



MICHAEL
CRAFT

Body
Language

A MARK MANNING MYSTERY



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The author is indebted to Agatha Christie, master of this genre, one of whose stage plays inspired the core idea for this story. Further, he thanks Mari Higgins-Frost and Joel Wallen for their assistance with various plot details. As always, the author expresses his gratitude to Mitchell Waters and John Scognamiglio for bringing this series to print.

—M.

Contents

[PROLOGUE This Afternoon](#)
[PART ONE Three Months Ago](#)
[PART TWO Three Weeks Ago](#)
[PART THREE Three Days Ago](#)
[PART FOUR Three Hours Ago](#)
[EPILOGUE This Afternoon](#)

[Preview: Name Games](#)

[A Biography of Michael Craft](#)

PROLOGUE

This Afternoon

MY NEW LIFE SEEMS bogged by funerals, peppered by the last rites of passage into some vast unknown. The mourners who surround me are watching the spectacle of grief played out at the altar. With a numb sense of detachment, they mime the prescribed motions and mouth psalms about sheep, lost to their memories, as I am lost in mine.

This journey, this launch of a faithful soul to its presumed reward, mirrors my own journey north to this town, seeking a future still rooted in my past. While the events that led me here were personal and introspective—selfish, some might say—the circumstances of this funeral, and the one that preceded it only days ago, have deeply bruised the public psyche of this town. Wondering what thoughts are harbored by the others here in church today, I am tempted to make a few notes.

Reaching beneath my topcoat, my hand brushes the spiral of a steno pad as I remove from my pocket the wonderful old pen I carry everywhere, even here. In the course of my career, I've known legions of reporters, but none other have used a fountain pen for notes—idiosyncratic perhaps, and not entirely practical, but it's a luxurious affectation that is by now second nature to me. Rolling the Montblanc in my fingers like a fine cigar, I remove the cap and examine the gold band beneath the nib. Engraved there in tiny letters is the name MARK MANNING, barely legible through the years of wear.

The priest drones through the script of his fill-in-the-blanks sermon, eulogizing “this allegiant child of the church.” Heads bob, some sob, but most try to huddle deeper into their scarves; outside the midday sun may glare in a crystalline sky, but inside, the building's old boiler is no match for the January cold spell that now grips central Wisconsin.

Pulling the notepad from my coat, I flip it open and poise my pen, searching for the first words of a story that wants to be told. After all, the events of the past few weeks are the stuff of sensation journalism. I know a great story when I see one, and my reputation stems from an ability to report. Groping now for that opening phrase, I find that words seem to resist the tangibility of ink. But why? This one has it all—deceit, greed, secrets, and lust. Not to mention murder.

And it dawns on me. I'm too close to this story. This is family. This is *me*. Though page-one material, this will never carry my byline. This is a tale I can spin only in my mind.

PART ONE

Three Months Ago

WHERE TO BEGIN? The roots of this story trace back to my boyhood, some thirty-three years ago when I first visited Dumont, Wisconsin. And there were even earlier chapters, with a hidden prologue written prior to my birth in Illinois forty-two years ago. But the events that led to the tragedies of the past few weeks are not nearly so distant. The main action of this tale began just three months ago.

It was autumn, mid-October in Chicago, arguably the most pleasant weeks of the year—cool, dry, and invigorating. Kids were back in school, the opera and symphony seasons were in full swing, and the world got busy again with the productive grind of life. For all of these reasons and countless others, I have always enjoyed fall.

But last October was different. A mild despondency had gnawed at me all year, and by the time the leaves began to yellow, I found myself in the throes of full-blown depression. On the surface, the condition could be glibly diagnosed as a common case of midlife crisis. Indeed, like most men in the forties, I had begun to contemplate my mortality, and my staunchly rational creed did not permit the safety net of an afterlife. At the suggestion of an attorney friend, Roxanne Exner, I even wrote a will.

The truth was, though, that while I wasn't getting any younger, there wasn't a thing physically wrong with me. I was (and still am) as fit as most at thirty. So it is simply inaccurate to say that my depression was caused by the pull of the grave. What was really eating me was my job.

Doubtless, there are many who look back at their life's work and wonder why they've bothered. All too often, visions of a changed world are dead-ended by the realities of a future that doesn't measure up to the plan.

My career, however, exceeded all expectations. Back in the seventies, as a journalism student at Champaign-Urbana, I didn't dare dream that success might await me in Chicago, where I managed to land a reporting job at the *Journal*, one of that city's two major dailies. Over the years, I honed my skills and eventually secured a reputation as the most respected investigative reporter in the Midwest—a statement that verges on boasting, perhaps, but it is not with empty pride, because I did, in fact, deliver a unique brand of journalism in a city that's known as a newspaper town.

Most notably, last summer's big story dealt with a civic festival of the arts and sciences. When I took on the assignment, I had no idea—no one did, other than a handful of conspirators—that the festival was related to a bizarre scheme with insidious social implications for the entire country. During the course of my investigation, several of my coworkers were killed, and while there were many who considered me a hero in these developments, I myself had a hard time shrugging off the notion that I had played a role in these deaths.

This notion may have been shared by the Partridge Committee, that august body of publishers and scholars responsible for handing out the Partridge Prize (investigative journalism's highest award known among reporters as "the coveted brass bird"). When the nominations were announced last fall, my efforts were again ignored, and the elusive prize was awarded posthumously to a reporter who was felled by the events of my story. Ironically, this was his *second* Partridge. The one awarded to him in life meant little to him—he treated it like a knickknack, a gaudy paperweight.

I am a reasonable man, self-analytical and perhaps overly logical, hardly prone to fits of peevishness. But that story was easily the highlight of my reporting career—any journalist would drool at the prospects of typing his byline over it. A combination of circumstances, luck, and my own best efforts produced an investigation that was hailed by my editor as the story of the year, if not the decade. Public acclaim was overwhelming, but the Partridge people ignored me. And this had happened before. I believe this is the result of a particular prejudice against me. I believe this is a reaction to the fact that I am gay.

