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It was 4:30 on December 31st and Guy was exhausted. He clicked the scissors he held in his hand and drank some coffee from a china cup embossed with the single initial G. He put down the cup, grabbed himself a handful of crystalized ginger and, clicking the scissors, continued to pace. He paced to the windowed wall in his office and peered through the back of a one-way mirror and into the oval waiting room beyond—a room designed to look like an indoor gazebo, with its white wicker tables and its white wicker chairs and the green-and-white trellis paper on the wall and the actual ferns and the one-two-three-four-five—sweet Jesus, *five!* *Five* women still waiting to be done. Five more heads to be magically transformed into Crown-ing Glories in time for the boredom of New Year's Eve. *Depressing* boredom. Who in the hell ever liked New Year's Eve? It was worse than a birthday. It *was* a birth-day. Everybody turning an entire year older on exactly the same lousy day.

Guy shook his head now and looked at the women, a typical group of G clientele. He loved them, hated them, pitied them, envied them, but most of all, Guy Laval understood them, knew what was going on in their minds. Jesus, who knew better than he what it was like to love unrequited, to wait by the phone for a man who won't call, when all you want to do is to hold him again; hold him; shake him; make him respond. Respond and *commit*. He sipped some more coffee and clicked his scissors. He could feel the anger rise in him now. He

would not think. Tonight he would absolutely not think of Him. It was too depressing, too outrageous, too disgusting, too unfair. Clicking his scissors, he walked through the door.

In the waiting room, he smiled at one of the women, beckoned with his finger, and she tilted her head. Said, “Wish me luck,” to the rest of the group and, rising, followed him in through the arch, into the hum of the Main Salon, with its celadon walls and matching chairs and clicking scissors and glossy heads.

He watched her now as she sat in the chair, meeting his eyes in the light-rimmed mirror. He knew all about her Recent Troubles, but today she was wearing a confident calm. He ran his hands through her shiny hair. So much like His hair. Thick; straight. He caught a lustrous clump in his fingers and, thinking the things he’d vowed not to think, he looked at her said, “So what shall we do?”

And she looked at him slowly and said: “Whack it off.”

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*Friday, January 23rd:*

“Well hey there, Gorgeous. What’ll it be?”

“Um. I don’t know. A Scotch on the rocks?”

“A general Scotch or a particular Scotch?”

“I really don’t care. Oh wait a second.— How much is Scotch around here?”

“Depends on what Scotch. A good single malt’ll go fourteen to twenty. The usual stuff only sets you back eight.”

“Okay. Then I think I’ll have an eight on the rocks.”

“Coming up. . . Is it starting to snow now or what?”

“A little. But it’s just plain freezing out there.”

“Well, this’ll warm you up.”

“That’s some giant drink.”

“I gave you a double. Second half’s on the house.”

“Well, thanks. I think.”

“De nada. I figure it’ll keep you here a while. Which’ll give me enough time to put a move on you.”

“Aw. Gee. I bet you say that to *all* the girls.”

“Nope. Only the gorgeous ones.”

“Right. You say *that* to all the girls too.”

“Okay, okay. Are you new to the nabe? What I mean is, I haven’t seen you here before.”

“I don’t live here, is why. Not that I’d be hanging out in bars if I did, but I’m in for the weekend for my brother’s graduation and I’m staying with a friend. And the thing is, I seem to have forgotten her key. I mean I left it in the house and I’ve been trying to reach her, but her cell doesn’t answer. And it’s freezing out there so I figured I could wait it out here and have a drink.”

“And keep calling her?”

“Yeah. I *think* I know where she’s gonna be around eight, but if she’s not and if she stays with her boyfriend overnight. . . I don’t know. I don’t know. I can’t afford a hotel room. . .”

“Well what about your brother? I mean, can’t he help?”

“My brother’s in New Jersey.”

“What college?”

“No college. Police Academy. Tomorrow afternoon he’s officially a cop. My father’s one too.”

“Well. . . that’s interesting. And what about you?”

“You mean am I a cop?”

“No. I was roundabout asking what you do. Model? Actress?”

“Teacher.”

“No way! You mean all that beauty wasted on the young?”

“And what about you? All that palaver wasted on the drunk?”

“Hah! You’re funny. In fact, I’m an actor.”

“Of course you’re an actor.”

“No really. I am. Ever watch CSI? I did five major episodes. That was last year. Except, hey, in between stuff, I have to pay the rent—. Excuse me. I gotta get some beers for these guys....Sorry. Didn’t know it’d take me so long. That tall guy—the baldie? He’s a top level agent. So listen. I was thinking. If you can’t find your friend and you can’t reach your brother and you’re really in a jam, right here’s my address. I get off here at three. Come back, meet me there, or whatever you want to do. You can stay in my living room. Sleep on the couch.”

“Uh-huh. On the couch.”

“Well of course you’d have your choice among sleeping accommodations...”

“You know? That’s pretty nice. I mean, taking in a stranger. Only, hey.— How do you know I’m not an axe-murderer?”

“Well....How do you know that *I’m* not?”

“I guess you’ve got a point. Anyway, it’s practically eight—”

“You gonna go?”

“I want to try to find my friend.”

“Yeah. Well. Right. See you later, though. I hope.”

“Yeah. Well. Maybe you’ll be lucky. Who knows?”

*Saturday, January 24th:*

Right in the middle of Brymmer's nightmare, somebody somewhere started to scream. He wondered who it was and exactly where it was, and exactly what Whoever was expecting him to do because he'd have to do something. A cop siren wailed. It was somewhere in his overcoat or somewhere in his head ... or...

He swam into consciousness, blinked and then moaned. The cell phone—where the hell was it?—gave up. The cacophonous atmosphere clicked into view. The walls shrieked in salmon. The rug hollered "Blue!" He shuttered his eyes again and vaguely concluded he'd awakened in hell. His headache pounded; his muscles ached. He lifted his head now, slowly, with care, like a busted egg, and tried to remember what happened last night. Must have been one hell of a night. The other side of the bed had a dent; lipstick on the pillow; a blondish hair. He wondered who she'd been and how much she'd cost, and then wondered idly if he'd had a good time.

Not that it mattered.

He fumbled a cigarette out of a pack, lit it, and looked at the writing on the wall. "No... Smoking," it said on the wall. A card on the night table told him he'd been sleeping at the "Kern's Motor Inn. 11th Avenue." West Forty-Third. The last thing he clearly remembered was the Village. Squinting, he tried to remember the blonde, couldn't, shrugged, knuckled his jaw and limped naked to the vinyl bureau where he glanced at his cell phone (the call was from Ross) and then picked up his wallet (a hundred still left) and then glanced at his wristwatch which told him it was going on eleven

after noon.

“Hell of a night.” He said it out loud in a voice he’d borrowed from a rubber duck; heard it, laughed, coughed up some junk, and then peered at the mirror. Jesus Christ! Whatever it was, he decided quickly, he’d much rather meet it in a mirror than an alley, but Jesus Christ. He fingered the scars. Stigmata that spread from his cheekbone to his jaw and resembled nothing less than a freaking topographical map of California—its valleys and mountaintops perfectly described. He grinned at the mirror and winked at himself.

Sleeping Beauty was now awake.

In the icy bathroom, he turned on the shower and stood underneath it, soaping himself with a tiny pinkish bar of Camay, feeling the hangover starting to lift. Turning his chin up, he just let the water drum on his head. He soaped his head.

The telephone rang. This time, the actual Motor Inn phone. “Wrong number!” he hollered through the steam. Had to be. Nobody’d know he was here. Even *he* hadn’t known. But the rings didn’t quit.

15...16...17 rings. Cursing, he bolted and dripped to the phone.

“Brymmer?”

He sat on the bed; wet. “Ross? How the hell did you know where I am?”

“I didn’t. I called every fleabag in town.”

“Wrong.”

“Right.”

“So how did you know?”

“I know cause I’m the best fuckin cop in the city. I know where you can still buy a twenty-ounce Coke. I know six, seven places you can smoke in New York. And I knew where you were because Dubisky told me.”

“Dubisky?”

“Yeah. You were with him last night.”

Brymmer squinted at the hair on his bed. “Is Dubisky a blonde?”

“You and Dubisky picked up the blonde but she thought you were cuter so Dubisky went home.”

“Goody for me.”

“Well, I don’t know. Dubisky said she looked like she might have the clap.”

“I’m going now, Ross.”

“Hey wait a second. Shit. I didn’t just give you that build-up for nothing. I’m in need of a favor.”

Brymmer rolled his eyes. “What’s wrong with your car *now*?”

“Nothing,” Ross said, “that a hernia wouldn’t fix. It’s buried under fifty-thousand acres of snow. Archeologists will find it in ten thousand years. A dented Beetle with a dead battery. They’ll think it’s a prehistoric bidet.”

“Take the subway.”

“Forget it. I gotta take the kid to the hospital, see? It’s Saturday, Brymmer. You ever try Bellevue on a Saturday, Brymmer? I won’t get back till a quarter of four. The streets are like ice. I will break my neck running to the subway. Eight blocks, Brymmer. It’s minus twelve. That’s sixty below on the Celsius scale. Kathy went to stay with her sister last night and she twisted her ankle and—”

“Right. I’ll pick you up at a quarter of—”

“Fine. I’m hanging up now before you change your mind.”

Brymmer let the phone drop back to the cradle and sat for a moment, shaking his head. Ross was in one of his manic moods and Brymmer had finally broken the

code. Manic One meant things-could-be-worse. Manic Two meant that they were. Brymmer yawned and went to the window, scanning the day: Sky the color of dirty sidewalk; sidewalk the color of dirty snow. Down on the street at the corner of Eleventh, a bar girl was purchasing some chemical respite from a guy who had a street vendor's pass to sell socks. Brymmer padded back through the sick orange room and glanced at the hair and the lipstick on his bed. If this were a crime scene, he suddenly thought, his detectives would be jumping up and down at the find.

Brymmer shivered.

The room was cold.

Dressing hurriedly, he went home to shave.

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The kitchen clock said 3:31 and Ross stood there, still in his coat, blowing on his red, scratchy hands. Brymmer was due at a quarter of four, which meant there was time to heat up the coffee. Only he didn't want any coffee. What he wanted—not needed, just wanted—was a Scotch. So screw it. Shit. It was cold outside. He'd been running around in the freezing cold. He'd eaten his spinach. He'd done his chores.

He found the bottle in a tidy cabinet over the stove, poured out a shot and toasted himself in a toaster so clean you could see yourself in it. Bogart's voice came in from the hall, over the sound of a gurgling chant. Billy was planted in front of the set. For the hell of it, Ross had lugged the kid in and left him watching *To Have and Have Not* which was sure to make mommy get

boiling mad on account of *The Electric Company* was on and she wouldn't admit it was all the same thing.

Poor mommy.

Poor kid.

He finished the shot with a Bogart leer and watched his face distort in the toaster. He liked it that way. Slightly skewed. A truer reflection of the Basic Ross than the clean, almost innocent Golden Boy front that someone had mistakenly slapped on his head.

“Hey, is that you?” It was Kathy’s voice, yelled from the echoing tomb of the tub. Ross poured a quick half-shotful of Cutty. “Would you bring me an aspirin? Up by the sink.”

He found the aspirin. Up by the sink. Shoving it into his coat pocket, he left the kitchen, leaving his glass. Billy stared through the living room arch, the large, lolling, vacuous head propped against the padded back of his chair. Giving the kid a salacious wink, Ross said, “Hi! How’s daddy’s little onion?” Billy drooled. Ross hardly ever called the kid Billy, preferring the apter vegetable names—carrot, onion, turnip, beet.

Kathy soaked in a bubbled tub, her russet hair caught up in a knot, tendrils wisping around the ears. Ross filled a bathroom glass with water and handed it to her along with a pill. “If it hurts, you should call a doctor,” he said.

“We’ve got enough *doctor bills* around here.” She swallowed the aspirin, keeping the glass, lifting her ankle out of the tub, the bubbles clinging around its curves. “So—how’s Billy?” she asked quickly.

“Fine. For Billy.” Ross moved away, leaning his back on the back of the door.

“I mean what did Dr. Rinaldo say?”

“Fine...” He shrugged and reached for a smoke.

“Coach says with only a little more practice, the kid’ll be playing in the Vegetable Bowl.”

She gave him a cool indifferent look. “You realize I hate you when you do this, don’t you?”

“I realize you hate me when I *don’t* do it, too, so I figure what the hell, I got nothin’ to lose.”

She continued to give him the baleful eye, then moved in the water, baring her breast. She held out the glass. “Would you *mind*?” and he took it, put it back on the sink. When he turned, she was dramatically shaking her head. “Poor...poor...poor...Steven. Really we do put upon you so.”

He nodded. “Uh-huh. Anything else?”

“I was thinking what a fine person you are.”

“Fine.”

“I said that, didn’t I? Fine. Fine, upright, noble, good.”

“Christ.”

“I think that’s going too far, but you’re certainly upright, noble and good. And handsome too.” She tilted her head. “I bet girls actually kill themselves too, just on the chance you’ll discover their body.”

Ross said, “Stop it,” which wouldn’t help. It was like telling somebody not to vomit. He watched her, cupping her chin in her hand, leaning her elbow on the edge of the tub. Pensive. Coiled:

“Ever made it with a corpse?”

He lifted his shoulders. “You should know.”

She laughed. “Oh well. Forget about me. Do not speak evil of the living dead. But you must be getting it somewhere, eh? I mean, I don’t see your balls turning blue.”

Ross just stood there, dragging his smoke. It was such an old and ridiculous fight that he didn’t know

why it held his attention, kept him, as now, glued to the spot. Guilt, Brymmer said. Fascination with guilt. To a Wasp, Brymmer said, it's a new toy. An endlessly virile Erector Set, a chance to construct an actual hell.

Grinning now, he suddenly looked at his watch. "Well," he said brightly, "time to move on. Always nice to stop by for a chat." Turning, he saw her start from the tub, slowly, carefully, holding the sink.

"Come on," he said sharply and held out a hand, and she took it, leaning against his arm, dripping water on the sleeve of his coat; an improbable scene in the bathroom mirror. She saw it too, and stared at the glass: the tired, pale, naked girl and the tall, dressed, holstered cop.

Softly, she said, "I wish...oh God, I wish you'd arrest me. Lock me away. Lock up my mouth." She watched his eyes in the mirror now, and her own were wide, starting to mist.

Turning her gently, he cupped her chin. "I have to go now. It's twenty to four."

She shrugged then, lightly, tossing her head. "It's always twenty to four," she said. "Truly. In the real dark night of the soul it is always, always twenty to four."

"Right," he said quickly. "Whatever you say."

As he walked to the corner of Avenue C, at the ass-end of Peter Cooper Village, he wondered how long they could keep it up, how long they could hack away at each other, how long before something snapped in his head:

#### POLICEMAN MURDERS ONION AND WIFE

The real killer was, that he still loved her.

"So what do you say?" Brymmer said in the car. "How're things doing at the tragedy mill?"

“Grinding them out,” Ross said blithely. “Making the quota for our Five Year Plan.” He yawned. “Can I borrow your life for a week?”

“You wouldn’t like it.”

“And how would *you* know? Christ. You don’t even remember the dirty parts.”

“Right. And speaking of dirty parts, kiddo, we just caught a case.”

“Yeah? What kind?”

“The worst,” Brymmer said, and added, “Like Clawson.”

“Shit.” Ross whistled and then rolled his eyes. “Who caught it first?”

“This one? Matson.”

“Great. And the Clawson?”

“Ritter. Downtown.”

“So they called in the cavalry.”

“Yep. Except one of us didn’t have his horse.”

“So true. Where we going?”

“Padillo said we ought to fly straight to the scene. East Sixty Second Street. Two-ninety-three.”

They were stopped now at Sixtieth, waiting for a light. Ross sat slumped in the corner of his seat, staring at the overhead tramway port that looked like a giant Fisher-Price toy and wondering again if he might still be suited for another line of work.

“I’m gonna meet you there,” he said. “Let me off at the corner.— Want coffee?”

Brymmer frowned. “You’ll only barf it all up.”

“I know.” Ross shrugged and then grinned. “It’s for after.”