

Jack Pendarvis  
**A DUD DURDEN**  
MYSTERY



THE CASE OF THE  
**SEXY**  
**LADIES**

# THE CASE OF THE SEXY LADIES



A DUD DURDEN MYSTERY

*by*

Jack Pendarvis

McSWYS ELECTRANGULATIONS  
[VOLUME TWO]

*Designed by Andy Warner*

DAWN.

Dud Durden struggled manfully into his Scout-master pants. How had they come off? Why was he lying in the pumpkin-colored Alabama dust, a handsome young millionaire crumpled by his side? What was this spurt, emanating from the millionaire's frail and elegant neck, this Pollack starburst baked to dark brown in the dirt?

Ah yes. The blood that had gushed from the strike. The snake that had attacked them, and killed them, they thought.

Lombard Cuff III, otherwise known as Three, stirred, then thrashed, then farted, then sat up and looked around, then farted. It wasn't amusing. Nobody said it was. It reminded Dud of the time during his teen years when one of his female cousins had killed someone in a car accident. She had been given sedatives and Dud had sat up with her all night as she slept and, frequently, farted, unawares. How sad farting was, how human, how private, the sound of tragedy, of essential loneliness, the guilt of remaining alive and able to fart.

Today's occasion was more joyous. It turned out that no one had been killed by a snake. The two men were relieved and sheepish. There were some affirmative exclamations about being alive, and some awkward near-embraces, and they sat in the road saying nothing.

"I thought I was a fucking goner," said Three at last, hugging his knees to his chest.

"F-F-F-Fudge!" said Dud, and laughed joyously. "Oh dear me! I almost said the fuck word, in joyful emulation!" Both men laughed and laughed.

"Well, buddy, I have to say, you're all right," said Three. "No, I mean it. I don't want to embarrass you, but you laid your life on the line for me, bro. Fuck!" Three shook his head in wonder.

"Maybe the snake wasn't poisonous," said Dud. "Or maybe it had just enough poison to knock us out and make us go crazy for a little while."

"Don't be so fucking modest, you modest fuck,"

said Three. "You didn't know that at the time. For all you knew you were sacrificing your life for me. Fuck, I'm pretty sure you did save my life. That snake could have been a poison motherfucker. I got bitten right on a fucking artery or something and you sucked out the venomous shit. Maybe your taint was so thick and fleshy... no offense..."

"None taken," said Dud.

"Life is so fucking mysterious," observed Three. Something flickered on his face, something like a realization. Three got on his hands and knees and vomited white stuff at the thought, whatever it was.

"What is it?" said Dud.

"I don't want to talk anymore."

Three rose formally, took out his cell phone and went off in the bushes. Dud eavesdropped as best he could. It sounded as if Three were requesting a pickup by someone named Albert. When Three returned, he was stiff and snobbish in his filthy linen suit. His gorgeous yellow hair was filled with twigs.

"We must have been out here awhile," said Dud. "Listen to that rooster."

Dud, taking his own advice, listened with pleasure to the crowing of the rooster. Three gave the impression of ignoring the rooster in a big way.

"You know, I used to hear roosters all the time and gradually I just stopped hearing them," said Dud. "I guess I never thought about it. About what happened to all the roosters."

Three turned his back on Dud. It made Dud sad. What had changed between them? Was it the fact that Three owed Dud his very life? Had some kind of shock set in, the kind you read about in books? Of course, Dud had not sucked any venom at all, but Three didn't know that, and it didn't seem prudent to correct him.

Three was observing the crashed Escort in which they had reached this pass. He retrieved his knitting basket from the backseat and walked away.

"I'm sticking with you!" said Dud, following. "You know what you're doing. Hey, remember when



we were laughing it up? Remember?”

They ended up by the side of the paved highway, looking across to a cleared and fallow field from which the new red sun cast a blinding sheet of light. Dud and Three were covered in dew. Everything was. Cars passed occasionally and, occasionally, a tractor. Almost everyone waved, friendly country folk. Three never talked and after awhile Dud stopped trying. Perhaps two hours passed. A black Hummer stretch limousine passed them and pulled over a little piece up the road.

Three walked briskly to the limo. Dud trotted behind him, huffing and puffing and hurting.

He observed as the driver stepped down to wait, a slip of a fellow in a sharp uniform: chauffeur's cap, dove-gray topcoat, charcoal pants with a keen crease, tiny, perfect black shoes like a little boy's Easter shoes, soft-looking blue leather gloves. When Dud got closer, after the driver had already let Three into the back, he noticed the incongruous cheap glasses that could have come off the rack at Wal-Mart, the clip-on shades flipped upward out of respect for

Three, the rattiness of the moustache.

When Dud drew closer still he sniffed patchouli and recognized Albert's eyes. It was Farrah! Farrah dressed up like a little man! Farrah: Three's punkish young girl Friday and lover. Her “moustache” barely hung in place, globs of spirit gum clearly visible around the edges. Her smart cap, he knew, concealed greasy blond dreadlocks. She snapped her shades into place when Dud's eyes met hers.

“Him too, sir?” she said in a curious, hoarse bleat that Dud guessed was her idea of a man's voice.

Three shrugged.

Dud had trouble climbing in, but he made it. Farrah shut the door behind him.

Well, things were certainly getting odd. First Three's sudden change of behavior and now his little tootsie in drag. And before that, the snake.

Dud resolved to unravel it all as they rode back to Lumber Land. But once inside the limousine, which was nicer and more comfortable than his house, he fell fast asleep before he could muster a thought.

DUD AWOKE FROM a luscious dream in which a team of female bodybuilders resembling his dead wife had been hired to drive him around North America in the back of an eighteen-wheeler. The truck never stopped, there was some special process for refueling, and Dud never had to get out. He had everything he needed. The sides of the trailer were made of glass and families traveling on the interstate could marvel at Dud as he slept or wrote perceptive essays.

"I didn't talk in my sleep, did I? I often worry what will happen when I'm ninety and living in the poorhouse, a near vegetable. I'm afraid of the trash that is bound to come out of my mouth because I've bottled it up for so long. My secret, terrible thoughts."

No one answered.

"I imagine everyone is exhausted after our taxing experience," said Dud. "Too exhausted to talk."

No one answered.

"Yes, we're soaking it all in," said Dud. "Taking stock."

He noticed that his individual sector of the limousine had its own independent climate controls, and got a great deal of pleasure from blasting the ice cold air directly onto his face at its chilliest and most forceful levels while, simultaneously, turning his personal seat warmer up to "5," the maximum allowable setting. The contrast enlivened him.

"I believe I've just invented an entirely new form

of physical therapy," he said to Three. "My taint is remarkably becalmed."

They passed a sign welcoming them to Tennessee.

"Tennessee!" said Dud.

Mysterious Tennessee, home of music. Nothing like prosaic Lumber Land, Alabama, nothing like home. Three had something up his sleeve. A break in the case? It would account for all the silent brooding. Maybe the snake had been planted. After all, they had been following an unfaithful ornithologist into the woods. Maybe the ornithologist had a friend who was a herpetologist, or would they be professional rivals? And what of the monsignor who had thrown the case their way? Why would a monsignor be so interested in science? Didn't monsignors prefer faith? Was the monsignor setting the herpetologist against the ornithologist in the service of some insidious plot to destroy science from the inside? Dud imagined the herpetologist, the ornithologist and the monsignor on a sort of triangulated chart with color-coded lines running back and forth, but it made his head hurt and he stopped.

He took a Fresca from the built-in ice bucket and settled back. Out his window, enormous red neon letters advertised legal fireworks and adult novelties. The Hummer climbed the Great Smoky Mountains.

THEY PULLED UP in the clean gravel drive of a lonely stone cottage nestled in a grove.

Three jerked open his door and exited the vehicle, clutching his knitting basket.

Dud and Farrah listened as Three crunched, disconsolate, across the gravel, and watched as he approached the cottage to rap upon its quaint door. He was answered by an apparition in an olden bonnet, a wisp that disappeared as quickly as the door could open and shut. Three disappeared with the figure.

"Dud," hissed Farrah.

He met her reflection. "I knew it was you. Why are you dressed that way?"

"Look. You don't like me and I don't like you."

"I'm hurt by your assessment."

"I need your eyes and ears in there. I don't trust the bitch."

"I hate to leave this wonderful car. I have everything set just the way I like it. I'll be right back."

Dud let himself out. He thought at least he could ascertain how long Three's business here might take. As soon as he closed the door, Farrah sped away, spraying Dud's bare legs with shards of gravel.