Recognition of prejudice is not a persecution complex, and my insistence upon maintaining that distinction is not mere defensiveness. People are free to believe whatever they wish, and if, as a result of their beliefs, they don't "like" me, so be it—I'm not apt to like them, either. But the Partridge Foundation, while private, functions in the public arena, claims open-mindedness, and parades its veneer of objectivity. By any objective standard, I was screwed.

In other words, last October my career at the *Journal* maxed out. I had taken the job as far as was likely to go, and while my performance was recognized by the adulation of my readers and the respect of my cohorts, I was convinced that my reporting would never be endorsed by that one evasive plum it deserved. Further, assignments like the festival story don't come along every day—subsequent stories fired no passion within me. And there was still that nagging thought that I had played a role in the death of friends.

I was beginning to grapple with awareness of the unthinkable: my reporting days at the *Journal* were drawing to an end, and I had no idea where I was headed.

All was not bleak, however, not by a long shot. Though the stability of my professional life was approaching a crisis of uncertainty, I had achieved emotional bedrock at home with Neil Wait. Meeting him, learning to love him, had precipitated a different kind of crisis—an identity crisis—some three years earlier. Approaching forty, I was single, straight, frustrated, and curious when an intriguing young architect, barely in his thirties, came to Chicago on business from Phoenix. At first glance, I judged him athletically handsome; during our first evening of conversation, I came to understand that he was intellectually rigorous as well. I was doomed (perhaps "destined" has a less pejorative ring) to fall in love with him, and my lifetime of fears became meaningless.

Roxanne introduced us, a courtesy she learned to regret, as she'd set her sights romantically on both Neil and me over the years. By the time Neil made his decision to relocate to his firm's Chicago

office, it was obvious to both of us, as well as to Roxanne, that he and I belonged together. We were relieved when Roxanne ultimately reconciled herself to the role of unwitting matchmaker, and she has since been our closest friend.

The other aspect of my life that was anything but bleak last autumn was finances. As the *Journal's* star reporter, I was well paid, of course, but that was just the beginning. When I solved a prominent missing-person case nearly three years ago (at the time I met Neil), I received a substantial cash award from the woman's estate. Not long after that, I learned that I had inherited a large house from an uncle in central Wisconsin—Dumont, Wisconsin—which I had seen only once during my boyhood visit. Since both Neil and I were then anchored to our jobs in Chicago, I sold the house to an architecture buff and his wife from Madison, a Professor and Mrs. Tawkin.

The proceeds from all this were used to customize a cavernous loft apartment in Chicago's New North area, which I had bought and Neil redesigned. The renovation took nearly two years, but we both enjoyed the process despite the upheaval. We were literally building our life together, and our home was the tangible symbol of that commitment.

The loft project, while substantial, did not exhaust my windfall, and I proved myself a shrewd investor of the remaining funds, watching with bemused disbelief as they multiplied. Then, last summer, after my investigation of the festival story made page-one headlines worldwide, I found myself in constant demand as the recipient of outrageously inflated lecture fees, which fueled my investment hobby with additional capital.

No, money wasn't a problem. Nor was my home life the problem. The problem, as I have said, was my job. I wanted out.

"So just quit," Neil told me. "Take a breather. Or take an early retirement." We were at home one evening at the loft, and he waved his arms at our lavish surroundings, all paid for. "You don't *need* to work."

"But I do need to work." I handed him one of the two cocktails I had just poured, Japanese vodka over ice with a twist of orange peel—more of a summer drink, actually, not quite right for October but ever since the evening we first met, this had been "our" drink, our ritual.

Taking the glass, he said, "Concentrate on your investments. You're good at it."

"Just because I'm good at it doesn't mean I enjoy it." I sat next to him on a sofa facing a tall bank of windows looking east toward Lake Michigan. "I'm no bean counter. I'm a journalist."

"Then write a book."

A tempting thought. I knew very well, though, that books get written by people who have something to say, not by people who are merely in search of a literary pastime. I told Neil, "Someday, sure, I'll try my hand at a book. Now, I'm still absorbed in the day-to-day mind-set of newspapers—that's all I've done, and that's really all I know. But it's time for a change."

We'd had this discussion before, frequently, so Neil was aware that I was wrestling not with id

musings, but with an active attempt to solve a dilemma. He'd been wholly sympathetic in these talks but knowing that any major change in my life would surely affect his as well, his sympathy was tempered by a measure of caution. He said, "If you need to stick with newspapers, you could easily get a reporting job somewhere else. You'd be welcome in any newsroom on the planet. Please, though, not New York—I'm just not ready for it."

I laughed. It felt good, as my mood had ranged from funky to somber over the previous few weeks. Setting my drink on a table in front of the sofa, I took Neil's hands into mine. He still held his glass, and its icy condensation spread through his fingers to mine. "Set your mind at ease, kiddo," he assured him. "I won't let this come between us. You're far more important to me than my professional wanderlust. You've uprooted yourself once already to be with me. I wouldn't dream of confronting you with such a choice, not again."

"But you've got to be *happy*," he insisted, setting his own drink next to mine and leaning forward with his face close to mine. I felt his breath as he continued. "You're at the top of your profession, Mark. I can't expect you to take some beat reporter's job in Podunk. You need to move *up*, and there aren't many options—none within driving distance."

I smiled, wanting to tell him how much I loved him, but that might have led to some carnal diversion, and there was something I was eager to discuss with him. "I've had an idea," I told him, "and I think it might work, and it wouldn't disrupt 'us' at all."

"Oh?" Intrigued, he reached for his glass again and sipped. "I'm all ears."

Pausing, I grinned. "What if I *bought* a paper? Nothing on the scale of the *Journal*, of course—that's impossible. But with other investors, I might be able to swing a small-town daily somewhere, maybe in the suburbs. It would be a big investment, certainly a gamble, but one that I would really care about. And here's the point: It would be a new challenge. Acting as a publisher, I *would* be moving up, 'steering the ship of journalism'—a small ship, granted, maybe a measly punt, but it would be mine and I'd be in charge." Twitching my brows, I asked Neil, "What do you think?"

"Mr. Manning," he told me, kissing me before passing judgment, "I think you're a genius." Then his face turned quizzical. "How do you go about buying a newspaper? Check the want ads?" He wasn't serious.

"There are various trade journals," I explained, "and if I need to field some discreet queries, Gordon said he'd help."

"You've already discussed this with *Gordon*?" asked Neil. "He'd be the *last* person I'd tell."

We were speaking of Gordon Smith, the *Journal's* acting publisher, recently promoted, waiting for the nod to take over the position permanently. Before his promotion, he served as managing editor, and I'd worked with him on a daily basis for years. He always took a fatherly interest in my career and pride in my success. Much of what I achieved at the *Journal*, I owed to Gordon's mentoring.

"Gordon is remarkable," I told Neil. "He seems almost as concerned about my welfare as you do."

and he knows that I'm itching to try something else. I can tell that he's sick at the prospect of losing me, though."

"Who wouldn't be?" asked Neil. Then we sat quietly for a while, weighing the future's uncertain prospects, but secure in the knowledge that we'd hit upon a workable plan.

Later that week, I was at my desk in the *Journal's* newsroom, at work on a story about some routine autumn scandal in the county treasurer's office, when I took a phone call, grateful for the interruption.

"Good morning, Mr. Manning," said the thin voice of an older man on the line. "This is Elliot Coop. Do you remember me?"

I hesitated. The name was familiar. He continued. "I'm the lawyer from Dumont who handled the sale of your uncle's house on Prairie Street."

"Of course. Forgive my memory lapse, Elliot. It's nice to hear from you—it's been a while."

"Nearly three years," he tittered. "I got a phone call from Professor Tawkin yesterday, and I thought you'd want to know about it. You do remember the Tawkins, don't you?"

How could I forget? Elliot Coop prattled on about something, but his words were a blur against the din of the newsroom as I recalled the day some three years ago when I first met both the lawyer and the Tawkins.

I hadn't seen the house on Prairie Street in over thirty years, when I first visited Dumont as a boy of nine. Even then, the house struck me as a place of uncommon beauty—masculine beauty—but its restrained grandeur seemed tainted by an unspoken past. Like its occupants, it guarded secrets, and those bits of missing history puzzled me until the day I returned, the day I met Elliot Coop.

The first I knew of Elliot was a few weeks prior, when I received a FedEx from him informing me that I had inherited the house from my uncle, Edwin Quatrain, who had recently died. Uncle Edwin, my mother's brother, was a wealthy man, patriarch of the huge Quatro Press, a web-fed printing business in Dumont, situated in the central Wisconsin area known for its paper mills. His children grown and his wife long dead, Uncle Edwin had no other family with him during his latter years in the house on Prairie Street, just the live-in housekeeper who had helped raise the children. Her unlikely name was Hazel.

Both Neil and our lawyer friend, Roxanne Exner, were with me in the Chicago loft on the evening I opened Elliot's FedEx. They were as astounded as I to learn of my good fortune. "Wow," said Neil. "Your uncle had no kids?"

"As a matter of fact, he had three."

Roxanne asked, "Then why would *you* inherit the house?"

"I'm not sure." Then I added, "There was also a printing business, big enough to make them *rich*," as if the house were merely an afterthought, a trinket for a distant nephew.

"What's it worth?" asked Neil, never one to dance around delicate subjects. I had mentioned the

house before, and he was intrigued by it, but we would not be moving into it. We were both city mice finding scant allure to the prospect of life in central Wisconsin. Of *course* it would be sold.

“Plenty,” I told him. “Hundreds of thousands—maybe three, maybe five, depending on the market up there.”

Roxanne asked, “Going up to see the place?”

“Probably. The lawyer’s letter says they’ve already got a prospective buyer. They’ll let me know when they need me. God, talk about a nostalgia trip.”

And a nostalgia trip it was. A few weeks later, I was summoned to Dumont by Elliot Coop, the Quatrains’ longtime family lawyer who was handling the estate. He’d found a buyer for the house, the architecture buff from Madison who planned on moving up to Dumont to live in it. We would be meeting him at the house with his wife—she held the purse strings and still needed a bit convincing.

Driving north in a slick new Bavarian V-8, I was thrilled by the satisfaction of having finally bought the car I’d always wanted. Neil had accused me of counting chickens before they hatched, but it turned out that my estimate of the house’s worth was well on the low side, so the car would barely make a dent in the windfall that would come of that afternoon’s transaction. Besides, I told myself Uncle Edwin would surely approve—I could still smell the leather in the magnificent imported sedan he drove when I first visited Dumont as a boy.

As I turned onto Prairie Street, the house filled my view, and the sight was no less imposing than when I first saw it thirty years before. An agent’s spec sheet, which was sent to me, described the house as “vintage Prairie School, Taliesin-designed.” It was, in fact, the work of one of Frank Lloyd Wright’s students at Spring Green, Wisconsin. An expansive Palladian window across the third-floor facade was not at all typical of the style, a design eccentricity that made the house even more appealing to the man from Madison, a professor of architectural history. The spec sheet further confirmed that the house was every bit as big as I remembered it—six thousand square feet, two thousand on each floor. Plus basement. My most enduring memories of the place focused on the third floor of the house, where there was a beautiful and (in my child’s mind) mysterious loft space. The spec sheet described this attic great room as “a fabulous mother-in-law apartment/retreat.”

Parked at the curb that day were two cars, the lawyer’s and the buyers’. I hesitated for a moment then pulled into the driveway—it and the house were, after all, mine, if only for the day. As I got out of the car, the lawyer hobbled toward me, extending his hand. “Good afternoon, Mr. Manning. Elliot Coop. Thank you for driving all this way. Let me introduce you to Professor and Mrs. Tawkin.”

The wife cooed, “Introductions are hardly necessary. It’s an honor, Mr. Manning.” We all shook hands, then followed the lawyer in through the front door.

It took less than an hour to tour the house and convince the wife. In the attic great room she told us, “I was skeptical, I admit, but I’m totally won over. Shall we sign some papers?”

Mission accomplished. We trundled down the stairs, out the door, and back to our cars, with the lawyer giving directions to his office. Once the Tawkins were in their car, Elliot walked with me toward mine, telling me, “Before your uncle died, while he was reviewing his will, he gave me a letter and asked me to deliver it into your hand.” He produced the envelope. “There, Mr. Manning. Done.”

“Are you still there, Mr. Manning?” Elliot Coop’s voice buzzed through the phone at my desk in the newsroom.

“Sorry, Elliot,” I told him, snapping back to the moment. “You were saying something about Professor Tawkin?”

“Indeed,” he replied in a breathless tone, giddy with some pent-up gossip. “They’re divorcing. It’s uncontested, and they’ve retained me for arbitration.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to react to this news—or why Elliot thought I’d be interested.

He bubbled onward. “I don’t need to remind you that *she* controls the finances. She *hates* life in Dumont, and—guess what—she’s pulling the plug on the mortgage. So they’ve instructed me to sell the house, at a substantial loss if necessary. ‘Just *dump* it,’ she told me. So I was wondering, Mr. Manning, if you might have any interest in reacquiring it. It’s a magnificent home, as you know, and with your family roots in Dumont, I thought—”

“Thanks, Elliot,” I interrupted him, “but Dumont is a bit out of the way for me.” Even as I spoke, though, another thought occurred to me. The local paper up there, the *Dumont Daily Register*, had long been known as a fine small-town daily. I recalled picking up a few copies during my brief visit three years ago when I sold the house, and the *Register* measured up handsomely to its reputation. What’s more, its venerable founding publisher was due for retirement. So my phone conversation with the lawyer took a different turn. “Excuse me, Elliot, but is the *Dumont Daily Register* still being run by its founder?”

“My, yes,” he assured me. “Barret Logan has manned the helm for nearly fifty years. With Bonnie gone now, it’s his whole life.”

“Do you think he’ll ever retire?”

“Depends.” Elliot chuckled. “In the market for a newspaper, Mr. Manning?”

“Depends.” I thought a moment. “Do you have his phone number handy?”

The lawyer recited it. “That’s his direct line. He answers his own phone, and he’s usually at his desk till noon.”

“Thanks, Elliot. I appreciate the information.”

He asked, “What about the house?”

“Depends.” I laughed at his persistence. “I’ll have to get back to you.”

Within a minute, I had dialed the number he gave me and a man answered, “Good morning, Barret Logan.”

“Hello, Mr. Logan. This is Mark Manning, a reporter for the *Chicago Journal*. My mother was originally from Dumont; she was Edwin Quatrain’s sister.”

Logan laughed gustily. “I know who you are, Mr. Manning—who doesn’t? And to what might I owe the unexpected pleasure of your call?”

An hour later—it was well past noon by then—he said, “I’m late for a lunch appointment, Mark, so I really must go. Let’s both have our people review these numbers; then let’s talk again. Soon. I’m so very glad you called.”

With my mind spinning, I said, “I am, too, Barret. I think we’ve laid the groundwork for a promising transaction. I’ve got a lot of thinking to do, and I know that you do, too. But we *will* talk again. Soon.”

That evening, I waited at the loft for Neil to return from work. I considered having cocktails ready for his arrival, but reconsidered, knowing that this conversation would require a clear head. When Neil walked through the door, we exchanged a kiss and some small talk. I suggested, “Let’s take a walk along the lake. There’s a bit of daylight left, and I want to discuss something with you.”

“Uh-oh.” A wary glance. “How about a run together? It’s been a while.”

“Maybe later, Neil. But now, let’s just walk, okay? An opportunity presented itself at the office today, and I need to know what you think of it.”

So, still dressed for the office, minus jackets, we headed out. It would be a week till the ritual of setting back the clocks, and shafts of orange twilight angled between the buildings toward the shore. An easterly breeze striped the surface of Lake Michigan with whitecapped waves. Colliding with the cement embankment, they disappeared in rosy mist. Out near the horizon, a few hardy sailors leaned their masts toward harbor, conceding at last that summer was gone.

“What’s up?” asked Neil after we had crossed through the traffic on the Outer Drive and settled into an easy saunter along a stretch of beach.

“Remember the house I inherited from my uncle Edwin in Dumont?”

“I never saw it, but sure, I remember it. It paid for our work on the loft.”

“Right. Well, today I learned from a lawyer up there that the house is on the market again, and I could get it back cheap.”

Neil shrugged an I-don’t-get-it. “Why would you want it?”

Obliquely, I answered, “I also learned that the local paper up there, the *Dumont Daily Register*, might be available to the right person. I talked to the publisher, Barret Logan. He thinks I’m the right person, and he’s ready to retire. I think I could swing it. I’d have to go heavily into debt, and I probably have to take on some investors, but it sounds doable—if you go along with it.”

Neil’s pace slowed, stopped. He eyed me askance. With an uncertain inflection, he said, “Dumont is—what?—three hours’ drive from here?”

I confessed, “Closer to four.”

“That’s a hefty commute.” There was no humor in his understatement. Nor in his afterthought. “And I doubt if there’s much need for high-powered architectural talent in central Wisconsin.” Eyering me, he asked, “Where would that leave ‘us’?”

I strolled him toward a park bench anchored in the sand, telling him, “I’ve struggled with this all afternoon. I do want the *Register*, but I want you more, and I won’t push for anything that would jeopardize ‘us.’”

We both sat down, legs touching. Neil gazed out at the water. I peered at him, saying, “So I’d like to propose an arrangement.”

He grinned. “Yes?”

“I would buy back the house on Prairie Street, but I’d also keep the loft here in Chicago. I’d take over the *Register* and work up there, and you’d stay here at your job. *But*—and here’s the crucial part—we’d spend every weekend together, alternating locales. We’d try this for a solid year. It wouldn’t be easy, but it would be a commitment to buy some time. After a year, we’d reevaluate the arrangement. By then it should be obvious what we need to do. Maybe circumstances would allow both to settle happily in either Dumont or Chicago. Maybe we’d extend the arrangement. Maybe we’d explore other options we haven’t thought of yet.”

I stopped talking, as there was nothing else to add. All that mattered now was Neil’s reaction. I waited.

He turned to me and rested an arm across my shoulder. “Some ‘arrangement.’ You don’t ask me much, do you?”

“Neil, I could flop big-time up there, but I have to find out if...”

“Shhh,” he stopped me, pressing a finger to my lips. “I know you need to do this. You’re working your way through some sort of midlife guy-thing, and the last thing I want is for our relationship to be a casualty of this crisis. I don’t much like the ‘arrangement,’ but I’m willing to go along with it. Like you said, we’re buying time. I can deal with inconvenience for a year. What I can’t deal with is the thought of not spending my life with you.”

How could I react other than to pull him into my arms? I nuzzled his neck and told the back of his head, “I love you so much. I really don’t deserve you.”

“No, you don’t,” he agreed. “You’re the luckiest man in the world.”

News spread fast that I was leaving the *Journal* for—of all places—Dumont, Wisconsin. Roxanne Exner was first to get wind of it, hearing it directly from Neil, and she wanted more details. So she suggested that we meet for dinner at Bistro Zaza, a loud, trendy, but good Near North restaurant that had of late become our favorite haunt.

Parking at the door, giving my car keys to the valet, I entered Zaza’s with Neil, asking him, “Wi

Carl be here, too?"

I was asking about Carl Creighton, a recently appointed Illinois deputy attorney general, formerly a senior partner at Roxanne's law firm. When Carl entered political life, he left the firm and promoted Roxanne. As of that Saturday evening last October, they had been romantically involved for about a year. Neil and I often wondered aloud whether they would take the plunge into "the *m*-word." Roxanne had never struck either of us as the marrying type, so we rarely breathed the actual word, referring to it in code.

Neil answered me, "Rox didn't mention Carl, but I assume he'll be here tonight. It seems they're always together now."

The man at the host's podium, black-garbed and sunken-cheeked, greeted us like old friends. I couldn't recall having ever met him, but then, I was forever confused by the help at Zaza's, who all looked like cloned models from some depraved perfume ad.) He escorted us through the noisy mezzanine-raftered room toward the booth where Roxanne and Carl awaited us. We leaned to kiss Roxanne; Carl rose to shake our hands. We all got situated around the table, ordering drinks from the man in black.

"You look fabulous tonight, Rox," said Neil. And indeed she did. At thirty-seven, she was successful, smart, stylish—and sober. She'd sworn off drinking nearly three years ago, not long after introducing Neil and me. The new challenges she had recently undertaken at Kendall Yoshihara Exner obviously agreed with her, and she sat there radiating a confident smile that, worn by anyone else, might appear smug.

She nodded a wordless thank-you for Neil's compliment, then returned it. "Again, it seems, I've stumbled into the good fortune of being surrounded by three devastatingly attractive men."

Her statement had the ring of hyperbole, but I realized as she said it that she was sincere—we *did* look good that night. At thirty-four, Neil was the youngest of us, and the advantage of his years was augmented by his designer's eye; he always seemed to dress with an instinctive appropriateness to the occasion, as evidenced by the combination of the casual but expensive slacks and sweater he wore that night. The eldest at the table was Carl, forty-nine, whose prematurely white hair was countered by his lanky frame and the aggressive energy that flashed from his eyes; his breeding and bearing were Brooks Brothers all the way, a correct but laid-back dressiness perfectly attuned to his role in the world. And between them sat I, forty-two, wearing my favorite gabardine suit, a nattier wool version of the khakis and blazer that I habitually wore to the office.

Carl got to the point. "There must be something in the air to account for this epidemic of career-tweaking—my move into politics, Roxanne's name on the door at the firm, and now word of your rather stunning intentions, Mark." He laughed, slapping my shoulder. "Is it true? Are you really folding your tent at the *Journal* and heading north to... *Wisconsin*?" He, Roxanne, and Neil leaned toward me, waiting to hear it from my lips.

Our drinks arrived—bourbon for Carl, the usual vodka for Neil and me, mineral water for

Roxanne. We exchanged a quick toast; then the group fell instantly silent, still waiting to hear my story.

I confirmed the whole plan, detailing the arrangement that Neil had agreed to. “So, probably sometime after the first of the year, I’ll take over as publisher of the *Dumont Daily Register*—assuming I can pull the finances together.”

“A desk job?” scoffed Roxanne. “That doesn’t sound like you, Mark.”

“I’ll be the boss,” I reminded her, “so I can take on any duties that suit me. As publisher, I’ll be responsible not only for the *business* of the paper, but also for its thrust, direction, and stature—that’s the whole point of this move. I confess I don’t know much about the day-to-day logistics of running a paper, so I’ll need a good number two. Barret Logan’s managing editor is nearing retirement age, so I’m sure they’ll leave together, and that’s just fine. I’ll need to build my own team anyway, so I’ll start with the managing editor.”

“But what about investigative reporting?” asked Neil. “That’s what you’ve always done, what you’ve always loved. Won’t you miss it?”

“The paper *has* a reporting staff,” I assured him, “and it’s known to be a good one. If a particularly juicy story should come along, though, I can always don my old hat and do a bit of sleuthing.”

“In sleepy little Dumont?” asked Roxanne, her voice heavy with sarcasm. “Somehow, Sherlock, I think your whodunit days are over.”

We all laughed. “You’re probably right,” I conceded.

Little could I imagine how wrong we were. Though I have never placed the least credence in superstition, I can only conclude that our flippant humor that night must have nettled some fraction of a gremlin of fate.

By the next week, word of my intentions had spread further, and I began to receive queries, by letter and phone, regarding the managing editor’s position in Dumont. I was surprised—both pleased and humbled—to discover that so many of my journalism colleagues, some of whom I had never met, had such unswerving faith in my new undertaking that they were willing to uproot their own lives and follow me to a smallish town they had never seen.

At first I just stuffed the résumés into my briefcase, but the collection thickened to the point where I had to dump it on the kitchen counter at home one evening. Neil and I had no plans that night, so we spent a couple of hours together sorting through the applications, commenting on likeable candidates while sipping a cocktail or two.

“Wow,” he said. “Guess who wants to move to Dumont with you.”

I looked up from the cover letter I was reading. “Who?”

He passed the papers across the kitchen island. “Lucille Haring.”

Sure enough, the letter, the resume, the supporting documents—all crisply laser printed on heavy white Strathmore—were hers. Lucille Haring worked upstairs at the *Journal* in the publisher's office as a computer specialist with a military background and a stiff, efficient manner to match. While I was immersed in my investigation of the festival conspiracy last summer, she provided me with key information that helped crack the story. I also learned that she was a lesbian, a guarded aspect of her private life that she had kept well removed from the job.

"Lucy?" I mused aloud. "Gordon says he finds her indispensable, which surprises me—he's such an affable sort of backslapper, and she, well... isn't. But I have to admit that she's smart, dedicated, and no-nonsense. If she feels she could handle the Dumont job, she'd probably make a hell of an editor." I fell silent.

Neil prompted me, "But..."

"But I'd hate to raid Gordon's staff. I mean, he's already losing *me*."

"He'll live," Neil reminded me, smirking.

I laughed, putting Lucy's application aside, tucking it back in my briefcase for future consideration. I swirled the ice in my empty glass, asking Neil, "Another?"

"Sure," he said. "I'll get it." He rose from the stool where he sat, picked up both glasses, and crossed the kitchen to the refrigerator, saying over his shoulder, "We'd better plan to eat soon, or we'll be smashed—on a weeknight, no less."

"God forbid." Absentmindedly, I opened the next envelope and skimmed the cover letter. Intrigued, I read it again in detail, then flipped to the résumé and studied it. "Hmm."

"Who is it?" asked Neil, setting down my glass, snooping over my shoulder.

"Someone named Parker Trent."

Neil shrugged. "Never heard of him."

"Me neither, but he has nearly thirty years' experience with credentials as a hardworking editor on lots of papers, large and small."

"Sounds kind of old," Neil said under his breath. With curiosity slaked, he returned to the far side of the island, preparing to dig deeper into the slushpile of applications.

"He's fifty-one," I admonished Neil, reminding him, "only nine years older than yours truly."

"Whatever. If this guy's so hot, why has he moved around so much?"

A reasonable question. "He says he's been in search of the perfect position. He wants to 'make a difference.' And get this: he's currently managing editor of the *Milwaukee Triangle*."

Neil's brows rose reflexively. "The gay paper?"

"Yeah." I passed Parker Trent's material across the counter, and Neil began perusing it. I continued. "The *Triangle* is one of the best gay weeklies around, known for its solid reporting as well as its tough stance on gay issues. This guy's at least partly responsible for that reputation."

Impressed, Neil acknowledged, "He writes a good letter. Listen: 'I can think of no mo

rewarding career move than to work at the side of Mark Manning, helping to shape the *Register* into top-notch daily.’ Pretty smooth. Does he jump to the top of your interview list?”

“With any luck, he’ll be the *only* interview. He’s qualified, he’s nearby, he wants to work with me—and he’s gay.”

Neil beaded me with a stare. “Remember now. No casting-couch antics.”

“Hardly,” I assured him. “Even if the thought crossed my mind, I wouldn’t get far with you in the room.”

“*Me?*” Neil looked up from sipping his vodka. “Why would I be in the room?”

“Because I insist. Whoever ends up as my managing editor will be working with me on a daily basis, sometimes day and night. It’s bad enough that you and I will be spending our weeks apart—certainly don’t want to burden you with ‘casting-couch’ suspicions. So I won’t hire anyone without your approval.”

Neil sucked an ice cube into his mouth and rolled his tongue around it. Dropping it back into the glass, he grinned, telling me, “This interview process may take longer than you think.”

The process began that Saturday. I had phoned Parker Trent the day after reading his application, and he was eager to meet with me. Milwaukee is an easy two-hour drive from Chicago, and he offered to make the trip that weekend. So I suggested that we meet at the loft late on Saturday afternoon. Neil would be there, as I wanted, and if the meeting went well, I could suggest that we all go to dinner together.

That day the city basked in perfect autumn weather. The loft’s eastern wall of windows framed a spectacular lakescape under cumulus clouds like mountains of froth in some trompe l’oeil fantasia. Overhead, the room’s skylights admitted brilliant shafts of light that played against the interior surfaces, heightening the sculptural quality of Neil’s design of the space. Within these great oblique beams, motes of dust silently danced.

“This place is a mess,” Neil fretted while spritzing a table with Endust.

In fact, the place was immaculate, and I couldn’t help laughing. “He’s supposed to impress you, remember.”

Neil glanced about. “Well, we don’t want him to think we live like pigs.”

Dryly, I told Neil, “I doubt that he’ll draw that conclusion.” While setting my notepad on a table near the sofa, I checked my watch. Nearly four—Parker Trent should arrive soon.

Stowing his cleaning paraphernalia in a cupboard, Neil asked, “When you talked to him, what did he sound like? I mean, cute?”

We both knew that his question was ridiculous, but I had to admit that I, too, had been wondering what Parker Trent would look like. He had enclosed no photo with his résumé, forcing me to ponder whether this signaled political correctness, true professionalism—or a wizened old mug. I answered

Neil, “He sounded... nice enough. You’ll have to judge for yourself whether he’s ‘cute.’ But remember, he’s fifty-one.”

This speculation was ended by the sound of the door buzzer. Glancing at my watch, I told Neil, “He’s on the dot—I like that.” Then I buzzed him up.

Neil followed me to the door, where we waited the half-minute that it took Parker Trent to come up from the lobby. When he rapped on the door, I opened it.

“Well, hello,” he said, smiling, surprised to find two of us waiting for him. He looked from my face, to Neil’s, then back at me.

“Hello, Parker,” I told him, extending my hand. Though we’d talked at length on the phone, I recited the ritual of introducing myself.

“It’s a pleasure, Mark, an honor,” he told me, shaking hands; in his left hand he carried a portfolio, which undoubtedly contained samples of his work. “I’ve long wanted to meet you.”

I turned. “This is Neil Waite, my lover.” As they shook hands, I explained, “Neil is an architect and all of *this*”—I gestured toward the expansive interior of the loft—“is the product of his talents.”

Parker gazed into the apartment, telling us, “It’s sensational. Congratulations to both of you. Your success and, I presume, happiness is a rousing model for the gay community.”

Neil chuckled. “That’s a bit thick, Parker, but thanks. Hey—come on in.” And he ushered Parker into the room, closing the door behind him.

I suggested that we move to the sofa and chairs that were grouped by the big window, and as Parker walked toward the center of the room, I had the chance to get a good look at him.

He stood about my height (not quite six feet), with a lean, trim body. His hair thinned a bit at the crown, but otherwise it was thick and wavy with handsome dashes of silver. A neat, short beard framed the features of his face, giving him an ageless air. He looked believably fifty and fit, or believably thirty, like an actor playing a role. His clothes made no particular fashion statement—khaki slacks, oxford shirt, a nice vest—but they were right for the weather, right for this casual meeting at home, and exactly right for the man who wore them. Most striking, though, his style of movement was youthful, loping, and self-assured, a body language that was uniquely his and unforgettable.

Equally unforgettable (and there is no genteel way to relate this), he strutted a simply fabulous ass. As he leaned in front of the sofa to place his portfolio on the coffee table, I was treated to a full, unobstructed view of his muscular, khaki-clad butt, a sight that actually made me gasp. Parker didn’t hear me—he was saying something at that moment, God knows what—but Neil picked up on my reaction, and, in fact, he shared it, mouthing an exaggerated, silent *Wow!*

My mind was in a momentary spin, caused not only by the unexpected, delightful display of Parker Trent’s posterior, but also by a memory that it triggered. Many years earlier, when I was a mere boy, at the very onset of my sexual awakening, I had experienced a similar rush upon viewing a similar sight. In a boy of nine, these new feelings were confusing and a bit frightening, but, most

all, thrilling. It had happened at Christmastime, during my first visit to Dumont. In the Chicago lo with Parker and Neil on that Saturday afternoon last fall, Dumont was very much in the back of m mind. I was planning the career move that would take me there. Clearly, it was my sublimin preoccupation with Dumont that fired my powerful response to Parker's physique.

Parker said, "I've brought along some tear sheets of my better work—editorials, extended serie special features. Ultimately, the work itself will tell you more about my background than a resum can." He unzipped the portfolio, flopped its cover open, and began sorting through a pile of full-pa newspaper samples, handing them to Neil and me.

Sitting in a cluster around the coffee table, we began a quiet discourse of the various sample Parker explaining the background of each project, Neil and I voicing our approval. While Neil w more interested in the design of the pages, I focused on their content and the solid research th backed each story. We both agreed that all of it was first-rate, and I grew steadily more convinced th Parker would make an outstanding managing editor for the *Dumont Daily Register*.

When Parker finished with one stack of pages and prepared to make room for another, Neil ros offering to get us drinks. Parker asked for juice or tea, and I had no taste for alcohol yet—it was st before five—so Neil stepped away to the kitchen, promising to concoct some sort of herbal infusio that he felt would suit the autumn afternoon.

Parker and I thanked him; then Parker turned to ask me, "May I bore you with some more of m samples?"

"I'm not the least bit bored," I assured him. "What else have you got?"

The coffee table was by now covered with the sheets of newsprint. "Let's see," he sai "somewhere here I've got a three-part series on a funding controversy at an upstate AIDS clinic. didn't do the actual reporting, but I dreamed it up, assigned it, and provided the hard research. I' proud of it, Mark. I think you'll agree that it's good, solid journalism. Ah—here we are."

He made a clearing on the table and spread the funding series before me. As I leaned forward study it, he gathered together the various pages I had already reviewed and glanced about f somewhere to put them, mentioning, "Let me get these out of the way." Vacantly, I told him "Anywhere's fine," already engrossed in my reading. With one knee on the floor, he picked the stac of clippings off the table and reached away to place them on the carpet, bending away from me, h rump aimed squarely in my direction.

That broke my train of thought. I found it difficult to continue reading—hell, I couldn't ev focus on the type. Instead, my eyes were again glued to Parker Trent's beautiful khaki ass. The sig of him kneeling there, bending over, with those sharp creases running up the back of his thigh reminded me of my boyhood visit to Dumont.

My mind spun back thirty-three years. It was several days before Christmas when my adventu began. I was nine and alone, bundled up and packed onto a northbound bus, laden with gifts for my a

yet-unmet extended family, including several pounds of margarine for Aunt Peggy, who had a heart condition. Mom had stuck some cheap self-adhesive bows on the waxy cartons, explaining, “They make so much butter in Wisconsin, margarine is actually *illegal* up there. You can be a real hero by smuggling these in for her.”

The bus ride took most of the day, as I traveled a few hundred miles from my Illinois home in Wisconsin, headed for a town called Dumont. Though the weather at home was cold, it hadn’t snowed yet, so I was anxious to set foot in the faraway land where I assumed all Christmases were white. As the long afternoon shadows grew darker around our bus, the driver announced that we had arrived, and I was disappointed to see that the ground was still green. I had presumed that Dumont was nestled somewhere in the great north woods, a mere clearing in the pines, but it turned out to be a substantial little city, larger than my own hometown. And though there were plenty of trees, they did not, even collectively, constitute a woods—certainly not the primeval forest that had rooted in my mind.

At the bus stop, I was the only child to get off the Greyhound, so my uncle easily spotted me in the crowd. “Mark,” he said, rushing forward and squatting to hug me, “I’m your uncle Edwin, your mother’s brother. Welcome to Dumont.”

In the car, he told me how anxious my aunt Peggy was to meet me. She was at home helping the housekeeper with dinner. (Mom had told me that her name was Hazel—right! The *real* Hazel wouldn’t need help fixing supper.) “The kids,” Suzanne and Joey Quatrain, were dying to show me around (I bet). And the older son, Mark (same first name as mine), wouldn’t be home from college till tomorrow. Uncle Edwin did most of the talking, as if he could fill me in on a lifetime of missing details during the short ride from the bus station. He mentioned his printing business, “the new plant,” and I remembered Mom’s frequent comment that our family must have printer’s ink in its blood.

The car was a real beauty, imported, which was something of an oddity back then. I found the strange controls on the wood-inlaid dashboard far more engrossing than my uncle’s chatter. “Here we are,” he said at last, turning onto Prairie Street. And then I saw it.

Big and brick, square and stately, it looked more like a bank than a house, conspicuous among its fancy-gabled neighbors. Its clean, strong lines rose from the earth and shot three stories high, topping the giant elms that edged the street. The pitch of the roof was so shallow that it appeared flat, overhanging the walls with broad, shading eaves. Though the house was more than twice my age, its many windows gave it a modern airiness that belied its structural heft. The most prominent of the windows was a half-circle of glass on the third floor, like a mammoth eye peering out from under the eaves.

My uncle laughed at my awed reaction to the house, mentioning a famous architect who ran a school in Wisconsin. One of the students had designed this house, and everybody got all gushy once when the head architect paid a visit and said he “liked” it. (Big deal!)

We entered through the heavy front door, and I was met by the entire household, who fluttered

around me with such excitement, you'd think they never had company. Aunt Peggy was nice, but a little stiff; I was expecting someone more like Mom. She thanked me for the margarine, saying "That's very thoughtful, dear," then handed it to Hazel, who held the stuff as though it might explode. Hazel wasn't anything like the maid on TV. She was not plump, she did not have red hair, she wore thick glasses, and she had a husband, Hank Healy, who was the handyman around the house (too bad he didn't have any snow to shovel).

As for "the kids," Suzanne, an eighth grader, was pretty and friendly, but sort of stuck-up, the way girls get when they're set for high school. I knew right away that we wouldn't be spending much time together. Joey, on the other hand, was ready to be my new best friend, at least for a week. A fifth grader, he was a year older than I was, but shorter, which evened the score. From the way he darted around, snatched at gifts, and generally caused a commotion, he seemed *younger* than me. He would do as a companion for the length of my visit, but he really wasn't my type. Not that he was dirty or anything, but he seemed, well... messy.

They all showed me through the house, which was so big that I often felt lost. Downstairs were all the rooms you'd expect—living room, dining room, kitchen, and kind of a den-place for Uncle Edwin. The furniture was woody and expensive, and the Christmas tree in the front hall looked department-store-perfect. A big open staircase led to the second floor, where there were mostly bedrooms, including my guest room, which was nice. There was a second stairway at the back of the house leading down to the kitchen and up to the third floor. No one offered to take me up there, so I assumed it wasn't used much, like an attic. But then I remembered that big window and wondered maybe it was a ballroom or something. As we began heading down the stairway to the kitchen, I turned and asked, "What's upstairs?"

Everyone stopped in their tracks. Uncle Edwin cleared his throat and told me, "Just extra space. We don't use it anymore. You can have a look sometime if you like." Joey didn't need any prompting. "I'll show it to you. It's *neat* up there." Aunt Peggy said, "Tomorrow, dear." Then we all went downstairs.

Next day, my oldest cousin, Mark, returned from college. A freshman, he had never really been away from home before, so it was a big deal when he arrived. Mark was very handsome, with wavy brown hair, and I could tell that Suzanne was jealous of all the attention he got. He wore tan pants, like soldiers wear, and I thought they looked really good on him. I liked his belt buckle, too, and his hands. Everyone else was hugging him; I wanted to, but thought I shouldn't. I wanted to be friends with him, but didn't think he'd care to hang around with a kid. Trying to think of something clever, I told him brightly, "We've got the same name." He smiled and said, "How about that?" Then he mussed my hair with his hand, and I really liked the way his fingers felt on my head. I'm usually fussy about my hair—but I didn't straighten it out for a while.

Later that afternoon, Mark was playing records in his room. Joey and I were horsing around

killing time before dinner, in Joey's room. He had his own typewriter, a portable Smith-Corona. Its metal case was painted harvest gold, and its ribbon printed either black or red, which was really neat. But something was out of whack, and you couldn't make it print all black or all red—no matter how you fiddled with the little lever, the letters always printed red on the bottom. Joey didn't know how to type (he just punched at the keys, which is probably how the ribbon got messed up), but I had already learned, so he let me use the machine whenever I wanted. I thought of a little story that I tried to write, but Joey was too noisy and I gave up on the idea.

Bored with Joey's clowning around, I strolled out into the hall. Hearing music from Mark's room, I took a look inside, and there was my older cousin with his shirt off—he still had those nice tan pants on—unpacking a suitcase and sorting through his records. Seeing me standing there, he said, “It's their new album. You like the Beatles?” I didn't much care for them and didn't know how to answer, so I shrugged my shoulders and told him, “Sure,” then went back to Joey's room.

A while later, Joey was busy scribbling in a coloring book (he acted very babyish) when I noticed that the music coming from Mark's room had changed, and this time I recognized it—Mozart, something about “night music”—Mom said it was a famous serenade. So I sneaked out of Joey's room and walked down the hall again, figuring I'd impress Mark and make up for shrugging off the Beatles. When I got to his doorway, I was ready to say something, but, looking inside the room, I stopped short. There was Mark, kneeling on the floor, reaching for an album that had slipped behind the stereo table. His backside was toward me, and I felt a little embarrassed, but I couldn't take my eyes off him—those tan pants looked so nice, somehow. And the hard creases of the cloth on the back of his legs made sort of an arrow, pointing right at his butt. I felt lost for a moment, like I didn't know where I was. I wanted to walk over to him and just, well... *touch* him. Could I do that? Would that be wrong? Would he think I was weird?

“Hey,” said Joey, popping up behind me. I froze, wondering if he knew what I was thinking. “Hey!” he repeated. “Wanna see the upstairs?”

“Hey!” Neil laughed. I blinked. Both Neil and Parker were staring at me, and their expressions betrayed a measure of concern as well as mirth. The iced tea Neil had promised to prepare already sat on the table—his and Parker's half gone, mine untouched, sitting in a pool of its own sweat. Neil asked me, “Lost in space?”

With a chagrined, apologetic laugh, I told them, “Sorry, guys. I was lost in the past for a moment. Lost in Dumont, in fact. I've never thought much about my roots before, but with the big move looming, a lot of forgotten memories seem to be bubbling to the surface.”

Parker flopped back in his chair with a whistle of relief. “I was afraid my funding series had lulled you into a trance, induced by sheer boredom.”

“Hardly,” I told him. “I'm highly impressed with everything you've shown me—it's well conceived, beautifully researched, and painstakingly edited. Are you free this evening, Parker?”

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