time for her to slip back down the hall before the early birds began to stir.

In the video, Katie was holding her hairbrush like a microphone and singing along with Vampire Weekend's "Cape Cod Kwassa Kwassa" with all the energy and conviction of an *American Idol* audition. Her long blond hair flew as she shook her head to the beat, her blue eyes sparkling like sapphires as they reflected the glow from the desk lamp I'd pointed at her to illuminate the scene.

Although I wasn't wearing my headphones—I didn't think I could handle listening to Katie attempting to match Ezra Koenig's falsetto just yet—I didn't hear a knock, so it surprised me to see Detective Branigan's head peek around the edge of my open door. As surreptitiously as I could, I slipped my iPod beneath my pillow.

"I know this is a bad time, Max," he said, "but can I talk to you for a few minutes?"

I waved him to my desk chair, which he swung around to face me.

"I need to ask you some questions." He spoke quietly. "Do you think you can handle that?"

"Can you tell me what happened to her, first?" I asked, my voice cracking. "How did she die?"

He tapped a Winston out of a pack, looked around for an ash-tray and, when I shook my head, put his lighter away and slowly rolled the unlit cigarette between his palms. “We’re not sure yet,” he admitted. “The cause of death seems to have been a blow to the head—but there just wasn’t enough blood in the bathroom for her to have died there. We think she must have died somewhere else and then been moved into the bathroom afterwards. We’ll know more after the autopsy.”

“But why on Earth was she naked?”

“I’m afraid we have no idea.” He wasn’t the least bit afraid, I thought, but I knew what he meant. “Look, Max, I’m truly sorry you lost a friend, but I—”

“No, it’s all right,” I interrupted. “We need to find out who did this. How can I help?”

He pulled a little spiral notepad out of his inside jacket pocket and flipped it open. “For starters, tell me where you were last night.”

The question stunned me. “Am I a suspect?”

“At this point,” he said, “I’m just trying to get a sense of who was where when it happened.”

I had to think for a moment: last night seemed so far away. “I went to the library after dinner,” I said, “around 7:30. My friend Geetika, she’s a senior, she loaned me her thesis carrel. I had to work on my psych paper, and I wanted to be somewhere where I wouldn’t be disturbed. Somewhere along the line, I just couldn’t concentrate any longer”—I paused again, making sure I had it as right as I could get it—“I guess it must have been around 1 AM, so I packed it in and came back here. I thought about stopping by my friend Larry’s room, but then I remembered that he went home for the weekend to study for finals.”

“Did anyone see you in the library?”

“I—I don’t know. I don’t think so. *I* didn’t see anyone I knew.”

“And where were you at 3:15?”

“Here, sound asleep. Why? Is that when—?”

He flipped back several pages. “According to the computer records, that’s when Katie used her access card to let herself into the dorm.”

I frowned. “That’s awfully late for Katie. She never stays out past, I don’t know, maybe two?”

He made a note. “I see.” He let a moment go by, and then he closed his notebook and looked straight into my eyes. “You seem to be taking this really hard, Max. Were you and Katie particularly close?”

I swallowed. Did he know about us? How *could* he? I’d never told anyone about our relationship. Had Katie?

“We were pretty good friends,” I finally said. “She was one of my freshmen here on the floor, of course, so I saw her all the time. We hung out. We were on the Student Activities Board together, and she used to ask me for help with her psych homework—she was a history major, she knew all about *what* people did, but sometimes she had trouble understanding *why* they did it.”

“I have the same problem in *my* line of work,” he said, nodding. Maybe he *didn’t* know about our relationship, after all. “Was there anyone who disliked Katie? Anyone she fought with?”

For that one, I didn’t need to think before answering. “Dee,” I said. “Her roommate. She and Katie fought all the time. They fought last night, actually, before the picnic.”

“Picnic?”

“They—Katie and Dee—Gavin and Ethan, too, actually—they were all in the same first-year seminar, Introduction to the Sociology of Gender. Professor Farmer always has a late-night picnic for his seminar students at his house at the end of the term. It’s indoors, I don’t why he calls it a picnic, but he does. He lives a mile or so out of town, north on Route 7. Anyway, before they left for the picnic, Dee and Katie got into a huge argument. Katie thought Dee had stolen her iPod. She accused her of it, and Dee went crazy—it was awful. They were both yelling at each other. Their room is three doors down the hall, but I could hear them from here. I went over and told them to knock it off, and Katie came here for a minute to

tell me what had happened. She actually”—I swallowed a lump in my throat—“she was sitting right there where you’re sitting.”

He gave me a minute to compose myself. When I started breathing again, he resumed his questioning. “Anyone else? Anyone she recently had issues with?”

Should I tell him about Gavin?

He sensed my hesitation. “Anything you can give us may help,” he said kindly.

I drew in a breath and decided to risk it. “Yesterday, this guy on the hall, Gavin, asked her out. Katie said no—she wasn’t interested in being in a relationship, I think, and, besides, Gavin’s not really her type. He came to me, told me about it—Gavin did, I mean. I calmed him down, reminded him that one ‘no’ from one girl wasn’t the end of the world. He was pretty steamed about the situation when he stormed in here, but I think he was okay when he left. I don’t think he was *ever* mad enough to—to do anything to hurt Katie. That’s—I mean—no, I’m *sure* he wasn’t.”

“All right, Max, thanks.” He slipped the notebook into his jacket pocket and stood up. “I think that’s enough for now. If I need to ask you any more questions, is it okay if I come back?”

I nodded.

“Here’s my number,” he said, handing me a business card. “You think of anything else, give me a call, okay?” He opened the door and walked off down the hall.

* * * *

Just the thought of it was staggering.

Katie had been killed, probably murdered, not even two days after dumping me. That made me the spurned lover, and, regardless of what Branigan said, I’ve seen enough cop shows on TV to know that a spurned lover is an obvious suspect.

I hadn’t killed Katie, I knew that. But I also knew that, in order to protect myself from being suspect number one and chance the truth coming out and getting me tossed out of Middlebury halfway

through my junior year, I'd have to figure out who *did* kill her before the detective dug any deeper into our relationship.

Right, sure, Max, you're a big 20 years old, and now all you have to do is put on your Nancy Drew outfit and beat the police to a murderer. Piece of cake!

* * * *

I knocked on Katie's door.

Well, not Katie's any longer. Dee's door, now, only Dee's.

She opened it, bouncing up and down impatiently on her perfectly pedicured toes, equally unsurprised and unhappy to see me. Dee is the pretty one on the floor—her family emigrated to Boston from Kashmir 10 years ago, and Dee'd brought with her the glossy black hair and striking features of a Bollywood film star—but right now her oval face was somber.

"Look," she said, waving vaguely towards Katie's side of the large double room, "I'm not going to tell anyone about you two, if that's why you're here. It's none of my business. It's *nobody's* business."

I gaped at her. "You—you *knew*?"

"Oh, Max, of *course* I knew. It was so totally *obvious*—I realized what was going on like six *weeks* ago."

"But—but I—"

"The way you looked at her? I might be a freshman, but I'm not *stupid*."

I swallowed hard. "Dee, you can't—"

"I'm not going to bust you, Max. I haven't said a word about it to anyone, and I'm not going to tell anyone now."

I pressed my lips tightly together and inhaled through my nose, processing this new information. "But she's *dead*," I said at last. "What if *I'm* the one who—?"

"Yeah, right," she scoffed. "She broke your heart, so you killed her? I don't think so. And I want to know who did it as much as you do. They have to find out before—well, before he does it again."

I hadn't even thought of that. Somewhere out there was a killer, and whoever it was who'd killed Katie could just as easily kill again.

I pressed the heels of my hands to my temples, trying to think.

"Katie's parents," I finally said. "Do you know if—when they're coming up? To get her things?" I sat on Katie's bed, softly stroking Bennington, the stuffed bear she'd had since she was a kid.

"Tomorrow," she said. "I talked to her dad about an hour ago. They couldn't get a flight, so they're driving. They'll be here in the morning." She sighed and sat on her own bed. "Look, Max, you know Katie and I weren't the best of friends, but I want to help. What can I do?"

I looked at her. "I want to ask you some questions, I guess. Is that okay?"

She nodded, and I saw that there was moisture in the corners of her eyes.

I took another deep breath and gathered my thoughts. Maybe the best way to begin would be to follow Branigan's lead. "For starters, where were you last night?"

"I was at Professor Farmer's picnic until about 11," she said. "Brandon gave me and Gavin a ride back here, and I sat up studying for my calc exam until like 12:30. Then I went to bed."

"Did anyone see you, once you got back to campus?"

"Not after Brandon dropped us off. I went down to the bathroom just before bed to brush my teeth, but there was nobody there or in the halls."

"Tell me about the picnic," I said.

She looked out the window for a minute before responding. "Well, you know about the fight beforehand. I never touched her freaking iPod—I have my *own* freaking iPod, everybody *here* has a freaking iPod!—but Katie just made up her mind I'd swiped it and practically chewed my head off. After you got her calmed down, though, she came back to the room and flopped down on her bed and picked up Bennington and hugged him—and her iPod was under the stupid bear, right where she'd left it. She apologized, but I think maybe she thought I really *had* taken it, but then I changed my mind when she

was down in your room and put it back. Anyway, we didn't hang out at the picnic—she was talking to Brandon, and I was with Blair and Ethan on the other side of the living room. Professor Farmer gave us our papers back around 10:15 or so, and what I remember is that Katie left soon after that. She was upset about her grade, I think. That was the last time I saw her.”

I got up from Katie's bed and looked at her desk. Her laptop was there, open and on, but there was no term paper in sight. In the second drawer, I found her “Gender” notebook—but the paper wasn't there, either.

“You didn't see her here at the dorm?” I was still poking around, trying to find the paper or some other sign that she'd been back to her room after the picnic.

“No,” she said. “I didn't. And I didn't see her paper, either, if that's what you're looking for.”

I sighed. “Okay, Dee. Thanks. I—I'm going to take her bear with me for tonight, okay? I'll bring it back in the morning, if her parents want it.”

“Okay,” she said, walking me to the door. I was halfway back to my room before I heard her say my name. I turned around.

“I really am sorry, Max,” she said.

* * * *

After talking to Dee, I really just needed to lie down and gather my thoughts, and that's what I was doing when someone knocked on my door. I rose unsteadily and opened up to find a distraught Gavin inches from my face. Gavin was the preppiest person on the hall, male or female, and owned enough Polo shirts to make Ralph Lauren jealous. Today he was wearing a black Polo over khakis. Mourning attire.

“Can I come in?” he said. “I need to talk to someone—you knew Katie best and I—well, you know—I just need to talk.”

I nodded and let him into my room. He sat in the beanbag chair across from my bed and tried not to cry.

I handed him a tissue and sat on the edge of my bed, uncomfortable with his emotion but knowing I needed to talk to him, too.

“Remember,” he said at last, “what I told you, you know, about what happened yesterday afternoon?”

I frowned. The last thing I wanted to think about was that he had asked Katie out.

“No, listen,” he continued, “what if it’s my fault that she—well, that she—died?”

I leaned forward. “Gavin,” I said, “it’s not your fault unless you killed her. Did you kill her?”

“No!” He looked startled. “It’s just that—what if she was upset that I asked her out, and she did something stupid because of it? That would *make* it my fault! I mean, she went to that party at Ross, last night, and you know how she gets when she drinks....”

“It wasn’t your fault, I promise you. When did Katie go to Ross, though? I thought she was at Professor Farmer’s picnic?”

“She was. Dee and I caught a ride out there with Brandon—he said Katie could ride with us, too, but she took her bike and got there about 10 minutes after we did. She mainly talked to Brandon until dinner, but I was close enough to hear some of their conversation and she seemed, you know, perfectly normal. When Farmer handed back our papers, though, sometime after ten, she got really upset. Soon after that, she took off—all there was to drink at the picnic was soda and cider, and she told me she wanted a ‘real’ drink, so she was heading over to Ross. She asked me if I wanted to go with her, but I was having a good time at the picnic and decided not to. Dee and I came back to campus with Brandon about 11. He dropped us off, and I just went to bed. I was still kind of freaked about—well, what happened. Are you *sure* she didn’t—you know—do it herself?”

“She didn’t kill herself, Gavin. The policeman said she was probably murdered.”

He shuddered, then got up from the chair and threw his tissue at my wastebasket. “This is so horrible, I know, but—in a way, I’m sort of relieved.” Suddenly realizing how that had sounded, he added in a rush, “Not that she’s dead, obviously. But, you know, if somebody

else killed her, then I guess it really *wasn't* my fault, after all. But, Max, why would anyone kill Katie? I mean, you know, *why?*”

“I don't know. That's kind of the million-dollar question right now, I guess.”

Shaking his head in bewilderment, he left my room.

* * * *

Why *had* Katie been killed? If I knew that, I thought, the answer might help me figure out *who* had killed her.

The Ross Townhouses seemed to be the last place she'd been seen alive, so I decided to head over there and nose around. It had already turned bitterly cold in Vermont, so I shrugged into my North Face fleece, threw on a wool ski cap, grabbed my backpack, and headed out.

It was only a five-minute walk from Stew to Ross, but I was thoroughly chilled by the time I touched my access card to the pad and pushed through the door. My hard-partying friend Charlie was sprawled out on one of the shabby sofas in the downstairs lounge, surrounded by pillows, with a dog-eared paperback in his hands. I'm not sure if he was actually *reading* it, but he was *holding* it—and it was by Kierkegaard. Charlie grew up in a Chicago suburb, a real straight-arrow all the way through high school. His first weekend at Midd, though, he'd found himself at a party at one of the social houses, and I don't think he's been sober for 15 minutes at a stretch ever since. I have no idea how he keeps his GPA up—but underneath his shaggy blond hair is a brain that somehow seems to be successfully fueled by alcohol.

“Hey, Charlie,” I greeted him, and slapped the hand he held aloft. “You were at the party last night, right?”

“Absolutely, babe, of course I was!” The words were slurred, and, although I couldn't see it, I knew he must have a bottle somewhere in the immediate vicinity. “It was *the* party of the semester! I looked for you. Where were you?”

“Studying,” I confessed. “It's a rough job, but *somebody's* gotta do it—and I knew *you'd* be drinking for the both of us. Listen,

Charlie, I can see you're busy, but can you help me with something for a minute? Do you remember my friend Katie?"

He frowned, concentrating. "That's that freshman you're really tight with?"

I hesitated at his use of the present tense, but decided it'd be just too complicated to explain. "Yeah," I said. "Her."

"Sure. She was here last night, I asked her where you were. She just glared at me and walked away." His voice dropped to a whisper, and he waggled his eyebrows like Groucho Marx in those goofy old comedies my dad likes to watch. "I think she was in a hormonally induced bad mood, if you know what I mean."

"Do you remember who she was talking to, what she was wearing, anything?"

He laughed. "What are you, a detective?"

"No, Charlie, I'm not a detective," I said patiently—thinking, *I just play one on TV*. "I'm just trying to figure out what happened to my friend."

He dug beneath his pillows, found a blue Nalgene water bottle, and took a swig of whatever was in it. "That's deep," he said. "Hey, wait a second ... she was wearing a red Hingham Hockey sweat-shirt! That's why I asked her if you were with her, 'cause I figured it had to be yours, nobody else I know went to Hingham. She pretty much ignored me, though. She wasn't talking to anyone, I don't think. She seemed really angry and just sort of sat in a corner by herself, pounding beers. While I was manning the keg, she got at least three or four of 'em from me, and she never said a word, not even thanks."

"Do you know what time she left?"

He considered the question, then shrugged helplessly. "I have no idea, sweetheart. I was so shwasted, I wasn't paying any attention to the time."

I figured that was about all I'd be able to learn from Charlie, so I thanked him, told him to get some sleep, and turned to go.

"Hey, Max!" he called after me. He pulled several folded sheets of typing paper from between the pages of his book and held them

out to me. “She left this behind, I found it lying on the floor when I was cleaning up this morning and saw her name on it. Can you give it back to her?”

I took the thin sheaf of paper from him and unfolded it. Across the top of the first page was the heading “Gender is as Gender Does,” and underneath it “by Katie Parker.” Scrawled across the bottom of the page in red ink was a big circled B+ and a handwritten message: “This is promising, Katie, as far as it goes. Problem is, it doesn’t go far enough. I expected a more fully developed job from you!”

Katie’s paper. She was a straight A student, so I could imagine the B+ flipping her out. Professor Farmer was a notoriously tough grader, though. I’d only gotten a B- from him on *my* final paper, two years earlier, and I’d been relieved to wind up above C level.

“Thanks, Charlie,” I said dully. “I—I’ll take care of it.”

I headed out into the frosty December air. Now what?

The last anyone had seen of Katie had been at Prof Farmer’s picnic. I was not one of the professor’s fans—actually, I’d always found him sort of skeezy, and I really didn’t relish the idea of seeing him when I didn’t *have* to—but it seemed clear he must’ve been one of the last people to see her alive, and that meant I probably had to go talk with him. I had no idea where the expression “bearding the lion in its den” came from, but I knew what it meant—and I knew I was going to have to do it.

* * * *

By the time I got into my rusted old Volvo and headed north, it was after 10. I slipped a mix CD Katie had made for my birthday into the player and jumped forward to track 9—Ani’s “Freakshow” seemed a fitting soundtrack to the day’s events.

Several minutes north of campus, I pulled into a long driveway and wound my way through the bare woods that surrounded the house. I parked next to his truck and noticed that the living room lights were still on. Good. Despite the cold, a window was open, and I could hear soft jazz wafting towards me. I don’t know jazz, but whatever it was was mellow and warm with saxophones.

I rang the doorbell, but there was no response from within the house. I rang again. On the third ring, the music stopped, and, as I was about to press the buzzer a fourth time, the door finally opened.

Professor Farmer hadn't changed much since I had seen him last—in December of my freshman year. His hair was a little thinner than I remembered, his beard a little grayer, but the way he slowly looked me up and down before speaking crept me out just as much as ever.

He was holding a half-full bottle of #9, a Burlington brew, in his right hand, and he raised it to eye level and tipped it towards me in a sardonic salute.

"Maxine Callahan, as I live and breathe," he said. "It's been quite a while, Max. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"You heard about Katie?"

His smile disappeared. "Yes, it was on the news. Such a tragedy. She was a sweet girl, a fine student."

"She was at the picnic last night, wasn't she?"

He nodded.

"Can I come in and ask you about it?"

He seemed nonplussed by the question, but then he nodded sadly and said, "Yes—yes, of course."

He stepped aside to let me pass, but not quite far enough. As I came into the house, I had to brush against him. The momentary touch of his skin against mine made me shiver.

His house hadn't changed much, either. He followed me into the living room and sat down on the couch. I moved to the armchair across the low coffee table from him. There was a throw rug I wasn't sure I remembered next to the table, but otherwise the room seemed the same.

"Can I get you one?" he said, raising his bottle again.

"No," I said quickly, adding a thank-you almost as an afterthought.

He took a drink. "This is rather awkward," he said.

"About Katie, Professor? What time did she leave here?"

He paused a moment before replying. “She took off earlier than the others, I remember. Around 10:30, I think. Perhaps a bit before that.”

“Alone?”

“I think so, yes. Yes, I’m almost certain.”

“Did anything out of the ordinary happen? I know Katie and Dee argued before they left the dorm. Did they fight again at the picnic?”

“Not that I noticed,” he answered. “She seemed quiet last night, quieter than usual. She only talked to Brandon, as far as I can recall. I handed back the final papers at, oh, quarter past ten or so, and she left not long after that.”

“Do you remember what she was wearing?”

He looked into his beer, as if to find the answer there. “A shirt? A sweater, maybe? Jeans, I think. I didn’t notice, to be honest.” He drained his bottle and got up. “You sure you don’t want one?”

“No, thanks,” I said. On the drive out, I’d rehearsed a series of questions in my mind, but none of them seemed especially important any more, and being there was making me less comfortable by the minute. “Can I just use your restroom, and then I’ll be on my way?”

He looked at me, his face emotionless. “Sure, Max, you know where it is.”

I nodded. When I reached the little room at the end of the hall, I swung the door shut behind me and leaned heavily on the sink, my pale face gazing back at me from the medicine cabinet’s mirror. I was running out of options. Professor Farmer had been no help, and I was clueless where to go next. If Detective Branigan didn’t know about Katie and me yet, well, he’d know soon, and my ability to find out what had really happened would be severely limited—limited to the inside of a jail cell, probably.

I sat down on the crocheted toilet cover—where had *that* monstrosity come from?—and buried my face in my hands. I had no idea what to do.

When I looked up again, I found myself staring blankly at the professor’s white wicker laundry hamper, 18 inches in front of me.

In the narrow gaps between the wicker slats, I caught glimpses of the blue of a pair of jeans, the white of a T-shirt, the red of—

The red of—

As if in a trance, I lifted the hamper lid and looked inside. Dirty shirts, underwear, jeans. The hint of red, barely visible through the slats, was completely invisible from above. Wincing at the smell of somebody else's dirty laundry, I held my breath and dug a hand deep into the pile, burrowed down past the denim and cotton and linen and pulled free—a red sweatshirt.

On the front were the words “Property of Hingham Hockey.” Inside was a label with my name on it.

I breathed deeply and stared down at it, confused and disbelieving.

What was my sweatshirt doing in Professor Farmer's bathroom?

I searched the rest of the hamper, dumped its contents onto the tile floor and went through everything, piece by piece. And buried way down at the bottom were a pair of flared jeans much too small and feminine to be the professor's, a lilac bra and matching panties, and a pair of flipflops with tiny red lobsters on the straps.

Katie's, all Katie's.

I went out to the living room, holding the sweatshirt hidden behind my back.

“Professor?” I said. He looked up blearily from a fresh bottle of #9. “Katie was wearing a sweater last night, you think?”

He shook his head. “I'm sorry, Max, I just don't recall. There were 15, 16 kids here. I don't remember who wore—”

I should have run out of the house, jumped in my car and gone straight to Detective Branigan. Looking back at it now, I know that. I was a full head shorter than the professor and he probably had a good 60 pounds on me, but something inside me made me stand my ground, made me pull the sweatshirt out from behind my back and say, “Are you sure it wasn't a *sweatshirt*?”

His eyes snapped into cold focus.

“Are you sure it wasn't *this* sweatshirt?” I said.

The room went very quiet.

There was a rattle from the kitchen as the automatic icemaker in Professor Farmer's freezer dropped a tray of new cubes into its bin.

"She—may have been," he said. "Where did you find that?"

"It was in your hamper. Along with her jeans, her underwear, her shoes. Why did you take her clothes, Professor? Why did you *keep* them? Why didn't you just get rid of them?"

Somewhere, a clock was ticking. I hadn't noticed it before.

Professor Farmer took a slow sip from his bottle. He wiped the back of his hand across his mustache. The ticking now seemed deafening.

"I handed back the group's final papers last night," he said. "I'd given her a B+, which I thought was actually generous. She was obviously disappointed, though. She left here in a huff, early, maybe around 10:30. That was the last time I saw her. I don't know what happened to her after that."

"Her clothes are in your hamper, Professor. Was she naked when she left here?"

He shook his head, disgusted at his own sloppy thinking. "Her clothes," he repeated slowly. "Her clothes were in my hamper."

He drank again, finished the beer and set the bottle down clumsily on the coffee table. He dry-washed his hands nervously—I remembered seeing him make the exact same gesture in the seminar, whenever he was asked a question he couldn't answer—and then he seemed to come to a decision.

"She came back," he told the table, his voice low and dull, "about 1 AM. Everyone else had gone. I was sleeping, but she pounded on the front door and woke me up. I put on my bathrobe and went to the door and let her in."

He picked up the bottle and looked at it, sighed and banged it back onto the table.

"She was drunk," he said. "I think she'd gone to the party at Ross. She was angry about her grade. She didn't have the paper with her, but she insisted she'd deserved an A. I told her to come to my office Monday morning, to bring the paper, and I'd go over it with

her—but she wouldn't listen. I tried to calm her down, but she took a swing at me."

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. "I pushed her away," he said, eyes still closed. "She fell. She hit her head on—on this table, right here."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "And that killed her?" I said.

He opened his eyes. "I don't know," he said. "I'm not sure. There was blood on the floor. I tried to clean it up, this afternoon, but—" He waved a hand at the throw rug I hadn't recognized.

I swallowed. "What happened after she fell?" I prompted him.

At last he raised his head to face me. "I felt for a pulse, but I couldn't tell if there was one or not. I'm not a doctor, I—" He twitched involuntarily and a breath rushed out of him. "I picked up the phone to call 911," he said. "I punched the 9 and the 1—and, and then—I hung up."

"You hung up? Why?"

He licked his lips. "Two years ago, Max, a girl in my freshman seminar filed a sexual-harassment charge against me. You remember that, don't you?" He smiled at me ruefully. "*I* remember. There was an investigation, the charge was eventually dropped, but still. Mud sticks, you know? I couldn't afford another—I mean, here this girl was, at my house, obviously drunk. Dead or alive, I was in for it, either way."

The light finally dawned. "So you decided to move her?"

"Yes. I—"

"Why take her back to the dorm? Why not just dump her in the woods somewhere?"

He stared at me blankly. "I have no idea," he said. "I wasn't thinking, I was in shock. I waited until I was sure everyone would be in bed, and then I put her in my car and put her bike in my trunk and drove her back to Stewart. It was late, around three. I put her bike in the rack and carried her up the steps. I didn't want to use my access card—that would have left a record of my having been there on the computer. Hers was in her back pocket, though, so I just touched her jeans to the pad and the door clicked open. I put her in

the bathroom and—came home. I thought that, if she *was* still alive, someone might find her there and—I didn't—didn't find out she was really dead until this afternoon."

"But why did you take her *clothes*?" I demanded.

He sat there on the sofa, hands clasped in his lap, blinking at me. He seemed completely bewildered.

"I—fingerprints," he said. "I thought the police might find my fingerprints on her clothing. I stripped everything off her and brought it home and put it all in the hamper until I could figure out what to do with it. I was going to burn it tonight, out in the woods."

I stood over him, watching him wash and wash his hands. The silence between us stretched out in every direction.

At last I said, "It was an accident, Professor. You might get in a little trouble for moving the body, but—"

"No," he said decisively. "No, Max, I can't let you tell them. It would—I can't—it would destroy my career. I can't afford to be dragged into another scandal."

He leaned forward, put his hands on the coffee table and pushed himself to his feet. Like a robot from one of those corny old science-fiction movies, he began to move jerkily towards me.

He didn't leave me any choice, really. When he moved into range, I did what any good hockey player would do and punched him, right in the face.

* * * *

"—so when I retired in '94, my wife and I moved up here. She grew up in Winooski, and we always talked about eventually settling in Vermont. I couldn't stand the peace and quiet, though, after 30 years on the NYPD, so when I heard that Burlington was looking for an experienced homicide guy, I clipped on a new shield and went back to work."

It was three days later, and I was sitting across from Detective Branigan in the Juice Bar, the oddly named coffee shop in McCullough Hall, at his invitation.

“I wish my grandfather would go back to work,” I said. “He just putters around the house all day and drives my grandma crazy.”

“If I hadn’t taken this job,” he joked, “I think my wife would have divorced me by now.”

I laughed.

“That’s nice,” he said. “That’s the first time I’ve seen a smile on your face. You’re a good looking girl when you smile, Max.”

I looked down at my coffee, embarrassed.

“I wanted to tell you a couple things,” he said, after a while, “now that it’s all over.”

I don’t know why I felt so nervous, but somehow I was afraid of what he was going to say.

“Farmer made a full confession,” he said. “He even admitted that you were right when you accused him of harassing you two years back.”

I looked up. “He did?”

“He did. That was then, though, and this is now. Now, he wanted to go after you for assaulting him the other night—he never touched you before you hit him, he says, and he wound up with a broken nose—but I, ah, convinced him to let the matter drop.”

“If I hadn’t hit him, he might have killed me, too!”

Branigan sighed. “That’s speculation on your part, Max. *He* says he was going to the phone to call the police and turn himself in.”

“That’s a lie! He told me he couldn’t let me tell on him. He said it would ruin his career!”

“Your word against his. He’ll deny it in court, and there’s no way to prove it.”

I shook my head at the insanity of it.

“What’s going to happen to him?” I asked.

“Given the fact that he undressed her and moved her body, I would *love* to go for Murder One, but I don’t think we can make that stick. I’ll fight for it, but I’m guessing the DA will charge him with involuntary manslaughter and a couple other minor things, and he’ll plead it all down to one lesser charge. I don’t think he’ll do any time, but—”

“No time! That’s crazy! He killed Katie!”

“He killed her, sure, but it wasn’t murder, Max. It was an accident: she took a swing at him, and he acted in self-defense. At least that’s his story, and I don’t think we’re going to be able to prove otherwise. In any case, he’s finished at Middlebury, probably in academia altogether.”

I picked up my mug and sipped, but the coffee tasted like nothing.

All around us, students were talking in little groups, doing homework, opening packages from home. Professor Griffen, hunched over a table with a man who looked enough like him to be his younger brother, spotted me and waved. Katie was dead, but life at Middlebury went on.

“I’m sorry about your girlfriend,” Branigan said.

I looked up sharply. “My—she wasn’t—I mean—how did you—?”

He got up from the table and patted my shoulder. “I may be old, Max, but I’ve been a cop for a long time. I can see when somebody’s reacting to the death of a—”

“You can’t tell anyone,” I said in a rush. “If they find out, I’ll—”

He put up his hands in surrender. “Your secret’s safe with me,” he said. “It’s got nothing to do with the investigation—never did. I won’t tell a soul.”

“You promise?” I said. “You have to promise! You have no idea how much trouble I could—”

“Cross my heart,” he said, “and hope to die.”

He turned, then, and went away. I watched him disappear through the Juice Bar door, and when he was out of sight I sighed and reached for my headphones and slipped them on. I hit the Play button on my iPod, and the stuttering opening guitar chords of “Both Hands” filled my head with sound.

“In each other’s shadows, we grew less and less tall,” Ani sang breathily, “till eventually our theories couldn’t explain it all, and I’m recording our history now on the bedroom wall.”

History, I thought. Katie’s major.

There were tears in my eyes as I pulled a notebook and a pen from my backpack.

I sat there for a moment, gathering my thoughts, and then I began recording.

“I’ll never believe it was just a coincidence,” I wrote, “not if I live to be 40. Somehow, I’m convinced, Ani *knew*...”

POLICE NAVIDAD

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Behind the apartment door, Eartha Kitt was singing “Santa Baby” about 25 decibels louder than was sexy. No wonder a neighbor had called in a complaint.

Bob Keene adjusted his gun belt and settled his uniform cap firmly on his head. He pressed the bell, pretty sure that no one inside would be able to hear it ring.

He gave it 30 seconds, then slipped his nightstick from its sheath and tapped lightly on the door. While he waited, Eartha Kitt gave way to the Jackson 5’s cover of “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus.” When he judged that another half a minute had gone by, Keene rapped the wooden panel more sharply. Almost instantaneously, the volume dropped by a good 50% and the door swung open, revealing a shapely blonde in her mid-40s and not a heck of a lot else.

Keene looked her up and down without much interest.

“See anything you like?” she asked, her index finger slowly rubbing her lower lip.

“Can I get you to put that away for me, please, ma’am,” he said.

“I don’t mind you want to cop a feel,” she said, and smiled broadly. “Cop a feel,” she repeated. “You get it?”

“Every damn shift,” he said. “Put it away, please.”

She cupped a palm beneath her breast and wrestled it into her bra, shimmied her shoulders to shake her blouse closed.

“Is there a problem, officer?” she asked.

“Neighbor complained about the music,” he said.

“We’ll keep it down,” she promised. “Sorry.”

He touched the brim of his cap. “Preciate it,” he said, and turned to go.

“For Chrissake, it’s Christmas Eve. Come in and have a glass a eggnog, why don’t ya?”

“I appreciate it, ma’am, but I’m on duty.”

“So we won’t spike it. Come on in for a couple minutes and take the chill off.”

He considered it. A light snow was falling, and the city had been remarkably peaceful for a holiday. He hadn’t even written a parking ticket since coming on shift.

“Much obliged,” he said, and as Michael Jackson handed off to Dean Martin’s rendition of “Walking in a Winter Wonderland” he stomped the white from his boots and went in.

The front door opened directly into the apartment’s living room. The place was sparsely furnished, and the party was sparsely attended: a sagging sofa and two mismatched armchairs ringed around a ramshackle coffee table, a TV in an old entertainment center that looked rescued from the dump, a set of bookshelves crowded with a mini-stereo and a collection of CDs and DVDs and knickknacks but no books, a scraggly pine hung with cheap Kmart ornaments and draped with lights, one balding guest in shotgunned jeans and a blue down vest over a red flannel shirt. Keene was the only one of them wearing shoes.

“Earl, you go pour the officer some eggnog, and don’t put no booze in it.” She turned back to the cop. “You don’t mind if he boozes mine up for me, do you?”

“It’s your house,” Keene smiled.

The bald guy thumbed the remote he was holding and went through an archway into what Keene assumed was a kitchenette, leaving behind a raspy voice wailing “Mom got drunk and Dad got drunk, at our Christmas party” against a minimalist instrumental background. Keene had no idea who the singer was—it sounded more like Lyle Lovett sucking on a helium balloon than anything else he was familiar with.

“Siddown,” the woman invited, waving at the couch. “I’m Nikki.”

“Like Saint Nick,” Keene said.

“Yeah,” she grinned, settling into one of the armchairs. Her eyes were bright, and the blue and red and green and yellow twinkle lights on the tree reflected in her dilated pupils. “Just like, except with two k’s and an i.”

He took a seat, and the bald guy came out of the kitchenette balancing two old-fashioned glasses and a plastic tumbler.

“No booze,” he said, handing Keene the tumbler and Nikki one of the glasses.

“That’s Earl,” Nikki said. “My boyfriend, kinda.”

“What kinda?” frowned Earl, perching on the arm of her chair. “Either I am or I ain’t.”

She patted his knee. “Course you are, honey. You and me against the world, right?”

He fumbled in the pockets of his vest, came up with the remote and stabbed it sullenly.

“And so this is Christmas,” John Lennon sang, “and what have you done?”

“Eclectic taste,” Keene nodded, sipping gingerly at his eggnog. *It* tasted like it had come out of a cardboard carton from a third-rate dairy.

“Electric *what?*” Nikki asked, but he let it go. There was an oversized brown coaster on the coffee table, and he wanted to park his tumbler there but the space was already occupied by three leftover glass ornaments: a purple ball, a clip-on blue jay, and what looked like a hand-painted Santa.

Earl saw him looking at the coaster, which also seemed to be made of glass, and quickly said, “Don’t worry about the table, it’s a piece a crap.”

That was interesting, Keene thought. He leaned back and faked another sip of eggnog.

“Nice place,” he said. “You folks mind if I take a look around?”

Earl's eyes flashed panic, and he fiddled nervously with his plastic remote. "Don't you need a warrant for that?"

"Not with the tenant's permission, sir, no, I don't. You both on the lease?"

Frank Sinatra invited them all to have themselves a merry little Christmas, and Nikki squeezed Earl's hand reassuringly and bubbled, "It's my place, officer, and you just go ahead and look around all you want to. *Mi casa es your casa.*"

He gently pushed the three ornaments off the coaster and picked it up and turned it over. It was a mirror, and there was a hint of white residue on its surface.

"Nikki," Earl said tightly, "you shouldn't oughta—"

Keene picked up the purple globe and held it to his ear and shook it gently. He set it down and picked up the blue jay.

Earl made Old Blue Eyes turn the microphone over to the King. "I'll be home for Christmas," Elvis crooned, and Keene replaced the bird and reached for the Santa.

"I paid 10 bucks for that one," Nikki said nervously. "It's German, I think, hand-blown glass. I don't think you oughta—"

He held it to his ear and shook it, and carefully began to work loose the metal cap.

"Hey," Earl barked, "the lady said—"

The music changed again. "Oh, the weather outside is frightful," Michael Bubl  sang, "but the fire is so delightful."

Keene tipped the Santa sideways and gently shook it, and a drift of fine white powder sifted out of Santa's head and swirled in the updraft from the central heating.

"I told you not to do that," Nikki said plaintively.

"Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow," said Keene.

SELFIE

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The Spring Fling just isn't any fun without Savannah. That plain Jane Jane Blaine asks me to slow dance, like she could hold a candle to my beautiful girlfriend. Not! So I slip out of the gym and back to the dark loading dock behind the high school to sneak a smoke and take the selfie Savannah asked me to text her.

It's not Savannah's fault she came down with the stupid flu and had to stay home. Like it says on the bumper stickers, stuff happens, right?

So here I am out back of the school, a Camel dangling from my lower lip and dribbling smoke, angling my stupid iPhone 4 so I can take the shot with available light instead of washing everything out and blinding myself with the stupid flash. It would be so much easier with the 6, I could line the shot up perfectly with the front camera, but my stupid parents never even upgraded me when the 5's came out, forget the 6's!

Savannah's never seen me in a suit, so that's why she wants the selfie.

Me, I never used to smoke, you know, except this one time junior year I was hurrying across the football field, running late for practice, when I saw Savannah standing on the loading dock with a couple of her girlfriends, cheerleaders, all of them, smoking. So after practice I stopped at the 7-Eleven and bought a pack of Camels and started carrying them around in my pocket with a book of matches, just in case.

And, sure enough, a week or so later I saw her out here again, by herself this time, rummaging through her book bag, all distracted, so I saunter up to her and say, “You want a smoke, there?” and she says, “Yes, please, I thought I had some,” and I whip out my pack, which is now only half full because I been practicing, and I shake out two cigs and stick them between my lips and light them both, real cool, like I seen in this movie my old lady was watching on TCM, and I give her one and she takes a long drag and sighs out smoke and says, “Thanks, I needed that.” So we get to talking, right, and I ask her does she want to go out some time, and she says, yeah, why not, let’s go to a show.

Turns out “a show” is what Savannah calls a movie, so Saturday night I pick her up in my Mitsubishi Eclipse, which I bought used but in practically cherry condition with money I been saving up like forever, and we go downtown. I let her pick the movie and she picks a scary one, so by the time the psycho killer is sneaking up on his fourth victim she’s got her arm snaked through mine and she’s pressed up against me, holding my hand so tight it would’ve hurt if I wasn’t pretty buff from working out and stuff, and by the time the movie ends we’re all boyfriend and girlfriend, you know, and now it’s senior year and we’re still together, making plans to go to the same college after graduation.

So I’m out on the loading dock with a cigarette and my stupid phone, so I can take a selfie and text it to her, you know. Off in the distance, I can hear the band in the gym. Actually, it’s not really a band, it’s just a DJ with records, our school’s too small and cheap for a band, but, still, it’s music, you know, it’s got a good beat and you can dance to it, and that’s all that really matters except not to me, not tonight, because Savannah’s home sick and what am I supposed to do, go dance with Plain Jane Blaine and get everybody gossiping? No, thanks.

I’m standing on the loading dock, and it reminds of that other time, a week after I saw Savannah out here smoking with her girlfriends, beginning of senior year. She was alone, that time, and I was scurrying across the football field, hoping nobody on the team

would see me, because it's an unwritten law at our school you don't go on the field unless you're actually on the team. I was late for practice, though, and I'm the captain of the stupid chess club, so it's no good if I'm late, so I cut across the field and I see Savannah out here by herself, pawing through her book bag, so I figured the hell with chess club and I come up to her and say, "Um, excuse me, you looking for a cigarette?" She looks me up and down and drawls, "Yeah, you got one?" And I take one out and hand it to her—I tried to learn how to smoke them myself, but they make me cough—and she says, "Match me, Sidney," which I later Googled, because my name is Steve, not Sidney, and found out it was a line from a movie, an old one, black and white.

So I try to make conversation with her, right, except she says she's late for something and poof, she's gone. If she hadn't of been late, we would have got to talking, I bet, and I would've asked her out, maybe Mom would have let me borrow her car, and by now Savannah would be my girlfriend, I'm pretty sure.

But I figure it's not too late. So tonight I get all dressed up and come to the dance, looking for her, except I can't find her, and Jane Blaine tells me she didn't even come to school today because she's sick, some kind of bug or something, so I thought, hey, I know what I'll do, I'll come out here on the dock where I first talked with her and take a selfie and send it to her, that'll be cool, she'll see I'm an okay guy and text me back, and maybe we'll catch a movie, after all, and wind up together, like they do in the movies, in what I decided Savannah probably calls "the show."

The lighting's pretty crummy on the loading dock, and I'm moving my stupid phone around, this way and that, trying to find an angle that looks cool but hides the tip of the cigarette, so Savannah won't see I haven't lit it, they make me cough, but she doesn't know that and I would look like a jerk if she did so I want to make sure she doesn't.

I twist around, angling my phone, and there are my feet, in exactly the same place they were that day I was late for Chess Club, thinking maybe if I showed up at the meeting they might let me join,

and Savannah was standing right in front of the door, blocking it. I was late, and I tried to say “Excuse me” but my voice came out all strangled and stuttery, and she looked at me funny and said, “Hey, you, Poindexter,” which is not my name, my name is Stephen, “you got a smoke?” Which of course I don’t, because of my condition, so I said “N-n-no” and she made a sort of *tchk* noise with her pink tongue and said “Get lost, then” but she was still in my way, so I had to go all the way around the school to the main entrance and by the time I got to Chess Club the door was locked and they wouldn’t open up when I knocked.

So I been practicing being cool in the mirror at home, and to-night I put on my cleanest pair of jeans and a plain T-shirt without any funny sayings on it and ride my bike to the dance. Savannah is in a corner with the rest of the cheerleaders, and they’re chattering away and laughing and stuff, and it takes me 20 minutes to get up the nerve while the DJ spins record after record, but I do, I go right up to them and, hardly stuttering at all, I say, “Can I talk to you?” and the other girls laugh like I told a funny joke but Savannah kind of narrows her eyes and says “Why not?” and comes outside to the loading dock with me.

“What do you want?” she says, pulling a pack of cigarettes from her purse and sticking one between her beautiful red lips and offering me the pack. “I have asthma,” I say, not stuttering, and she shrugs and puts the pack back in her purse and stands there, hands on her hips, waiting for me to light her cigarette for her, and I reach for my book of matches and remember they’re in my regular school jeans at home. She’s waiting for me to light her cigarette and I say, “S-s-s-sorry,” stuttering, and she looks annoyed and says “Jerk” and starts back inside.

So I reach out and grab her elbow and turn her around to face me, and I say “We’re not done here” without a trace of stutter and tell her some pretty cool things about myself which I guess impress her, because before you know it she’s looking up at me with respect in her eyes and I know she’s going to be my girlfriend, after all.

“Take a selfie,” she says, “of you and me, and text it to me so I can always have it on my phone and look at it under my desk in class and think about the next time we’ll be together.”

So I take my iPhone 4 from my pocket, which is better than the stupid 5 and 6, anyway, they ruined it when they did those upgrades, and I hold it up and angle it just right. I have to fiddle around to get Savannah in there, too, but I finally find the right angle, the perfect angle, me smiling, her pink tongue sticking out between her beautiful red lips as she lays there on the concrete, not moving so I can get the perfect shot, in sharp focus, the perfect selfie of me and my girlfriend Savannah, who I will love forever even though she smokes, and I smile and say “Cheese!” without a hint of a stutter and press the button to take the picture.