Dud stood there looking at the empty space where she had been. He reeled, a little. He was dizzy from the altitude, but invigorated by it, too. Where had he been headed, anyway? His awful house with its memories of his dead wife? He walked to the cottage and knocked.

A woman opened the door. She was shrouded a bit by the shadows within, but Dud could see that her fine, long face was covered by an extraordinary amount of freckles, her light red hair tucked into an ancient nightcap brimmed with grimy lace. A heavily starched gray dress disguised her body completely, flaring out like a bell from what seemed to be a slender figure. Despite the severity of her costume, her gray eyes sparkled.

"Prithee, dost thou crave refreshment within these poor walls?" she said, her teeth like rows of

immaculate stones in a soldier's cemetery. "Never hath the Prod family turned away a stranger in need."

Dud gaped at her large, aesthetic mouth.

"I am going to step out of character for a moment," said the woman. "Have you heard of Mistress Eliza Prod? Cornwall's first and foremost female poetess? *Covered with yon dust of tin! And a crimp'd-edg'd pie to put thee in.* 'Ode to the Filling of a Pasty?'"

"It sounds familiar, maybe."

"Well then, you will be stunned to realize that this is the only exact replica of Mistress Prod's birthplace in the world. It even had a thatched roof before the rats ate it. Now we use tarpaper. Would you like to see the domicile?"

She led him in.

"We are now entering the parlor, or what was referred to colloquially by Mistress Prod and her rather freethinking progenitors as 'the shitbox.' They were quite something. I'm completely out of character now, by the way, so you may call me by my real name of Doll Godbody, magnetic healer."

"I'm looking for a friend of mine who came in here a minute ago," said Dud.

"From what I gather you have a habit of feeling poorly."

"There are usually a lot of things wrong with me if that's what you mean. Did Three tell you that?"

"I picked it up through magnetic feelings. Anything in particular bothering you right now?"

"I feel a lot better since my car ride up here."

"The natural magnetic rays that spew forth from my body unbidden have been known to cure cancer at a distance. I don't mean to boast."

Dud looked around the room. There was a fireplace with an iron pot hanging in it, and some chunks of rotted wood strewn about, and some things that had turned into rust. The floor was made of firmly packed dirt. Three was not present.

"I'm worried about Three," said Dud. "Where is he? Can I see him?"

"This is where Mr. Cuff comes to be undisturbed. During my off-hours, when I am not being a historical interpreter, I attend to his needs, or help him combat his Nembutal addiction. May I ask your role in all this?"

"Nembutal addiction!" said Dud.

"Perhaps I've been precipitate," said Ms. Godbody. "Obviously, something is troubling Mr. Cuff again, but I'm having some trouble myself, attempting to pin down the details. He seems incapable of speech."

"Last night we had a life-and-death encounter with a snake, he and I," said Dud. "Somehow, we came out on the 'life' side of that equation, but the experience was not wholly pleasurable. Maybe he came to see you about that, or he might be on the trail of a mystery. It's got me a bit discombobulated. I feel an attack of hysterical defecation coming on."

"That sounds most unpleasant," said Ms. Godbody.

"Harmless, usually. It's where you're absolutely sure you have to go to the bathroom, but you get there and nothing happens. The corollary, of course, is that if one becomes too comfortable with the condition, one may begin to ignore nature's call to the extent that hysterical defecation becomes a self-ful-

filling prophecy, if you get my drift. In the form of actual public defecation, I mean. That's the concern."

"I think I can help you. I'm going to give you a little book I wrote."

"I thought of one other thing, as long as I'm here."

"Yes?"

"My body odor smells like rubber."

"I see."

"Pink erasers on school pencils. Do you want to smell it? I mean, me? My smell? As a healer? It's not my body odor, technically. It's the smell I get if I scratch my underarm and sniff my finger afterwards. It differs from the direct smell. Sometimes when I scratch my testicles and smell my fingers they smell like Easter egg dye."

"I'm going to make you some special tea," said Ms. Godbody.

"Now we're talking," said Dud. "This kind of mumbo jumbo is probably what I've needed for years. My late wife wouldn't hear of it, of course. She considered herself scientific."

After Dud drank the special tea, his soul seemed to fly out of his body and everything went black.

DUD AWOKE TO the sounds of vermin scratching and wind hooting in the chimney.

The high, tiny windows of the cottage looked as though they were made of dirty water. They let in a trickle of red-brown light that told Dud the sun was setting. As Dud's eyes adjusted, he saw that he had been placed in a second, smaller, room on the other side of the fireplace, a bedroom, he supposed, though there was no bed, just a pile of damp hay giving off an acrid but nostalgic smell.

He had a kind of hangover from the powerful drugs with which Ms. Godbody must have spiked his tea, so it took him a few moments to realize there was music in the air.

He rose—it was hard work, given the exertions of the day—and crept through the cottage, banging his knees on things, which made his eyes water.

The music was something familiar, tinny and high, punctuated with an occasional misplaced honk of brass. He traced it to a small closet, but when he opened the door he saw nothing but empty shelves, except for one Mason jar with a dried-up seahorse inside, and a wooden egg. At the rear of the closet a knothole gleamed with light. Dud crouched and put his eye to it, and he saw a secret room.

Ms. Godbody writhed around in lantern shine with a transparent pink scarf tied around her breasts and a black scarf tied around her hips, and that was all. Her bottom parts were uncovered. She was freckled all over. Her ribs were visible whenever she writhed in Dud's direction. Her hair was long and wild, but alarmingly thin. Freckled scalp shone through. She held a gargantuan trumpet—it was probably too big to be, technically, a trumpet—and once in awhile, she gave it a blast, as if moved by the plinking, syncopated melody coming from a black lacquered Victrola, much taller than it was wide.

Count Basie, Dud thought.

Three slumped expressionless on a beanbag chair, his hair slicked back, his impish forelock tamed. Three had left some changes of clothing up

in the mountains, apparently, when he had come to be cured of Nembutal addiction. He sported a red turtleneck and nice khakis, but his feet were bare.

Dud, weary from crouching, leaned with his full weight against the knothole and the wall gave way—a door, a secret entryway! Ms. Godbody squealed when Dud tumbled into the little windowless cell. She concealed herself behind a Chinese screen.

Dud picked himself up.

"Three, are you all right?" he said.

Three made no answer. He had some of the characteristics of a disused marionette.

Ms. Godbody emerged in a t-shirt advertising Quisp cereal and blue jeans, her hair bunched in a red bandana. Her polished instrument hung loose in one hand.

"I heard you playing your trumpet," Dud said. "That's how I found you."

"It's a flugelhorn," said Ms. Godbody.

They stared at one another in a kind of standoff. The Victrola wound down and creaked to a stop. Ms. Godbody fiddled with the keys on her flugelhorn and they made a musical sound, like drumming on an empty jug. "Sorry about the mickey," she said. "I have to be careful. I needed some quality time alone with Mr. Cuff. My methods are unconventional and easily misconstrued. It occurred to me you might be some kind of investigator, and that I had already said too much. My employers at the Prod cottage have only the vaguest idea of how I use the place. But I went through your pockets and you seem to be on the up and up."

"How is he?" said Dud.

"He'll never regain the power of speech," said Ms. Godbody. "Of that much I'm sure."

"Fuck!" said Three. "Am I the only one around here who's heard of a vow of fucking silence? I mean, does that fucking ring a bell? Can't a brother go up in the mountains and think about shit in peace? This place is like the opposite of a vow of



silence or some shit. You people are driving me fucking crazy. Some things have come up, okay? Some things have been on my mind, all right? Some important, life-changing type shit, are you with me? Okay, I'm issuing some instructions now. And then it's back to the vow of fucking silence, if that's okay with everybody. Dud, you're moving into the mansion. I don't want it anymore. That's not fucking *me*, okay? One fucking phone call and you're my official caretaker. Another call and you'll get that restaurant you've always dreamed of. I own the old storefront that used to be Red's Drugs. They have soda fountain shit in there already. Good place for a restaurant, right? I'll grease the fucking wheels.

You saved my fucking life, man. Everything I have is yours."

"I don't want to start a restaurant anymore," said Dud.

Three did not seem surprised. "Well, what the fuck is it you want to do?" he asked without rancor.

"I'd like to be some kind of healer. It just popped into my head. That's what a calling does, doesn't it? I think it's my calling."

"That's not possible," said Ms. Godbody.

"What are you talking about?" said Three. "People get fucking callings all the time. That's what people do. You got it, bro. Your wish is like my fucking command or some shit."

DUD SPENT MOST of his time in the library. He loved its soothing deep reds and deep browns, the odor of leather and sweetly rotting paper. For the first few days, the book dust had given him nosebleeds, but that had passed, and Dud had never felt better in his life. He was ensconced in the library on the day Farrah stomped in, dressed in boots and bulky togs, looking like she had joined some kind of foreign army.

Dud moved slightly in his exquisite chair and it made small noises like a birthday party balloon. His diet orange Fanta fizzed on the table beside him. Dud had lost six pounds. He was dressed in a kimono and fez he had found in a chifforobe. “Farrah! How goes it? I was reading this mystery you might enjoy,” he said. “Lucky Grogan, my vile friend at the video store, recommended it. *The Zebra-Striped Hearse*, by Ross MacDonald. Lucky Grogan is quite the connoisseur of the literate thriller, but you should really stay away from him. You should have heard the filth that came out of his mouth about Eudora Welty, supposedly enamored of this MacDonald character, though that’s far from the way Lucky Grogan saw fit to put it. Anyway, MacDonald writes, let’s see, that the birds had finished their matins, but I thought it said that the birds had finished their martinis. Do you think I have dyslexia?”

“I hope you have eye cancer for all I care. You drove him away!” Farrah said, apparently referring to Three.

“I believe he had spiritual concerns,” said Dud. He closed his book. “Here’s my interpretation of the mystery.”

“What fucking mystery?”

“The monsignor down in Bayou Cottard was golfing buddies with Three’s father. So Three told me when the case first came to my attention. Why golf? Why mention golf, of all things? Already, then, we have issues of oedipal rage, combined with the paternal and elitist nature of golfing—guilt feelings over inherited wealth, often represented as feces

in our dreams—and the sexual symbolism of knocking a ball in a hole. And of course the symbol of the priest, who is symbolically emasculated. Then somebody tried to kill us with a snake, very phallic. This drove Three toward feelings of gloom and mortality. Now he’s off somewhere solving the case, or brooding about the choices he has made in life. I owe much of my remarkable conclusion to this wonderful library, particularly Sigmund Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. You can borrow it if you like. You can borrow anything in the house.”

“You got everything and I got nothing! It’s not about the house, you fuck!”

“No, of course not,” said Dud. He viewed her with calm, detached compassion, the way it said in *The Anatomy of Wow*, Doll Godbody’s self-published update in modern, accessible language of Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Dud had run across it in the library and made it his Bible for the art of intuitive healing. “Once I was riding in a cab in Baltimore, Maryland,” he said. “There was a sticker on the window that said, ‘Driver does not carry more than twenty dollars cash.’ I thought it said, ‘Driver does not care.’”

“He’s the only person I’ll ever love and now he’s gone, you fucking fuck stain!”

She was blowing translucent snot everywhere, she was so mad.

“God!” she said. “Fuck!”

“I should compile a book of things I’ve misread,” said Dud.

Farrah ran off into the other room. Soon Dud heard water running, the sink in the downstairs guest bathroom. It stopped, but Farrah didn’t come back. She was absent for awhile.

When she came back she was as naked as you can imagine.

She had composed herself. Her eyes weren’t even red. They were, in fact, shiny, bright and defiant. Her feminine extremity—that is the phrase that came into Dud’s head—was coifed with care, a

thin strip of hair it bore, no wider than a Band-Aid brand adhesive bandage, and as pale as corn silk. Her body... Dud supposed “dewy” would be the adjective someone would use, her skin as tight as an apple’s skin, marred only by the Chinese jibber-jabber on her upper right arm and some other tattoo—a black widow spider?—on her upper pelvis, left side.

“Well, get on the massage table,” said Dud. “There it is.” It was all he could think of to say.

To Dud’s surprise, she did as he asked, lying on her stomach and resting her head in the headrest. Dud covered her with a big white towel but she threw it off and told him to get cracking.

Three had been unable to procure any kind of a medical license, much less one for magnetic or psychic healing, but he had managed to get Dud the proper, if counterfeit, accreditation for massage therapy. True to his word, he had given Dud run of the mansion, and maintained his vow of silence in the face of pleas from Dud, Ms. Godbody and Farrah. Three spent just one night in “Dud’s” mansion, that first night they had returned from the mountains. When Dud awoke at five in the morning, heart thrashing, he discovered that Three had disappeared, and so had all the liquor, and the four remaining bloodhounds. No one knew where he, or it, or they, had gone. Two days later, UPS had delivered the massage table, which Dud had moved into the library and used for laying out snacks on.

Dud had been Lumber Land’s only massage therapist for close to three weeks, but Farrah was his first customer. He tried to remember what Robert Burton had theorized about massage therapy, and to apply it as best he could, all the while being considerate of Farrah’s heiny and not coming within a foot of it if he could help it.

This situation, he thought, is something Lucky Grogan would dream about and slobber over.

Lucky Grogan was the only person of his own age with whom Dud communed on a regular basis. Lucky Grogan peppered his conversation with references to carnality.

Lucky owned his own video store. He didn’t bother with DVDs, so no young people ever came in, except those he hired and secretly made sexual remarks about. He never assaulted his teenage employees or accosted them, never asked them out on dates, never patted their fannies or asked them what color their undershorts were, but he seemed like a sleazy fellow even when he was trying to be polite. There was a big turnover at Videos Only and usually Lucky was behind the counter by himself, keeping a lid on his yearnings while his churchgoing elderly customers tottered about, but he perked up whenever Dud walked in.

Dud wondered why Lucky had chosen him, out of all of Lumber Land, as the receptacle for his sordid musings. Maybe it was because he sensed correctly that Dud had the only open mind in Alabama. But Dud had no carnal yearnings. He just didn’t have them, period. He noticed, for instance, that a faint and delicious aroma came from Farrah’s lower half. She smelled in fact like those little bite-sized pizza rolls that Dud’s dead wife used to buy, or really, maybe, like an empty preheated oven. Dud catalogued these sensations without being moved by them. Finally he heard Farrah snoring.

When he shook her awake she turned right over and stared at him in a bold way. He got the whole picture again. This time her breasts kind of rolled back and flattened out and he could see that there were bumps like goose bumps standing up all around her nipples, which were also standing up, and his brain could sort of tell, incorporeally, what such bumps might feel like but it was a purely involuntary intuition.

“What are you looking at?” she said, through a yawn.

She stretched her arms over her head, twisting the fingers of both hands together. Dud saw that she was less than fastidious about shaving under her arms. The length and number of rather coarse, tangled, grain-colored hairs was in fact alarming.

“Mm, *mm*! My pussy feels extra relaxed,” she said.

"I'm... glad," said Dud.

"That would make a good children's book. You should write it down."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Birds drinking martinis. It was your idea, remember what you said? Or you probably couldn't do that in a children's book, could you? Have alcohol?"

"Anything goes in this day and age," said Dud. He picked up the white towel from the floor where she had kicked it, gave it a good strong flap and let it waft down to cover her nakedness. "It would make a good *New Yorker* cartoon, though. Birds drinking martinis. Hey, what do you think of this? A housewife saying, 'Look what the cat dragged in.' And the cat has dragged in something humorous and unexpected."

"An anchor?" said Farrah.

"Possibly," said Dud.

"You should draw cartoons for my paper," said Farrah. "That's like genius. You should show the kitty dragging in a big humongous dildo. And the woman's eyes would be all, 'Yaaah!' You're like

genius." Dud was not certain when "genius" had become an adjective, and the idea of it disgusted him immensely, but Farrah's appreciation had all the earmarks of sincerity, as far as he could tell.

"Are you planning to keep the paper going, then?" he said.

She sat up, excited. "Yeah, my plan is, I'm going to put in all kinds of defamation of character and shit, and things against Jesus, and now you just gave me a great idea about porno cartoons. We'll get sued. The house'll get set on fire. Three will come back to make sure I'm all right. Don't you think he would?"

Dud looked at her, poor thing with great big eyes and vulnerable shoulders.

"Oh, I'm sure of it," he said.

It was funny how he and Farrah had turned out to be the best of friends all of a sudden. All those years he had secretly considered her a dumb little cluck in his mind, and had tried to educate her about smart things—apparently he had been doing it because he cared. Look at her, all naked and so on in so many ways. Isn't life funny.

Dud was filled with a fatherly love.

A WEEK LATER the doorbell rang. Dud had never heard it before. He had never used the front door of the mansion in any capacity. It took him awhile to find it.

The entrance hall was magnificent, restored to its original period. Everything was white marble, veined with opulent blacks and pinks. Dud wore flip-flops—his foot fungus had cleared up considerably—and he nearly slipped to meet his death on the marble floor, but he grabbed a banister just in time.

Back when his feet had been really bad, his doctor, Dr. Bitsy, who came from the North and had an unpronounceable last name so everyone just called her Dr. Bitsy, had looked at his toenails and said, I see a lot of that down here. She was clinical about it yet, at the same time, condescending. As if up North a toenail was a thing of beauty and she dreamt of going back there one day, just for the toenails. She offered him some medicine that would make his toenails presentable in a year or two but in the meantime might cause weakness in his muscles and liver failure. Thanks but no thanks, Dr. Bitsy! And now they had cleared up from pure happiness, Dud supposed. One of his toenails had turned black for some inscrutable reason, just one of the smaller ones, but otherwise Dud was in tip-top shape, podiatrically speaking.

He made his way to the door and opened it to find a small but strong-looking man, very dark, his face very creased, perhaps of Brazilian or American Indian descent, with a neat moustache and sad black eyes. He wore, in the heat of Alabama springtime, a heavy brown suit with a black silk shirt and a loosely knotted yellow tie. His hat—a hat in this day and age!—was in his hands, where he clutched its brim out of shape. He bore, in general, the air of a supplicant, a poor man dressed up for the occasion.

“I need your help,” said the man.

“Come into the library and lie down on the table,” said Dud.

The man refused, from some odd humility, to

enter the house, and insisted instead upon speaking to Dud on the porch.

Dud came outside and looked at his porch, which was a wraparound, and very impressive. He offered his guest the rocking chair. Dud sat across from him, on the porch swing. Although Dud had lost some weight, the porch swing groaned beneath him, and strained at its chains.

“Where does it hurt?” said Dud.

“My name is Carlos P. Younce,” said the man. “I come from the Mark IV subdivision off of Old Kettle Road. A hawk, waist-high, has been eating kittens in the subdivision.”

“I don’t understand how I can help,” Dud said. “Is this stressing you out? The kitten eatings? Have you witnessed one? I can understand how awful that would be. I could rub your temples with sensual oils, which would not require going in and lying down on the table, if you truly have an aversion to that.”

“You are the detective who lives in the big house, no? We of the community watch group need your help in subduing the evil hawk and bringing him to justice. I come to you humbly, with my hat in my hands.” He rolled his hat around in his hands.

“I’m not a detective. That was the gentleman who lived here previously. I am a licensed massage therapist and medical intuitive. You can tell your friends. Even if I were a detective, large hawks, I believe, would not come within my parvenu, if that is the correct word, and to tell you the truth I’m almost positive it isn’t.”

“What?”

“I’m saying, it’s not possible for me to take your case.”

The little man was outraged and made vague threats, such as “You haven’t seen the last of me,” etc. He reminded Dud of Rumpelstilskin. It was very cute. Mr. Younce departed in a flurry of consternation. Dud watched him toddle down the front steps, over the green hill and out of sight.

“This is nice,” he said. “I have a porch swing.”



DUD HAD BEEN collecting rainwater for some time, via an old-fashioned rain barrel he had discovered in the attic and instructed the gardener to put in the yard. In *The Anatomy of Wow*, Doll Godbody concurred with Robert Burton that the way to health was eating wheat kneaded with rainwater.

Dud had a pot of rainwater boiling on the stove.

He had dragged in, from the pantry, an enormous sack of barley. He hadn't found wheat, but barley sounded more authentic to Dud anyway. Dud didn't know how to prepare barley, but he figured it worked more or less like grits.

He was trying to think of how best to open the sack when Farrah skidded into the room, rather flushed, and took a seat on a stool at the magnificent chrome island in the middle of the kitchen.

"I need a special kind of massage, my man," she said.

"What kind of massage would that be?" said Dud.

"Do you see this indentation in the tip of my nose?"

"Not from here, I'm afraid."

"It's very tiny. Anyway, it's there. I need you to press on it gently with the tip of your finger and make a circular motion, okay? Just keep doing it over and over. It makes the soles of my feet get real hot and then I have an orgasm."

"You see, I'm in the middle of this barley conundrum..."

Farrah was wearing baggy pants with large pockets, from which she pulled a wad of yellow legal paper, scored with red magic marker ink that pooled and leaked through. She spread some of the pages on the counter and smoothed them out.

"If you knew how stressed I am..." she said. "Look. I'm getting fucking death threats."

Dud turned down the gas flame under the rainwater and walked over to take a look. He picked up one of the pages and read:

"Maybe you hate God. Maybe you think you are

being smart. Maybe you are trying to freak me out like Jonathan Swift. So all the time you are saying one thing with your words and the opposite thing with your hidden meanings. If you think you are Jonathan Swift you have another think coming. And if Jonathan Swift was alive today I'd beat his ass too for that matter. Get ready for a beating you will never forget. But unfortunately you will forget it because you will die at the end of it. But I forgot you are going to hell so you can remember (sic) it there."

"Well?" said Farrah.

"It certainly appears to be a death threat. What's this all about?"

"I think this guy's pissed about an editorial I wrote for the Monitor. Didn't you read it?"

"I've divorced myself purposefully from that world, no offense, Farrah."

"It's a series I call 'Reviews of God.' Like I talk about that ugly bush in front of the courthouse. Is that the best God can do? But then I say something nice, like it shows signs of talent and maybe God will make a more substantial bush in the future. You know, a tree. That's all."

"You're trying to stir people up," said Dud.

"So Three will come back and whip their asses," said Farrah.

Dud studied the note. "Why would somebody write '(sic)' in their own death threat notice? It makes no sense when you think about it. If they're trying to convince us that they're typical Alabama dummies through the tactic of purposeful misspelling, the '(sic)' counters their plan directly. Equally perplexing, the mention of Jonathan Swift, the famous humorist of days gone by. Do you want me to store this in my death threat file?"

"You have a file?"

"Oh, I've also been the recipient of a few choice death threats as of late. They're from this fascinating Hispanic or Latinate fellow who's obsessed with hawks. I made him upset. It's too bad, because he seems like someone I could have interesting conversa-

tions with on the porch swing on a nice afternoon.”

“How do you know it’s him?”

“Oh, he signs them and everything. Yours truly,  
Carlos P. Younce.”

“Then you know how it feels. Don’t you think I

deserve a special massage?”

“No, I don’t believe the activity you described is  
medically ethical or morally desirable or, indeed, a  
massage. But I will take your case.”

“I didn’t know I had one.”

"PEOPLE USED TO say that I looked like Robert Montgomery in my wedding photos," said Lucky Grogan.

Lucky Grogan had giant pores, and a bald head with large bulging wrinkles that made it look like a pile of folded blankets, and an ungroomed, sweaty moustache that dangled into his mouth, and Dud found it hard to believe that anyone had ever said he looked like any movie star.

"Do you know my greatest fear?" said Lucky.

"I do not," said Dud.

"I'm afraid that when I die, Robert Montgomery will slip out of human consciousness. I'm afraid I'm the last man alive who gives two shits about Bob."

"Poe's greatest fear was premature burial," said Dud. "I used to feel the same way, but I changed my life recently."

"What'd you do, get some tail?"

Dud shook his head. He had known it would happen, Lucky's inevitable shift from art to "tail."

"Have you ever read *The Anatomy of Melancholy*?" said Dud. Without waiting for an answer, he added, "I've thought of an independent feature film we could make. It's called *You've Got Melancholy*. Get it? It's a take-off on that Tom Hanks picture, *You've Got Mail*. People enjoy take-offs."

"I'd love to stick it to Tom Hanks," said Lucky. "Every time I see his picture on a magazine I poke a hole in his face."

"Yes, well, my reason for coming in today... I was just wondering if anybody had been around, some old person without a DVD player, probably, like most of your customers, bragging about writing hate mail."

"I'd like to write a letter to Tom Hanks," said Lucky. "A letter with a big fat bomb in it."

Dud began to reply, but his tongue was stopped by the appearance of a woman with a floppy hat on her raven hair. Below it, her face was completely wrapped in bandages like a cartoon mummy, with small slits for her nostrils and her mouth. Her eyes were hidden by gigantic octagonal sunglasses, her

hands by dainty white gloves with buttons on the wrists, her body by a floor-length coat of white fur. Despite the heat, and her unseasonable trappings, she projected coolness, unaffectedness and true superiority as she approached Lucky at the counter.

"Do you have anything starring the rapping football players?" she said.

"Do you mean the Chicago Bears? They rapped at one time, but I don't believe they made a feature film, ma'am. Now there is a rapping sequence during the end credits of the Goldie Hawn production *Wildcats*. That's the one where she plays the put-upon female football coach."

"Neither of those is the one I'm seeking. Perhaps you could check for me on your computer system."

"I'm proud to say I don't have a computer, ma'am. Nor a high-tone Leonard Maltin reference work nor any sort of records on microfiche. All my cinematic expertise is safely stored right up here in this pretty head of mine." He turned and gave Dud a big, obvious wink, as if to hint that he was about to start laying on the charm. He then returned his attention to his mysterious customer. "Lots of women say they'd like to crawl right up inside there and explore. In my head I mean, find out what makes old Lucky tick. The eternal mystery! And who am I to argue, little old me?"

"Perhaps I'll browse around and stumble on it for myself."

"Sorry, ma'am. I'm just telling you the way it is. I didn't make this sorry world, I just live in it."

"If you say so."

She walked away, browsing.

"Get a load of that high class cooch," Lucky said to Dud.

"Lucky, please!" Dud whispered.

"Those bandages are an act," Lucky said. "She's a fabulous recluse like Greta Garbo, I'll bet you. Or that underrated Billy Wilder film *Fedora*. Or a victim of tragic surgery who's retained her knockout bod."

The woman seemed to faint. She clutched at a

stand-alone shelf of Hong Kong action videos and it pinned her as she hit the floor. Dud and Lucky rushed over. When they lifted the shelf off of her body, they saw that she was holding a long, serrated

kitchen knife, and she was very much awake.

“I could nail either one of you in the taint from where I lie,” she said. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll do exactly as I say.”

THE STYLISH BANDAGED lady had a list of videotapes that she wanted Lucky to put in a bag:

*The Bad News Bears in Breaking Training*  
*Imitation of Life* (the Lana Turner version)  
*Two-Lane Blacktop*  
 8 1/2  
*Zulu Dawn*  
*Splash*  
*Down and Out in Beverly Hills*  
*Klute*  
*West Side Story* (letterboxed)  
*Thunderball*  
*Darby O'Gill and the Little People*

If any title was unavailable, he was simply to skip it and move on to the next one. As Lucky gathered the videotapes from his storeroom, the bandaged woman held the knife at Dud's throat.

Lucky returned with the bag. "I only had five," he said.

"If you're lying I'll come back and gut you." She snatched the bag with her knife hand. With the other, she whipped out a paper-thin cell phone of purest silver. "It's a go," she said into it.

A guy, disguised in a helmet, large black goggles and a false beard, roared through the propped-open front door on a pale pink motor scooter, the color of the inside of a seashell. The woman hopped on back with her sack of movies.

"And you," she said to Dud, waving the knife at him. "You tell that two-bit detective you work for to forget Mexico City."

She yanked on her co-conspirator's ponytail and he gunned the engine. They screeched around the video store, knocking stuff over and giving the rebel yell. Then they were gone in a shroud of violet exhaust.

Dud was still there when the patrolman showed up, a cop named Sandy who had formerly been known as a young local turd.

"Those movies are all over the map," said Lucky. "If we could figure out some pattern..."

"Right," said Sandy. "We could crack the case wide open. The big case of the stolen crap nobody gives a shit about."

"Please show some respect. My deceased wife knew your late mother," said Dud.

"Don't start bawling, titty baby," said Sandy the Cop.

"We're witnesses to a crime," said Dud. "You need to take out your notepad and respectfully jot down what we say."

"I don't know. Sounds like a story two old queers would make up to me. You figure the world done you dirty, having to sneak around and hide your actions in a closet all these years, and now you're craving attention."

"Those videos are my livelihood," said Lucky. "I know they don't mean much to the likes of you."

"I'm going to put it to you straight, Pops. Stolen property ain't never recovered. Never. So I'll file a report if you want, but you can kiss your crap goodbye. Hey, I know. Why don't you get your buddy here to do some detective work for you? I hear he's a big-time detective, now that his homo boss left for Queer Town."

"Can you?" said Lucky, after the cop had gone.

"Can I take the case?" said Dud.

"That's what I'm asking."

"My plate is rather full. I've already taken the hate mail case I was telling you about."

"You've got to help me, chief. I'm scared she's going to come back and violate me again. I'm bringing my crossbow tomorrow, I swear to God I am. You've got to stop this thing before there's bloodshed, like in Yojimbo. I'll be here for you, all right? Listening out for hate mail clues, or anybody that sounds hateful. I'll pry it out of them, real casual. Fair trade?"



DUD CANVASSED LUMBER LAND in the experimental electric car that he had found mothballed in Three's carriage house. It was one of the first electric cars, quite cramped, and didn't go over thirty miles per hour, but on the plus side, it gave Dud a lot of time to observe and think. It occurred to him, for example, that perhaps he had been the real target of the crime. Someone wanted to get a message to Three. The robbery had been a smokescreen, something to throw him off track, make him waste time looking for a nonexistent pattern in the incongruous video selections.

He passed the Mark IV subdivision.

It couldn't hurt, he thought, to pay a call on Carlos P. Younce. There probably wasn't a connection between Mr. Younce's personalized hate mail and Farrah's anonymous hate mail. There were not, Dud reasoned, hate mail clubs, or hate mail seminars, where hate mailers got together and compared notes and techniques. But something made him want to stop and interview Mr. Younce, as long as he was in the neighborhood. Strange events were occurring, and Mr. Younce had been part of one of them. Were all the smaller strange events part of a large, single strange event? As Doll Godbody had said in *The Anatomy of Wow*, "Your brain is like a Play-Doh Fun Factory, always making shapes!"

Yes, Dud mused, the human brain is so stupid. Finding patterns where there are none. But sometimes overlooking the patterns that were right in front of its nose, if the brain could be said to have a nose. Yes, why not? A mental nose.

Dud drove around until he saw an old man planting bulbs in his yard, and he grilled him for directions.

Younce's house was small and neat and looked like every other house. Dud tried to open the screen door so he could knock on the real one, but it was latched. He rapped on it and it made a rattling noise. There was no doorbell that he could see. He rattled the screen again and a woman came to the

door. She left the screen door closed and latched between them.

"Mrs. Younce?"

"Yes. May I help you?"

Her teeth were perfect, the opposite of Dud's teeth, the opposite of every other tooth in Alabama, as far as Dud was concerned. She was a beautiful, lithe black woman of about forty, her hair cropped close to her head.

"I'm a reporter for the Lumber Land *Monitor*," said Dud. "I'm here to do a follow-up interview with your husband? We're trying to get to the bottom of the hawk situation that's plaguing our community."

"Oh, that hawk," said Mrs. Younce. "Carlos is just worried sick about it. Our neighbor had two cats eaten, you should talk to her."

"What's your husband's interest?" said Dud.

"Well, he figures that once it finishes off all the cats it'll start going for the children. You know, not carry them off or anything, but pluck out their eyeballs maybe. Or knock them over and scratch them in the face and bite off their noses and jab its beak in their ears. You know, trying to get at their brains. Would that be considered normal hawk behavior?"

"I can't say, ma'am. I'm not an ornithologist. But the consumption of domestic housecats does point to a certain type of desperation. These sound like some pretty disturbed hawks that would be capable of anything."

"And here I was telling him not to worry so much. He stays up half the night looking up hawks on the internet."

"Don't blame yourself, ma'am. May I come in?"

"Carlos isn't here right now."

"That's fine. I'd like to get some human-interest stuff, the private side of Mr. Younce. Our readers enjoy such things. It might even be easier without him around."

"I don't know... I hate to seem skittish, but do you have some ID?"

"As a matter of fact I do." Dud dug out his press

card, which was just some slip of cardboard Farrah had produced on the computer. He had never used it before. It had sat so long in his wallet that the edges had worn off and it looked like one big smudge. Mrs. Younce let him in anyway. While she was in the kitchen, making Dud and herself some chamomile tea, Dud checked out the dining room for clues. There was a big family photograph, showing Mr. and Mrs. Younce and several children. They looked young, he supposed. Dud had never learned to guess the ages of children.

Mrs. Younce returned with tea and sugar cookies. She found Dud studying the picture.

"Ellita, Maria, George, Sara and Little Carlos number two," she said.

"Are they at school?"

"Yes. Now you sit down and get started on your tea. I'm going to get Carlos' scrapbook. It's full of human interest."

Dud ate some cookies. He tasted the tea. It tasted like somebody's yard. He stirred eight packets of Sweet-n-Low into it. Mrs. Younce came back with a large blue album.

"Some sort of hawk sighting journal?" said Dud. "Or a collection of angry ravings? That reminds me of an idea I had. Can you imagine a cartoon that shows a newspaper ad, and the ad says 'The Critics are Raving'? And in the background, we see a movie critic consigned to a straightjacket, with spittle flying from his mouth. Not that I think your husband should be consigned to a straightjacket. His emotions are perfectly understandable. People need to get things off their chests, as Robert Burton once observed."

"Oh no. When Carlos wants to blow off steam he goes down to Mobile and takes an improv class or something like that. He's not an angry man. He just cares about things."

"Mobile? That's almost three hours. Long way to go for a class."

"Carlos loves his acting. He needs something

like that, after working at the lingerie factory all day. That's where he is today, acting. It's a special charity performance. He even took a sick day so he could participate. They go down to Bayou Cottard and read to the shrimpers in the back of a seafood restaurant. They clear out a banquet room. Carlos and his friends put on these black turtlenecks and read a whole play. It's to give the poorer people some culture. Last year they did one by an Irishman, something about everybody drowning at sea. You know, a mother waiting for her son to come home from the sea, but really he drowned. They thought the shrimpers and fishermen would appreciate the emotion of that. You know, 'Hey, I know somebody that drowned. I guess culture is okay after all.' They couldn't find another drowning play for this year, so they're just doing *The Jew of Malta*. The readers are familiar with it because they did it onstage two years ago. It's mostly the same cast. Look." She opened the album to one of the last pages and spun it around on the table to face Dud. He picked it up and read the yellowing clipping pasted there:

"...an innovative production of *The Jew of Malta*, the action of which the director has transposed to the War Between the States, while also making sly commentary on current events. The title character Barabas, for example, wore a big cardboard sign with SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS printed on it in every scene. In this reviewer's opinion, such shameless grandstanding is just the sort of political correctness that could ruin *The Jew of Malta*, but somehow a game cast pulls it off. Special commendation must be given to Carlos P. Younce, who performs the dual role of Friar Jacomo and Machiavelli in a comical Italian accent that must be heard to be believed." Yellow highlighter haloed the final sentence. The accompanying photograph showed Carlos P. Younce, dressed as a monk, gesticulating at a general.

"Huh. Is that supposed to be Stonewall Jackson?" said Dud.

"Or somebody. You know how you people are with your Civil War," Mrs. Younce said, and gave a nice laugh.

"If only my dead wife had encouraged my hobbies while she was alive," said Dud. "Maybe I could have been in the newspaper like this. A real newspaper."

Mrs. Younce didn't know what to say.

"I don't agree with flying the Confederate flag in state parks," said Dud.

After some thought Mrs. Younce replied, with a puzzled smile, "Well, honey... Good for you."

"State parks. Hawks. Bayou Cottard. The monsignor, sequestered down there. Golfing buddies. Science versus faith, that old, old story. Herpetology? Preposterous!" Dud stood up and snapped his fingers. "I've solved the case."

"Do what now?" said Mrs. Younce.

"Quick, do you have an atlas?" said Dud. "Or your husband's birth certificate?"

"I don't think so."

"I'm sorry," said Dud. "I need to leave rather hastily while something is still in my brain."

BAYOU COTTARD.

The rectory.

Thunder and lightning. Heavy rain. Electricity out.

Monsignor Isaiah Spoon nodded in his special chair, falling asleep over a volume of Chaucer, too dim to read anyway in the taper light.

Footsteps in a stone hallway. The creaking of a great oaken door.

"Monsignor?" The voice hesitant, cowed.

A croak. "Must you disturb me, my son?"

"There's a telephone call. It's said to be urgent."

"Very well."

"It's on Father Donovan's cell phone, sir. May I?"

The monsignor raised a hand so frail as to appear transparent. The cell phone was placed within, and the novice tiptoed away. Once the door had closed, Monsignor Spoon greeted the caller.

"You don't know me," returned the voice. "My name is Dud Durden. I'm a representative of Lombard Cuff III, known to his friends as Three."

"Go on," said the monsignor.

"I need you here in Lumber Land," said Dud.

"I'm always pleased by an invitation from my friends to the north. But is it so urgent that you must call in this terrible hour?"

"I'm afraid it is. I need you to officiate at a kind of memorial service. For you see... Three is dead."

IT WAS ABOUT two weeks before everyone's schedule could be coordinated. The great chandelier gleamed in the dining hall of Cuff Manor. The red-and-silver 19th century wallpaper, original to the house and painstakingly restored by experts, picked up the light in sparks. The dark oil paintings of magisterial hunting dogs seemed to glow and pulsate from deep within. Dud had set out some Ritz crackers, grape Fanta and Chips Ahoy! for the suspects.

"The crab dip is imitation," he said to them, "but I don't think you can tell. I'm aware it's not the kind of feast that was served here in the heyday of such things. Unfortunately, I've made no money as a massage therapist, and over the past few months I've eaten all the food in the refrigerator, the deep freeze and the pantry, just as a matter of survival. There wasn't as much as you would think. I'm certainly not looking a gift horse in the mouth, don't get me wrong, but the outlay for this spread came from my own pocket. I know it isn't much, but it represents a significant percentage of my savings, and I hope you enjoy it. Could you get the door, please, Farrah?"

Farrah, dressed for the evening in a white shirt and men's black pinstripe pants, obliged. Mr. Younce soon entered, unescorted. He wore the same old suit. Dud took his hat.

"Are you quite alone this evening, Mr. Younce?"

"Yes, I'm sorry to say."

"The invitation was extended to your wife as well."

"We couldn't find a sitter."

"On tonight of all nights."

"Yes."

"Fascinating."

"Is there a problem?"

"No, I don't have a problem, Mr. Younce. None of us has a problem... yet. Make merry. I insist. Avail yourself of the Fanta."

Dud excused himself and deposited Mr. Younce's hat in the solarium, where he had piled the various cloaks and accoutrements of his other guests, rifling

through each pocket, purse and loose lining for corroborative evidence—just a little something to provide a final flourish for his presentation.

He had found nothing, but it hardly mattered. His ideas would be enough. For so many years he had lived on ideas, and it had started to seem worse than living on candy corn. But now it was paying off.

This is what it's like to be a scientist, he thought. Scientists are nothing but good guessers. Look at those guys at NASA high-fiving one another in their white coats. It's just dumb luck when it goes right, that's why they're always so relieved. The trick is being there when the right thing happens, like where I am now. Doll Godbody would probably put it like, the planets or magnets or something are lining up. But I think of it more like a scientist. I could have been a scientist with a little encouragement from my dead wife. I know she's smiling down from heaven tonight and probably kicking herself.

He almost skipped as he returned to the dining hall, just in time to see the final guest arrive.

Farrah walked in leading two hooded monks bearing a velvet-cushioned litter, and atop that litter sat Monsignor Spoon, sparrow-like and legless in his smart black frock. Every vein in his face had burst so that his skin was lavender. He was so old that even the whites of his eyes looked lavender, and his hair. The monks brought him to rest at the head of the table, where by means of special attachments they transformed the litter into a chair. When their work was done they retreated to the corner and began silently playing some kind of card game—Dud deduced from its classiness that it was whist—on a small, empty sideboard.

"Then our circle is complete, with the exception of your wife, Mr. Younce," said Dud. "But we'll come back to her shortly. Everyone, I'd like you to meet Monsignor Spoon, the monsignor for the parish of Bayou Cottard and indeed, for the whole surrounding county if I am not mistaken."

The monsignor seemed to nod.



"Monsignor, may I present Miss Farrah Stubb, editor-in-chief of the Lumber Land *Monitor*; Doll Godbody, magnetic healer and historical interpreter; Carlos P. Younce, amateur thespian and professional factory worker; Lucky Grogan, video store proprietor, trivia buff and bawdy raconteur; and of course, myself, Dudley Durden, massage therapist, aspiring healer, thinker, scribbler of words, painter of mental pictures and, in this one instance, accidental detective and conjurer of dreams. Who knows, maybe you've met some of these people before."

"I'm very tired and hard of hearing," the monsi-

gnor said. "My eyes are sensitive to the light."

"Is there a dimmer on this chandelier?" said Dud. "No, I don't suppose there would be."

"I have sunglasses," said Ms. Godbody. "What did you do with my bag?"

"Farrah, could you fetch Ms. Godbody's bag from the solarium, if you please? It's something quite rustic and charming, unless I gravely misremember. And in the meantime, let's all gather around the monsignor. We're so spread out, anyway! This room is like a cave. It'll be much more cozy, and I won't have to shout."

SOON MS. GODBODY had tenderly placed her large octagonal sunglasses on the monsignor's eyes, and all the suspects were gathered in awkward poses behind him, some with plates of cookies. Dud stood before them, leaning with one hand flat on the long table.

"I don't think anyone will deny that every single fact in this case points to Frenchness and Catholicism, which, as we know, go hand in hand," he said. "Fact: Mr. Younce portrayed Friar Jacomo in a recent reading of *The Jew of Malta*. True or false, Mr. Younce—isn't a friar a kind of Catholic?"

"That's true," said Mr. Younce.

"And isn't Bayou Cottard, Alabama, where you performed this piece, a bastion of French Catholicism in the United States of America?"

"I don't know. It sounds French," said Mr. Younce.

"I can see that your improv lessons have paid off nicely. So you're an actor. An actor who came to me with a monologue about hawks, trying to tease me with a connection about a certain unfaithful French ornithologist. I was hired by the monsignor to follow him into the woods, where I nearly met my doom. But the joke was on you. I wasn't the detective you were looking for. I wasn't Three. But you didn't know that. You were too busy putting on an act, the only purpose of which was to draw 'Three,' as you thought, deeper into the web. But that's where you made your mistake. If you hadn't been such a good actor, you might never have been accepted by a community theater. And I might have never discovered your connection with Monsignor Spoon."

"A connection with what?"

"Ah, your acting talents are wearing thin, I'm afraid. Allow me to continue. The hate mail, a significant clue. Who else but a person with a Jesuit education would be able to toss about the Latin phrase *sic* with such authority, not to mention making references to Jonathan Swift... who was himself, I believe, a Jesuit of some kind."

"Dean Swift was an Anglican," said Monsignor Spoon.

"Hmm. How interesting that you should know that," said Dud.

"Everybody knows that," the monsignor replied.

"Hmm. What a fascinating opinion," said Dud.

"And I am not a Jesuit," said the monsignor.

"Nobody said you were. Or did they? What's the matter, Monsignor? Having some guilt feelings?"

"I don't understand," said the monsignor.

"Oh, don't you?" said Dud. "It was you who threw that first detective case Three's way. It seemed like an act of charity at the time. Or did it?"

"What?" said the monsignor. He appeared to lose consciousness for a moment. Doll Godbody went over and shook him and asked if he were okay. He gazed about in the big owl glasses, slightly confused.

"You two seem quite cozy," said Dud. "First your sudden foray into eye care, Ms. Godbody, if that is your real name, and now... the touch of life?"

"Yes, I was concerned," said Ms. Godbody. "And my natural rays may have played some part in reviving this poor old soul, but I don't know him at all, if that's what you're saying."

"Not even as a... lover?"

"Oh my Lord!" said Ms. Godbody.

"Either you've been duped, or you're up to your neck in this, baby. Either way, your boyfriend here knew about Three's Nembutal addiction, didn't he? If not from you, he would have gotten the skinny from Three's father on one of their famous golfing expeditions. Who better to tell about such things than a priest? But beware of the priest who stands to profit from your sins."

"What?" said the monsignor.

"Ah! A call for logic and symmetry, just what one would expect from a Jesuit. Suit yourself, padre. I'll spell it out for you nice and neat, right from the beginning. But you may not like the way it turns out."

"I'm going to microwave some popcorn," said

Lucky Grogan. "Anybody want some?"

"Stay where you are, Grogan. You're in this, too. Right now, we're going back to the beginning. Back to my first case. It was a night much like this one. A night when Three and I were lured into the godforsaken backwoods of Alabama, supposedly on an adultery stakeout, but that was just a red herring."

"Hitchcock called it a McGuffin," said Lucky Grogan.

"Someone here, in this very room, shot me in the taint with a poison dart. That was his first mistake. A man's not likely to forget a thing like that. Isn't that correct, Mr. Younce?"

"I'm going to finish up this cookie and go," said Mr. Younce.

"What a witty saying. Was it ghostwritten for you? But why not use one of your comical accents? The ones the Mobile theater critic praises you for. Of course, being a rube from Alabama, and unable to distinguish such things, he thought it was an Italian accent, whereas I know it was your own *real* accent... Your *French* accent!"

"I did an Italian accent once," said Mr. Younce. "In the stage play, not the read-through. Is that what you're talking about? I worked hard on it. I based it on Father Guido Sarducci."

"Another Catholic, no doubt! Really, Mr. Younce, I should insist that you stop making my case for me. It all clicked when I stumbled upon this book in the Cuff family library... *the Columbia Standard Atlas of the World, 1943 edition*." Dud pulled a couple of black linen napkins off the table, revealing the atlas that had been concealed underneath. "It was within these pages that I encountered a fascinating colony called French Guiana, home to the penal nightmare known as Devil's Island. The perfect spot for recruiting an assassin, wouldn't you say, Monsignor?"

"It's also the setting for *Papillon*," said Lucky Grogan. "Terrible in pan-and-scan. Still, the chemistry between McQueen and Hoffman captivates. Don Novello played Father Guido Sarducci. His role as the Corleone publicist in *Godfather III* brought a

much-needed breath of life to an otherwise enervated production."

"The tribesmen of French Guiana retain some of their primitive practices, such as blowing poison darts," said Dud, "but most of them have been converted to Catholicism. Isn't that right, Monsignor?"

"I would certainly hope so," said the monsignor.

"Of course you would. Because French Guiana is where you did your missionary work, which included the conversion of a tribesman who now goes by the name of Mr. Younce!"

"You're crazy," said Mr. Younce to Dud. "My mother is from Cuba. What do you mean calling me a tribesman? It sounds racist."

"There will be ample time to play the race card at your trial," said Dud. "Your trial for shooting me with darts tipped with Nembutal, meant to get Three addicted again, and thus into the clutches of Monsignor Spoon's henchwoman and possible concubine, Doll Godbody. It's called the theory of Occam's razor, people. Look it up."

"You're just mad about those letters I wrote and you're taking it out on me," said Mr. Younce. "When that hawk kills an innocent baby it'll be your fault because you stood idly by."

Dud applauded slowly. "And the Oscar goes to Carlos P. Younce. Oh dear. All this to cover your misdeeds. But why did you have to get your wife involved, Mr. Younce? She's a wonderful woman, and devoted to you completely. Did you tell her it was part of an acting exercise? Making her dress up in bandages to rob Lucky Grogan's store? Why else, I put it to you, would someone disguise her entire body, except to hide the fact of her race?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Mr. Younce. "But I can think of lots of reasons for somebody to put on a costume, I mean other than the crime of being black. You've got a problem with racism, sir."

Doll Godbody screamed. Her hat had come off and her stringy hair blew sadly about her head. "Stop! I want to confess!"

"OUR FIRST ARREST of the evening. You can come out and cuff her, Sandy," said Dud.

Sandy the Cop entered from the next room and cuffed Doll Godbody's hands behind her back.

"I got to admit I thought you was just a crazy old fruit," he said.

"Within your insult I find the seeds of an apology," said Dud.

"Wait," said Ms. Godbody. "First, you have to understand, I don't know the priest. All I know is, Three had experienced some trouble, and he was looking for refuge. There wasn't a snakebite anywhere on him, or a dart injury, for that matter. He had lost some blood, enough to make him pass out, but I think his wounds were self-inflicted in a kind of Salem-like hysteria. Now Mr. Durden, I believe maybe you *were* bitten by a harmless snake, like a green snake. Or stung by a wasp or a bee. A spider, yes, a spider could explain some of your reactions. In any case, you panicked, and Three was in such a tense state that he went into an empathic panic, or perhaps you were both sitting in a nest of perturbed baby spiders, or it was hysteria all around, we'll never know."

"Maybe it was a deadly snake," said Dud. "Perhaps we were resurrected from the dead, our flesh made incorruptible. It's a long shot."

Dud looked over at the two monks for possible support, thinking they would take up the notion, but they were busy at their whist, displaying the concentration for which monks are famous.

"Whatever the initial cause, something else happened in the woods that night," said Ms. Godbody. "Something that I fear neither of you remembers. Possibly an alien abduction. Whatever it was, Three's unwillingness to talk about it, to talk about anything, unnerved me. I knew it wasn't healthy. I had to open him up. And I tried to do it the only

way I could think of... by staging a mystery in his hometown. He loved playing detective. I thought a good mystery would crack through that shell, bring him back to himself. That's why I robbed Mr. Grogan's shop, with the aid of an Eliza Prod enthusiast, a rather prominent Atlantan I'd rather not name. And that's why I sent the threatening letters to Farrah, the person he cared about the most. I didn't know he had gone off somewhere. I thought he was holed up in this big house, brooding in unhealthy silence. This has all been a therapeutic experiment. Catholicism has nothing to do with it. These men you're accusing are totally innocent. I'm to blame for everything."

"Your story is improbable," said Dud. "It couldn't have been you in the video store. I would have known. We have a special magnetism between each other, non-sexual."

"Look at the sunglasses I gave to the priest! They're the same ones I was wearing then."

Dud looked. She was telling the truth, but that couldn't be right. He put it out of his mind. "Anyway, it's moot," he said. "You couldn't have made such a plan because you knew very well that Three was already dead."

Farrah tore open her white Oxford shirt so that her lace bra showed. She knelt and began striking the carpet with her fists, sobbing like a child. Her dreadlocks bounced and her breasts capered about in abundance.

"Yes, Farrah, I'm sorry I haven't told you before. He's dead, killed by Monsignor Spoon so the Catholic church would inherit all of the Cuff land and turn this entire town into a golf course!"

"Fuck!" said one of the monks. He removed his hood, and the Lone Ranger mask beneath it, and he was Three, alive. Farrah ran to him and they got into some heavy petting for a minute.

"OH, BABY, I fucking hate to see you cry," Three said. He held her close as he addressed Dud: "Where are you getting this shit, man? It's whack. I'm not giving my fucking money to a golf course."

"Three! I... I assumed there was a codicil in your father's will..."

"No... fuck... what?"

"You said they were golfing buddies. When you told me about the case. You said you got the case because your father and the monsignor had been golfing buddies."

"And from that, you... Fuck. It's a fucking turn of phrase, man. This fucker can't golf, where's his fucking legs? Hey, Sandy, take the cuffs off my friend, you pussy."

"She confessed to a crime," said Sandy.

"I did steal videotapes from this gentleman, however well intended..."

"Shit, don't worry about it," said Lucky. "I gave you blanks."

"When my life was at stake!" said Dud.

"...and I damaged or destroyed some of your personal property," Ms. Godbody continued.

"I ain't pressing charges," said Lucky. "Not against a lady with such adorable freckles. You freckled all over, honey? That's the way I likes 'em."

Sandy removed the cuffs with evident disappointment. "I ought to run all of y'all in," he said.

"Yeah, go shoot a jaywalker," said Three. "Get the fuck off my property or I'll call a real cop."

Sandy left with a face-saving tub of dip.

"Doll knows what she's talking about," said Three. "Something happened that night. Something nobody knows. It wasn't an alien abduction. I came to at some point. I thought you were fucking dead, man. I... after all you did for me, trying to save my life and... I... I pulled down your shorts. You're right, Doll. It's good to say it."

"So that's how my pants came down," said Dud. "Another piece of the puzzle. The fact that you're alive—which I'm extremely glad about—it doesn't

invalidate any of my theories about the case. I can see that now. I..."

"Oh fuck, dude. This, right here, is your whole problem. Let me finish a fucking sentence. It was dark. I wanted to do right, after what you'd done for me, sucking out the poison. I knew it was hopeless, but... I... I couldn't tell where to... I... I totally had your sack in my mouth, bro." Three couldn't go on.

"Is that all?" said Dud.

"Your entire fucking sack I'm talking about. I was trying to draw fucking *sustenance* from it, like a foal or some shit. Fuck!"

"You're experiencing homosexual panic," said Ms. Godbody.

"I've had that," said Dud. "It's natural. And treatable. Why, even the President of the United States has been in a similar position, no doubt. As a young pledge of the Skull and Bones Society, there's literally no counting the number of male parts he was required to put in his mouth, all in the spirit of collegiate high jinks. And now he's the leader of the free world. I hope this puts it into perspective for you, and calms you down from your homosexual panic."

"Fuck, Dud, we've all been in frats, and I'm sure we've all done our share of teabagging, the President most of all. I'm no homophobe. I'm into that shit. Ask Farrah. But it was *you*, dude. It was *you*." Three was consumed with dry heaves for a minute.

"I think my feelings are hurt, a little," said Dud.

"Okay, now I'm going back into my vow of fucking silence." Three put the hood back on his head and he and his friend returned to their whist, while Farrah hung on Three's arm, having donned his Lone Ranger mask, which she occasionally lifted to wipe away a tear of gratitude.

"You see," said Monsignor Spoon, "this is why I asked young Cuff to fly in from the abbey in Denver. I had a message from this fat fool claiming he was dead. My first thoughts were of treachery and embezzlement. Now I can see that mere buffoonery



was afoot. My stubborn charge refused to break his vow of silence, or to reveal his true identity, promises that I urged him to reconsider, but which I now agree he should have kept. The sooner we get him back to the abbey, the better. We have so few young candidates for the priesthood."

"For what the fuck?" said Three, taking off the hood.

"The abbot tells me that he has never seen anyone so adaptable to the contemplative life. But he agrees with me that though you would get along well toiling in silence as a mystic, perhaps doing something marketable with your knitting, we are much more desperate to fill the needs of flocks without shepherds

in these controversial times."

"Well, fuck me," said Three. "I was on a fucking vacation, that's all. A year or two tops. I'm not into toil, man. Anybody can tell you that."

The other monk nodded as if in agreement.

"Then you will never make a monk, much less a priest," said Monsignor Spoon.

"No fucking kidding."

"I asked if you wished to enter the holy orders. And of course you wouldn't answer. What was I to assume? You know, there's no such thing as a complete vow of silence. It's counterproductive."

"Now it's *my* fucking fault," said Three. "Okay, everybody, out. This party's over."

"THERE'S NO REASON an imaginary near-death encounter should be any less psychologically devastating than a real one," said Doll Godbody.

"Is that from *The Anatomy of Wow?*?" said Dud.

"You know my work? I'm flattered."

It was the end of a long night. Dud and Ms. Godbody and Farrah and Three were in the hot tub, passing around a bottle of gold label tequila that Three had smuggled in under his robe. Three and Farrah, nude aside from Farrah's Lone Ranger mask, cuddled on one side of the tub. Dud and Ms. Godbody maintained a distance on the other. She wore an authentic period bodice. Dud had on all his clothes.

"I just want to apologize again," said Dud. He could feel how red, how cooked, his face was, from the combination of drinking and boiling.

"No, you brought me back, bro," said Three. "You did good. I wouldn't be here without your intervention. Fuck, that was some real *Da Vinci Code* shit they were trying to pull on me. You busted that shit wide open. You were looking at that monsignor like, 'Busted, Charlie!' This is the second time you've saved my life."

"I'm glad you're not a priest," said Farrah.

"That goes for all of us, I think," said Dud.

"Shut up, Dud," said Farrah.

"I'd do you even if I was a fucking priest," said Three.

"You old hippo," Farrah said to Dud.

"You're emotional," said Dud. "I remember when my dead wife used to get her period."

"You don't get it, do you?" Farrah raised the mask to her forehead. "It was a set-up, all along. What, you think we're friends? You think I want your Vienna sausage fingers touching me all over? I felt like puking every minute of it, even just thinking about it later. I wrote about you in my diary and left it where my daddy can find it. I'm going to get my daddy to stick you with his dress sword. What, you think I care about your stupid ideas for comic books or whatever the fuck? All the time you were talking, in my head I was like, blah blah blah, whatever, I wonder what's on TV."

"You can't mean it," said Dud.

"You old hack. You make me sick. I was using you. I thought you really knew where Three was, and you had promised not to tell or some other honorable bullshit like that."

Three picked lovingly at her dreads. "He did bring us back together, baby."

"I'm just telling the truth. That's what a journalist does. Telling the truth can never be a bad thing," Farrah said.

DUD HINTED THAT he wanted to keep the electric car, but Three didn't bite, referring to it as a keepsake and a reminder of the old man. Ms. Godbody gave Dud a ride back toward his old house, and she didn't seem to harbor any disgruntlement over the way he had treated her during the unmasking of the culprit, in fact she couldn't have behaved more graciously. He asked if he could be her disciple and she, seeming not to hear, asked if he thought Lucky Grogan was a nice man. Her interest in Lucky Grogan made Dud unnamably sad. She quoted from *The Anatomy of Wow*: "We can't smell ourselves as others smell us any more than we can see ourselves as others see us." Dud asked her to elaborate on the metaphor because he didn't get it. She said, gently, that it wasn't a metaphor. She asked him did he know that ordinary soap and water were crucial to good health. Dud guessed she was trying to tell him something. He asked her to drop him off up the

road. He didn't want anybody to see where he really lived, especially somebody like her.

As he walked the rest of the way in the old Cuff family fez and kimono, the only dry things he had been able to find, his mind returned to the case, all the questions that had never been answered—or asked—like what had ever happened to his old Ford Escort and why Farrah sometimes masqueraded as a tiny man named Albert. He had been meaning to ask her. He put it out of his mind. He tried to put her out of his mind, his friend.

His ankles hurt. So did his knees. His breathing was irregular. His mouth felt funny. He put his finger in it. When he drew it out he found blood from his gums, red and extravagant in the moonlight.

The house called to him, like the embrace of a dead wife. He opened the door. A dank, rotten stink poured out. It smelled like home.