

Rara Avis

A Crip & Henrietta Mystery

By Tim Wohlforth

“Where in the hell do you think you’re going?” Henrietta asked as I steered my van into the Webster Street Tunnel.

“Alameda, where else?”

“You crazy or something? There’s nothing there.”

“It’s quite a pretty place. Most of it’s an island. A lot of cottages as well as some fantastic old Victorians.”

“But Crip, it’s the wilderness - houses, mothers wheeling baby carriages with squealing kids in them, faces covered with sticky candy, asses full of crap. It’s not civilized.”

“I’m sure those mothers would think the same of Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley. They’d consider it a jungle inhabited by weird-looking Goths.”

“Good, they stay on their side of the tunnel and we stay on our side. Most of those Goth kids ran away from places like Alameda. And you know why, Crip?”

“Why?” I made the mistake of asking her. Henrietta was all fired up and into her rant. Her green eyes glowed with passion, her spiked green hair quivered. I supposed it was best to let her vent and then maybe she’d calm down and shut up.

We had passed through the tunnel and were making our way through one of those peaceful neighborhoods that drove Henrietta mad.

“I’ll tell you why. See that brat over there, crying her head off?” She pointed to a passing stroller and sure enough, the kid was throwing a fit. The mother appeared to be totally oblivious to the racket, smiling like she was spaced out on tranquilizers. “It’s the goddamn mothers. Look at that smile. Enough to make you puke. That kid’s trying to escape. Give her fifteen years and she’ll end up on Telegraph.”

“You had a mother like that?”

“None of your fucking business. So why we going to this penal colony?”

“A magazine has been stolen.”

“Big deal. When I snitch *High Times* over at Cody’s they don’t hire a private detective.”

“This one’s worth over \$2,000.”

“You shittin’ me?”

“The truth.”

“Fuck.”

That shut her up for a while. Money has that effect on Henrietta. My name is Tom Bateman and I’m a private eye. I lost the use of my legs when I took a sharpshooter’s bullet in ‘Nam. Since most of the time I get my customers over the Internet, the lack of movable legs hasn’t been a problem. Henrietta, however, has been a problem. I’ve made the mistake in the past of hiring her when I needed legs and haven’t been able to shake completely free of her.

When Alvin - her pot growing and dealing boyfriend, a recent resident of Pelican Bay maximum security prison - is around, he relieves me of the burden of entertaining her by being the brunt of her insults. However, a recent pot deal, financed by the mafia,

came to such a bloody and ignominious end, that Alvin had decided to hide out up in Humboldt County. She turned up at my door, said Alvin hadn't left her any rent money so she's out on the street. The least I could do for the streets of Berkeley was let her sleep on my couch. Stupid really, but I guess I'm a soft touch. That's why I don't make millions like a certain Hollywood gumshoe. I didn't really need her on this run to Alameda. It's just that I feared what my place would look like if I left her there alone.

I turned onto Encinal, a street of modest homes, hairdressing establishments, neighborly sports bars, dry cleaners, and one struggling used bookstore. I pulled up in front of Rara Avis Books and parked the van. Even the name of the bookstore was obscure. It refers to a certain mythic jeweled bird that inhabited Dashiell Hammett's *Maltese Falcon*. Rara Avis is run by a friend of mine, Marsha Linsky. She considers herself the world's foremost expert on Hammett, Chandler and other hardboiled authors. She buys, sells and collects rare pulp novels and magazines. As I rarely see a customer in her store, I sincerely hoped she had an active Internet and mail order business. However, I suspected she's one of those collector-dealers who loves to buy and hates to sell. She could be the one small business acquaintance of mine who made less money than I did.

Henrietta hopped out of the passenger seat of the van. I released the locks that held my chair in place and rolled to the rear lift area. Henrietta knew better than to try to help me. I pressed the lift control and was lowered to the sidewalk.

"Spooky," Henrietta said.

"Spooky?"

"Like it's the middle of the day and there's nobody out on the street. This a ghost town or somethin'?"

"It's America."

"Shit it is. Not my America, for Christ's sake. If I was in the Army, damned if I'd die for this street." She pulled a crumpled pack of Camel's from a pocket in her tight jeans and lit up.

"But you're not in the Army. Come with me." Like the Army would ever accept her. Henrietta was so skinny that if you put a pack on her back she'd fall to the ground. And smoked so much she'd get winded after the first twenty five feet of a fifty mile hike. If it wasn't for the spiked green hair, the sickly pale white complexion, and her cult tattoos, she was emaciated enough to pass for a Darfur refugee.

I forced Henrietta to put out her cigarette as we entered a bookstore packed with tattered copies of old pulps and novels by unknown authors from a past era. Movie posters on the wall featured noir favorites, *D.O.A.*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Double Indemnity*, *Chinatown*, *The Big Sleep*, and, of course, *The Maltese Falcon*. All around us tough guys in fedoras blasted away with automatics while blonds in slinky dresses, blue eyes, and big boobs simultaneously enticed and defied the onlooker.

Henrietta stood at my side, gaping.

"Great posters, Crip. Does she carry Dracula?"

"Ask her."

"I can't 'cus there's nobody here."

"How did you know it was a woman that ran this place?"

"Who else would get you over here? Does she look like any of the chicks in the posters?"

"No."

“But sexy. A girlfriend?”

“Henrietta, like you always tell me, mind your own damn business.”

I called out, “Marsha. You back there? It’s Tom Bateman.”

Marsha emerged from a rear door. Her head was covered by a mound of rich red hair, probably dyed, but I didn’t give a shit. Deep red lipstick, a touch of blush and eye shadow completed the look. But it was her figure that turned me on. Big breasts, shapely hips, a bit of a tummy, okay perhaps a bit too much of a tummy. However, in a tight green sweater that left her navel exposed and faded jeans she looked great. In her forties.

“Kind of fat,” Henrietta whispered in my ear.

“Healthy.”

Henrietta scowled. She didn’t like healthy and she never liked any woman I was attracted to. Not that we had anything going between us. It was just that, in her own way, she was possessive. And she didn’t like any women, period.

“Tom, thanks for coming.”

As I wheeled in her direction, Marsha strode towards me. She leaned over and gave me a very wet kiss right on the lips. I smelled perfume in her hair. Pure Poison by Dior, she had once explained. Perfect.

“You look stupid,” Henrietta said. And I suspected I did, as Marsha used a lot of lipstick. Marsha laughed, pulled out a handkerchief, and gently patted my lips. A damn sexy woman.

“Introduce me to your friend.”

“Meet Henrietta,” I said. “She helps me out from time to time.”

“He’s useless without me,” Henrietta muttered as she stuck her two hands into her jean pockets to avoid having to shake her hand.

“Tell me what’s going on?” I said.

“I got robbed. Like I told you on the phone, they took a rare mint-condition copy of *Black Mask*. I figure it’s worth over \$2,000.”

“Nothing else?”

“No, strange really. I have a few other *Black Masks* and some other pulps worth almost as much.”

“How’d they get in?”

“Jimmied the door. Not that great of a lock. Then smashed the glass in the display case I use for my rare stuff. See?” She pointed to the bookcase behind her where a jagged pane of glass was still stuck in the frame and shards covered the floor.

“Call the cops?”

“Been here. They just told me to put in an insurance claim. I gave them a copy of my catalog and circled the missing magazine. I don’t expect them to do a damn thing.”

“And you think I can do more?”

She smiled at me, reached down and squeezed my hand. “Yes, because you can help me in a way the cops can’t.”

Henrietta leaned over and whispered in my ear, “If you’re gonna fuck her, I’m splitting.”

I ignored Henrietta. “What do you have in mind?”

“First let me tell you something about the specific magazine stolen. Published in December 1925, it contains the original publication of Dashiell Hammett’s famous *The Gutting of Coufignal*.”

“Who the hell is Coufignal?” Henrietta asked.

“It’s not a person,” Marsha said, “it’s a place. A town for the very rich situated on an island near San Francisco. Many commentators believe it’s modeled after Belvedere in Marin. In the story a gang blows up the bridge connecting the town to the mainland, cuts the power and phones, then systematically robs all the inhabitants.”

“Fabulous,” Henrietta said.

“What makes the story so famous,” I said, “is the ending. A nameless private eye confronts a Russian princess. She was the gang’s boss. She offers to split the loot with him. Then offers her beautiful self. He refuses.”

“You serious?”

“Couldn’t be more so.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why he turn her down?”

“Because of what he was. A private investigator. PIs don’t steal.”

“Bullshit,” Henrietta exclaimed. “Everybody steals. That’s what makes the system work. Only some suckers get caught.”

“You write your own goddamn story,” I said. “This PI didn’t steal. Simple as that.”

“You’re shittin’ me.”

“And then,” Marsha added, “the princess picks up the loot and starts to walk out. She taunts him, certain he would never shoot a lady. He pumps a bullet into her thigh.”

“Far fucking out,” Henrietta said. “People pay two grand for that stupid story?”

“It’s very rare,” Marsha said, “a rara avis.”

“Like your bookstore,” I said. “Rare bird.”

Henrietta said, “We’re talkin’ books, not birds. The two of you are mind-fuckers.”

Henrietta as usual had totally obscured the point of the discussion and therefore our trip to Alameda. I felt I better jump in and rescue the situation.

“Marsha, you were trying to tell me what it is I can do that the cops can’t.”

“Go to a party with me,” she said.

“We came all the way out here so you could snag him for a date?” Henrietta said.

“I better explain,” Marsha said. “This was no ordinary robbery. It wasn’t about money. The thief was after one specific issue of *Black Mask*. Had to be a collector - a person who would pay anything, do anything to get his hands on the one issue of *Black Mask* containing a Hammett story that he didn’t possess. Of course, I know who this person is because he approached me last week. Offered \$5,000 for my copy. But I’m as bad as he is. I want to own it. I don’t want to sell it, for any price. I turned him down.”

I said, “So confront him.”

“He’ll deny it, of course. You have to find it.”

“And how am I going to do that?”

“That’s why you’re coming with me to a party at his house. While I keep him occupied, you’ll search the place. It’ll be there someplace. He wouldn’t let it out of his

sight. He needs to hold it, feel it, read that groundbreaking story over and over again staring at the original type, the yellowed pulpy paper, dusty smell in his nostrils, savor his ownership.”

“Who?” I asked.

“You come here Saturday night 7 PM,” she paused and glowered at Henrietta, “without her.”

“Fu...” Henrietta started to speak.

“Shut up for once,” I said to Henrietta.

“You get \$1,000 for an evening’s work. For me, like him, the magazine’s priceless.”

I said, “I’ll be there.”

“And Tom, bring your gun.”

“You’re not serious.”

“That’s the problem. Collectors can be very serious.”

On that note I scooted out before Henrietta could punch Marsha in the boobs.

I drove the van down Encinal. Marsha sat next to me. She wore a tailored tan jacket, tight green silk blouse that showed off her cleavage and a short tan skirt revealing stubby but sexy legs. Okay, so she dressed a bit younger than her age, but for me at least, it worked. My van was filled with the subtle fragrance of Pure Poison by Dior.

I had met her a couple of months ago when a woman friend of hers hired me to check up on her husband. Marsha was understandably high on the woman’s suspect list. Proved to be unfounded. The husband was another hardboiled mystery nut who used to spend time in Marsha’s store - that is, except for weekly trips to a motel with his secretary.

I got into the habit of dropping by the bookstore ostensibly to browse, but in reality to spend time with Marsha. I plied her with questions about the early pulp writers while she grilled me on the private eye trade. Like I knew anything much about being a PI beyond looking up dirt on someone on a computer. I got the better of the deal. There didn’t seem to be any detail, no matter how obscure, related to hardboiled and noir literature that she didn’t know.

One afternoon we spent two hours discussing the *Maltese Falcon* - the book, the movie, the existential philosophy buried within it, its place in the evolution of the American novel. She became so animated, her gorgeous breasts heaved as she talked a mile a minute, her face flushed. I wanted to bed her then and there. So much for my literary interests. But I knew it wouldn’t happen. At least not there and not then. I asked her out to dinner. She begged off. Now, finally, a date - if you can call being hired to steal back a magazine a date.

“I’ve been thinking about you and me,” I said, as I glanced over at her curled up on her seat, head nestled against the window.

“And?” Marsha smiled.

“There’s someone isn’t there?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because I would like to be that someone someday.”

“You are someone to me.”

I was going to mention my disability, but I knew better. When you live in a chair you soon learn to sense how others feel about paraplegics. And I knew it was not a concern for her.

“I’ve been preoccupied of late,” she continued. “Once this *Black Mask* matter is resolved, I will be able to think straight again. I wouldn’t want you to feel you were second in my concerns to a magazine, but you would be. It’s the way I am. Not normal, but there it is.”

She reached over and gave me a little kiss on the ear. Shit. I thought I’d drive off the road. What a woman.

“No problem, Marsha. Keep me in mind. It’s like computers. Everyone needs backup. I’m your backup.”

“I will. Thank you. You’ve given me a wonderful compliment.”

“Where the hell are we?”

“Turn right here.”

We entered a residential neighborhood of trees and an occasional large Victorian house with turrets. The neighborhood would’ve really freaked out Henrietta. Marsha continued to call turns as we weaved our way towards, I thought, the Bay. The truth was I wasn’t quite sure where we were heading. Then we crossed a small bridge.

“So whose party is this?”

“Wendell Houseman. Ever hear of him?”

“No.”

“Houseman Auctions. Houseman Gallery. Houseman Investments. He’s retired now.”

“Wealthy?”

“That’s an understatement.”

“The game plan?”

“There’ll be forty or fifty guests there. I’ll try to preoccupy him. You meander around looking. Check the library, the bedroom. You find it, take it, and then we get the hell out of there.”

“And the gun?”

“He’ll have private security people everywhere.”

“Great.”

“It’s close now. Slow down. Here.”

I could see the street we were on dead-ended at a low building. I found a slot along a curb already filled with the cars of other guests – Mercedes, Jags, Beemers, Lexus, even one Rolls. I unlatched my wheels, rolled to the back and on out to the sidewalk with my lift. Marsha hopped out of the front seat and joined me. We walked towards the building. Actually not very impressive, kind of like the back end of a motel.

Marsha rang the doorbell and a Hispanic maid in a black uniform with a neat white apron opened the door. We entered a whirling world of people, music, chatter, and smoke. I coughed.

“Should’ve warned you,” Marsha said, “Wendell’s a smoker.”

“I’ll survive. Henrietta’s got me conditioned.”

A man approached us with a bright smile on his face. To be accurate, he was zeroing in on Marsha. He had a trim gray Van Dyke beard, held a pipe in his hand, and

wore a red velvet smoking jacket with black trim and a matching cravat. The guy looked like he had stepped right out of a book set in an earlier century. Must be Wendell.

What I didn't figure on was the warm greeting Marsha gave the fellow. Full-court press of her body against his and a right-on-the-mouth kiss. Pissed me off. Was he the reason for Marsha's reticence with me? If so, I figured I better give up then and there. She wouldn't want backup. Not only was the guy loaded, but he was damn attractive for a sixty year old. And she would outlive him and inherit. What didn't fit was why she wanted to rob her magazine back from the guy. Why not marry the bloke and earn a fifty percent share in his whole collection and fortune?

He shook my hand. "Marsha dear has told me a lot about you." Then he placed his hand on my shoulder and spoke to Marsha, "If you will excuse us for a moment, there's a little matter I want to discuss with Tom."

I glanced around the house as he steered me through the crowd. The place was massive, all on one story, which was great for people like me, with two-story high plate glass windows looking out on some body of water.

"That's a canal," he said. "Put in years ago to drain the land here. Makes it our own little world."

He took me into his library. He sat down behind a huge mahogany desk, struck a match against the sole of his patent leather shoe, and re-lit his pipe. Smelled like Balkan Sobranie. I wheeled my chair next to the desk. I looked around, searching the shelves for copies of *Black Masks*.

"I would like to hire you," he said.

"What for?"

"Marsha's my dearest friend. We share a common interest in pulp fiction. Especially Hammett. I would do anything for her. In fact I've proposed to her more than once. However, a little matter has come up that could disturb our friendship and I cannot allow that."

"What matter?"

"There's this copy of *Black Mask*, December, 1925. Contains one of Hammett's most famous stories, *The Gutting of Couffignal*. Mint condition. My most treasured possession. It went missing the day after Marsha spent the night here."

That's all I needed to hear. This guy was fucking Marsha. Why should I care? It's not like Marsha and I were more than friends. But I did care. I would've loved to strangle the bastard right then and there. Instead I had to keep my cool, hear him out.

"Can you prove ownership?"

"Of course. I have documentation on my purchase of it last year. I can trace the magazine back through three collectors right to Eugene Crow, a co-owner of the magazine at the time it published the Hammett story. That's why the copy is mint. Never went into circulation, kept for Crow's private library, signed by Hammett."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Perhaps you could discreetly look around for it. I love Marsha dearly and there's no way I can confront her personally. But you understand this is more than some magazine. This is the prize of my collection and my collection's my life."

"More important than your affection for Marsha?"

"I hope it never comes to that. But, yes, more important. There's a \$5,000 finder fee for you, if you retrieve it. No questions asked."

“I’ll think about it.”

“Good enough.”

“What was that all about?” Marsha asked as I parked my chair in the living room looking out over the water. She had spotted me when I left the library.

“I...”, but I couldn’t continue speaking, as torrential rain, mixed with hail, battered the window. She leaned over my chair placing her ear next to my mouth. “I don’t like what I’m hearing, Marsha. It’s getting too complicated.”

“In what way?”

I sensed her nervousness.

“He says you stole that damn magazine from him. It went missing one night after you slept over.”

“I did sleep over, but not like you think. We had spent a late night discussing - more like arguing - about Hammett and he offered me his guest bedroom. That’s all there was to it.”

“He says he has the documentation to prove that the magazine’s his. Wants me to retrieve it from you.”

“And you believe him? With his money he can fake any kind of documentation he needs. So what’re you going to do? Believe him or believe me?”

I looked into her eyes, then down her front as she bent over me. She was taking the argument beyond the rational, beyond facts. And winning, at least for the moment.

“I’m not sure who to believe. The two of you are so obsessed with that magazine. I plan to do what you asked me to do. I’ll start looking for the magazine here. If I find it, then that will prove you’re right.”

“You’ll see I’m right.” She gave me a kiss on the lips. “I’ll occupy Wendell.” She spotted him in a far corner and headed over.

For a moment I sat transfixed by the storm raging outside. Small white balls of hail had gathered on the redwood deck. Sheets of rain pummeled the window. I knew within minutes the hailstones would disappear. I could barely make out a dock and the canal.

I turned and took in the party scene. The rain had had its effect. People talked louder, the laughs more shrill, martinis yanked off the waiters’ trays as fast as they made it out of the kitchen area. A well-dressed crowd, Armani suits, a couple of couture floor-length gowns, hip huggers showing navels, tattoos, and I suspected real diamonds in nose studs. It was becoming a party complicit in a futile effort to defy nature. And nature always wins.

I figured the best place to begin my search was in the library. It was possible that Wendell, in addition to being a student of Hammett, knew his Poe - *The Purloined Letter*, in particular. Want to hide a book? Place it in a library among a thousand other books and it becomes invisible. Like searching the stacks of the Library of Congress for a specific book without the Dewey Decimal System numbers on the spines.

It didn’t take me long to find Wendell’s collection of *Black Masks*. They were displayed, face forward, in a glass-covered cabinet much like the one in Marsha’s bookstore. It was an amazing collection. Wendell possessed the very first issue, April

1920, when H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan launched the magazine as a way to make money and sustain the prestigious literary magazine *Smart Set*. I recognized it from a catalog Marsha had shown me. My eyes sped across the other covers, working my way up to 1925.

The lights went out. Shit. What a hell of a storm. I abandoned my search, grabbed the titanium wheels on my chair, and sped towards the living room. I banged into a chair in the dark, but pushed on. I didn't like the feel of this. I made out the outline of the door and entered the living room. The fear in the now quiet room was palpable. Some stupid drunken woman screamed. Then a voice shouted, "Phone's dead."

I searched the crowd for Marsha, but didn't see her. She could've been there. Couldn't tell in the darkness. I did spot Wendell. He was working the crowd, seeking to calm people.

I looked out the window. Pitch black. The whole neighborhood had lost power. Then I saw movement in the canal. A large powerboat headed for our dock. Good. Probably the police or Coast Guard. The ship pulled up to the dock. Two men jumped out and tied it up. About a dozen men sprung onto the dock. Wearing ski masks. Holding Uzis. Lights attached to headbands. Definitely not the good guys. I remembered the plot of *The Gutting of Couffignal* and had a pretty good idea what was about to happen. One of two Hammett fanatics had to be behind this, or perhaps the two in cahoots. This was more than a robbery. It was the reliving of a fictional event. And I suspected that I would be required to play my role when the time came. