

From Crime to Crime

**MIND-BOGGLING
TALES OF MYSTERY
AND MURDER**

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*The Smart Guys
Marching Society*

I'd made the popcorn, as always, but at least Fred brought the beers. "Can't be a meeting of the Smart Guys Marching Society without some brewskis," he said, letting the bottles rattle noisily as he dropped the bag on my new coffee table.

"Hey, watch it!" I lunged for the bowl of cheese whirls, now perched precariously at table's edge.

Bill, munching peanuts, reached past my hand for the photo propped against the table lamp.

"You got it framed!" he said—or, rather, mumbled. A lone peanut escaped his mouth, bounced off the throw rug and scurried under the sofa.

"It's a goddam feeding frenzy around here." I was crouched by the sofa, reaching under for the peanut. All I came up with was a fistful of dustballs.

Bill looked at Fred, smirking. "Jesus, is this boy whipped, or what?"

“I happen to *like* a clean house,” I said, wiping my hand with a napkin.

“Lemme see the picture,” Fred was saying, craning to see over Bill’s shoulder. It was the Polaroid we’d taken with the auto-shutter last week of the four of us—me, Bill, Fred and Mark. Not a pretty sight. We looked like the chorus of a musical called “40-Something”: assorted beards, glasses and receding hairlines, in sneakers, shorts and one particularly vivid Hawaiian shirt.

“Whew,” Fred said, wincing at our smiling, casual images. “It’s a good thing we’re smart.”

“That’s open to debate,” Mark growled, coming in the porch door, laden with grocery bags. His severe glasses, dark hair and military-stiff bearing—a legacy of his career as an Intelligence officer turned journalist—were softened as always for me by his willingness to drop a few actual bucks for some real eats.

“My favorite Smart Guy!” Bill exclaimed, bouncing up to take bags from Mark. “Cold cuts, slaw... now we’re in business.”

“Look, are we here to eat or talk?” Fred looked concerned. A lawyer by trade, but philosopher by avocation, he rarely let our monthly discussions stray from what he liked to call “the big issues”—life, death, truth, etc. The usual suspects. He stroked his neat beard thoughtfully. “Today we’re doing Middle East policy, right?”

“I hope not,” Bill said, settling back on the sofa. He had the trim, wiry frame of a marathon runner, which in fact he was. “I brought a great *Atlantic Monthly* article about health care.”

He pulled copies of the magazine article from his back pocket, passed them around. A long-time actor and theater director, he had a tendency to try to control the flow and content of our discussions.

With little success, I might add.

“What happened to the Middle East?” Fred complained.

“Don’t look at me.” Mark shrugged. “I was nowhere near there all week.”

“Ha. Ha.” Bill nodded toward the pages in our hands. “We’re doin’ health care.”

As a psychotherapist, with years of experience handling conflicts, I decided it was time to apply my professional skills to the impasse.

“We’ll flip a coin,” I said, doing so. Unfortunately, it bounced off the table and, with a perversity I’d swear was deliberate, rolled under the sofa.

Mark looked glum. “It’s gonna be a long afternoon.”

Let me explain. The Smart Guys Marching Society began as an impromptu bull session a couple years ago, when the four of us (and our wives and kids) were barbecuing in my backyard.

It was a typical Southern California day, the smog doing a slow dissolve over the Hollywood Hills. Lazy Sunday conversation turned into impassioned debate, the four of us guys huddled around the smoking grill. Women and children were scattered about, doing real life, while we grappled with such pragmatic concerns as Roman military strategy, foreign aid and the merits of certain long-dead playwrights.

“Can you *believe* these guys?” Bill ranted to his wife, throwing up his hands. “They think Ibsen is overrated!” She stared back at him, unblinking.

We decided to make it a formal event, every Sunday afternoon. Stag. We didn’t plan it that way—our wives simply had the good

sense not to want to come.

“I have better things to do,” Mark’s wife reportedly told him.

“Like what?”

“Like... anything.” Case closed.

Anyway, that’s how the whole thing started. Every Sunday afternoon (excepting holidays, kids’ birthdays and visits from in-laws) the four of us—therapist, actor, journalist and lawyer—met in my game room to scarf down munchies, trade insults and debate the issues of the day.

This particular afternoon, however, would take a decidedly different turn, one that would change our lives, and the course of the Smart Guys, forever...

The conversation had somehow drifted away from the Middle East, health care reform and other such rhetorical stalwarts to various tales of unexplained phenomena.

“But that’s just my point,” Fred was saying, pretty exasperated by now. “We know from Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle that the observed is changed by the observer.”

“So—?” Bill said.

“So, that explains unexplained phenomena. We co-create reality, see? Research indicates that the more you believe in ghosts, for example, the greater the likelihood that you’ll encounter one.”

“Geez, I don’t know,” Mark said. “I believe in intelligent debate, and in all the years I’ve been coming here I haven’t encountered it yet.”

Fred gave him a look. “The salient factor is that reality, or what we call reality, is co-determined by both observer and observed. Subject and object, if you prefer.”

“Reality is reality, dammit.” Mark folded his arms.

Bill gnawed a fingernail reflectively. “Does this have anything to do with Jung?”

I perked up. “That depends. Why?”

“I have this friend. An actor. I directed him last year at the Taper. George is a real fitness buff, hits the gym every day. And he’s noticed a strange phenomenon, and is making a hobby of compiling other people’s experiences, to see if there’s a pattern at work.”

“Since when do actors care about other people?” Mark said, opening another beer.

“Ignore him,” I said. “What phenomenon?”

Bill went on: “George said he notices that when he goes to his locker in the gym’s locker room, even if it appears totally deserted, the moment another guy shows up, it turns out this other guy’s locker is right next to his.”

“Coincidence,” Mark said.

Bill shook his head. “George has made a study of this. No matter what part of the locker room—I mean, he’ll just pick a locker at random—and four times out of five somebody’s stuff is in the next one. With all these other lockers around.”

“That is strange,” I admitted.

“He’s asked lots of other people, and they’ve had the same experience. It’s like there’s some kind of primal, unconscious need to bond or something.”

I nodded. “That’s why you mentioned Jung... maybe you’re referring to his concept of synchronicity.”

“Oh, yeah... like when you’re thinking of someone, and the phone rings and it’s that person on the line.”

“Or,” I said, “perhaps the locker room phenomenon is caused by some mechanism in the collective unconscious toward merging, or community...”

Fred stared at a corn chip, as though it held the secrets of the universe.

“I’m thinking now in terms of quantum physics,” he said. “The tendency of subatomic particles, even at vast distances, to resonate at similar vibratory frequencies.” He popped the corn chip in his mouth. “I mean, at that level, everything—you, me, this table—is just a collection of vibratory frequencies, out of which comes the world we experience.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “That place where Buddhism and physics meet. Emptiness rising into form, manifesting reality.”

Bill’s eyes were glazing over. “Now I’m sorry I brought it up.” He rose, and stretched. “We’re gettin’ low on onion dip.”

“In the fridge,” I said.

Before Bill could take another step, however, a tub of onion dip came sailing out of the kitchen. He caught it reflexively.

We all whirled, stunned.

“I couldn’t help but overhear,” the newcomer said brightly. “Thought I’d save you a trip.”

It was my wife’s Uncle Isaac, his bear-like figure filling out his workman’s overalls. A retired contractor (a “Jack of all trades,” he called himself), he was staying with us for a while. I’d almost forgotten about him.

“Uncle Isaac,” I said, “let me introduce you around.”

He shook hands vigorously with each of the guys, his pale eyes gleaming. Then he stood back a bit, stroking his thick muttonchop

sideburns with a crooked finger.

My wife explained to me once that calling him “Uncle” was a courtesy; there was such a convoluted tangle of branches on her family tree that nobody was really sure how (or even if) Isaac was actually related. It seemed as though he’d just always been... family.

“How long have you been in the kitchen?” I asked. “You should’ve come on in.”

“I didn’t want to interrupt. Pretty deep-dish stuff you boys talk. Like college professors.”

Fred shrugged. “You should’ve been here last week. We spent an hour arguing about who’s the all-time hottest *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model.”

“You’re welcome to join us,” Bill offered, then glanced ruefully at the coffee table. “I think there’s half a sandwich left, and some Cheez Whiz.”

“A tempting offer,” said Isaac, “but I had a big lunch. I just came back from a constitutional around the neighborhood.”

He settled into the corner armchair. A lamp table beside it was stacked with books he’d brought along. Mostly mystery and sci-fi paperbacks. Conan Doyle. Asimov. Heinlein. The classics. “If you don’t mind, I’ll just listen in. Please don’t take offense if I doze off.”

“No problem. Kind of a weekly occurrence around here.” Bill carved a groove in the onion dip with a potato chip. “Now, where were we?”

“We were talking about reality,” Fred said. “Or Jung. Or locker rooms.”

It was then that I first noticed Mark, sitting somewhat pensively. He hadn’t said a word in some time.

“Hey, you okay?” I asked.

“I was just thinking about something,” he said, adjusting his glasses. “All this stuff about unexplained phenomena... it reminds me of something that happened earlier this week. It’s kind of... strange, that’s all.”

Fred looked up. “Something at the paper?”

“Well, I’ve been doing a series for the *Times* about street cops, the nightly grind, you know? I’ve been riding the graveyard shift with these cop buddies, Vince and Harry, and a real mess came down a couple nights back, down on Walnut Street.”

“I think I saw that on the news last night,” Bill said. “Some drug dealer got killed—knifed—by a cop.”

Mark nodded. “The cop’s name is Sergeant D’Amato. Your basic Neanderthal. Couple reprimands for excessive force. Always carries a pearl-handled folding knife in his belt—strictly against Department policy, of course—but everybody knows....”

“Anyway, I’ve been riding with Vince and Harry’s unit out of D’Amato’s precinct, and all I hear the past two weeks is about D’Amato’s obsession with Tommy Slick.”

“Who?” Fred asked.

“The victim,” Bill said helpfully. “TV news showed his mug shot. Looked like Al Pacino in *Scarface*. Your stereotypical murdering, gang-connected drug dealer.”

Mark ignored him. “As I was saying, D’Amato’s been trying to bust Tommy for years on a major rap, but Tommy’s been too...” He smiled. “Well, let’s just say Tommy’s been too slick for him.”

“Tommy Slick...” Fred muttered. “His real name’s probably Wilbur Kablonski or something.”

Mark sighed heavily. “Look, guys, if I want sidebars on this story,

I’ll write ’em myself. Anyway, D’Amato’s definitely got his reasons for hating Tommy. Couple years back, Tommy killed D’Amato’s partner during a police raid....”

“Wait a minute! He killed a cop—and walked?”

“Nobody could ID Tommy as the shooter,” Mark said. “But D’Amato swore it was Tommy, that he saw him waste his partner before taking off....”

“D’Amato’s upset...” I mused aloud. “He feels guilty over his partner’s death... blames himself. So he needs to fixate that blame somewhere else....”

“Spare us, willya?” Mark rolled his eyes.

“Yeah,” said Bill impatiently. “Besides, this is all just backstory, right?”

“You could call it that,” Mark said. “Anyway, all this week, the precinct’s humming like a live wire... D’Amato’s got Tommy’s main squeeze Carla in the strike zone—”

“What?”

“He was grilling her, as they used to say,” Fred explained. “Man, she must have a shitty public defender.”

Mark smiled. “Carla’s no deb queen herself. Juvie hall at 13, soliciting and dealing charges—real nice career track, if you know what I mean... Anyway, D’Amato’s been pushing her hard. A big deal is rumored to be going down, with Tommy behind it. D’Amato’s been wanting to take him down big-time, and figures this’ll do it.”

“But why would Carla help him?”

“Turns out, she’s furious at Tommy ’cause she heard he was cheating on her.” Mark leaned in. “Anyway, two nights ago, I’m in the patrol car with Vince and Harry, and a call comes in requesting back-

up. Seems the girl's taking D'Amato to where Tommy's holed up. So we hit the siren and red light, and go jammin' over to this rundown place on Walnut.

"When we get there, D'Amato's in his car with Carla, who's wailing and crying. We run up to them, Vince and Harry carrying the heavy artillery. Just then, a window smashes above us, glass showering down, and a couple of Tommy's guys start shooting at us."

"Jesus Christ," said Bill.

"Yeah, that name came up," Mark said. "I mean, all of sudden it's a goddam shoot-out. Vince is yellin' at me to stay down—Hell, *I've* got more combat experience than he does! Finally, after about ten minutes of this, D'Amato tells Carla to stay put and goes chargin' into the place. Vince and Harry got no choice, they go crashing in after him, with me bringing up the rear."

"What are you, nuts?" Fred stared at Mark, wide-eyed.

"It gets worse," Mark said. "Carla bolts out of the car, and the next thing I know, all of us, including her, are scurrying up this darkened stairwell inside the building—with Carla screaming her head off, trying to warn Tommy—"

"And you're in the middle of all this?" I said.

"Oh, yeah." His voice tightened. "Bullets are flying everywhere, and then we're upstairs, in Tommy's place. One of his gang is heading out the window. But Vince yells 'Freeze!' and the perp drops his gun. The other perp is in a heap by the bed, covered with blood...."

"Where the hell was Tommy?"

"That's what D'Amato wanted to know. We're all crouched in the doorway, guns drawn, Carla and me pushed behind the cops. Vince is covering the perp, still frozen halfway out the window...."

"Where's Tommy, dirtball?' D'Amato yells at this guy. He doesn't say squat. Suddenly, D'Amato lifts his piece... 'I'm sprayin' the walls, Tommy!'... So Vince starts grabbing for his arm, to stop him—Just then, Carla breaks free and runs into the middle of the room. D'Amato roars like a banshee, goes right in after her.

"Suddenly, a door flies open—it was a special hiding place, no bigger than a closet... Anyway, this door flies open and Tommy's body falls out—right into Carla's arms! She reels back, screaming, as the body hits the floor. There's a knife sticking out of his chest, blood seeping through his shirt."

"A knife?" Bill asked, his voice a whisper.

Mark nodded, eyes narrowing. "Carla takes one look at it and yells up at D'Amato. 'You bastard! You killed him!' Before anyone could stop her, she pulls the knife from Tommy's body and lunges at D'Amato! It takes me and Vince to restrain her, Vince finally knocking the knife loose... Then we all just stand there, staring at it on the floor. Even stained with blood, there was no mistaking the pearl handle. It was D'Amato's knife."

"What?" Fred and I exchanged looks.

"Yeah. It was *his* knife that killed Tommy Slick. I glanced instinctively at his belt, where he keeps the knife—and it was gone.

"So Vince says to him, 'How'd ya do it, D'Amato?' But D'Amato just keeps staring down at Tommy, his face hard as stone."

Mark sat back, took off his glasses.

"So... what happened?" I asked.

Mark shrugged. "Homicide and Internal Affairs are all over it. Vince figures D'Amato did it, but nobody can dope out how."

"What does D'Amato say?"

“‘Prove it,’ is all he says. ‘Maybe my knife wanted to kill the bastard more’n I did.’”

“He’s crazy,” said Bill.

“Not so crazy,” Fred replied. “I mean, if he did it, *how* did he do it?” He turned to Mark. “You say this hidden closet was closed the whole time?”

“Like a drum. Apparently Tommy had had it constructed as a hiding place just in case of a raid or something... a little one-man bunker, just for him.”

Bill looked thoughtful. “Maybe somebody else stabbed him... ya know, earlier, before you guys got there....”

“Vince thought of that. Like maybe one of the other perps on the scene... Tommy goes in to hide, leaving his two men to shoot it out with the cops. So one of the gang stabs him. The only problem is, where did he get D’Amato’s knife to do it with?”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “We’re making this way too complicated. You said D’Amato grilled Carla for two whole days. What if she spilled the beans sooner than he said? What if he got the hideout’s address from her, goes over earlier in the day, gets Tommy alone and stabs him, and stashes him in the secret closet?”

“How would he know about it?” Fred asked. “Unless Tommy conveniently told him, just before getting stabbed.”

“Carla told him about it,” I said. “So D’Amato kills Tommy, getting revenge for his dead partner—”

“And where were Tommy’s two men while this was going on, out getting a pizza?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Anyway, D’Amato comes back, then he radios for backup and instigates the big raid. But it’s only a charade

to cover his tracks. Meanwhile, Tommy’s already dead.”

“Interesting theory,” Mark said, smiling. “Stupid, but interesting. For one thing, the coroner puts the time of death at roughly when we broke in there. And, hell, I *saw* the knife in his chest—that wound was fresh.”

“Okay, let’s be logical,” Fred said. “It was nighttime, dark... probably the lights were shot out anyway....”

“Right,” Mark said. “And it all happened kinda fast.”

“So who’s to say D’Amato didn’t somehow get into the room ahead of you, your two cop buddies and Carla... It would just take seconds to slip the knife through a door slot, killing Tommy in that hidden closet.”

Mark shook his head. “I’m telling you, that closet was airtight. Built flush with the wall, so that you couldn’t even see a door without looking closely. I didn’t see it until it fell open and Tommy tumbled out. Besides, we all got into that room about the same time. I don’t believe D’Amato could’ve stuck a knife through the door jamb, even if he’d known where it was.”

“Then what are we left with?” Bill asked.

Mark smiled. “D’Amato’s knife magically left his belt, found its way into a sealed hidden closet and stabbed Tommy Slick to death. All this in a matter of seconds, in front of witnesses.”

“I still think one of Tommy’s men did it,” said Bill. “Didn’t you say one guy was down, but the other one was trying to go out the window when you broke in?”

“That’s right. But according to him, Tommy jumped into his special hiding place as soon as the shooting started. The guy swears Tommy was in there the whole time—he never came out and nobody

went near the door—until Tommy fell out, dead....”

“With D’Amato’s knife in his heart,” I said. “Talk about your unexplained phenomena.”

Bill frowned at Mark. “That’s it?” he demanded. “I mean, what’s gonna happen?”

“Who knows? D’Amato won’t talk. It’s kind of perverse on his part, if you ask me... he’s so glad Tommy’s dead, and that his knife was the instrument, it’s like he doesn’t care now what happens. Though one of my sources in the Department says that if charges are filed, D’Amato intends to plead not guilty.”

“I’ll bet,” Bill said. “He’s not *that* crazy.”

Mark smiled ruefully. As though there wasn’t much else to say.

Suddenly, a voice broke the silence.

“What does he look like?”

We all turned. It was Isaac, comfortably settled in the armchair, his cherubic face shining. Tell you the truth, I’d forgotten he was there... again.

“Look like?” Mark said, with some irritation. “Who? D’Amato?”

“No, no,” Isaac replied. “I mean George, that actor friend of Bill’s.”

“Oh, yeah, the guy in the locker room,” I said.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Fred asked. He glanced warily at Mark, and then at me.

“Uh... look, Uncle Isaac...” I must admit, I was somewhat embarrassed.

“I was just thinking,” Isaac went on, leaning back in his chair. “I mean, about that curious phenomenon of the locker room. I was wondering what George looked like...”

Bill shrugged. “Very handsome, in a buffed, hunky kind of way.

If you like that type.”

Isaac nodded. “You see, this fellow George noticed that whatever locker he chose—even if each day he chose a different area of the locker room at random—another guy would show up, his stuff in the very next locker. In a sea of available lockers, the odds almost always favored this coincidence.”

“So?”

“So I just thought that coincidence—or even the collective unconscious, or a field of subatomic particles vibrating cooperatively—might be *nudged along* a little if George were a handsome man. Perhaps other men who found him attractive would make it a point to pretend their locker was next to his.”

“But George said the other guy would show up, open the locker next to his, and start taking his stuff out—”

“Or start putting it *in*,” Isaac said, “in such a way that it *looked* as if he were taking it out. I did that once in high school—many, many years ago, as you can imagine—when I was attracted to this girl named Shirley. I opened the locker next to hers, claiming it was mine, and put a book in and took a book out, while we stood there talking. Of course, it was the same book. It’s really quite easy to do, especially if the locker door opens toward the girl, so her view is blocked as to the locker’s real contents.”

“Look, Isaac.” Mark tried to remain calm. “That’s real interesting, but what we’ve been talking about is—”

Isaac sat forward, eyes crinkling. “Yes, yes, I know. A mysterious crime. Unexplained. Your classic locked-room murder... only in this case, it’s a closet.”

“Are you trying to say something, Isaac?” I asked.

“Just a question I have. I was wondering why...”

Can you figure out what Isaac is thinking?

Can you solve the crime?

If you think you know who, what, when, where, why and how...email tallfellow@pacbell.net with your theory. Reference “Smart Guys Theory” in the subject heading.

The first fifteen people with the right, or closest to the right answer will win an auto-graphed copy of the book.

Only winners will be notified. Allow several weeks for reply.

Contest open from March 10 through April 30.

All decisions are final.

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Good luck and and Happy Sleuthing!!!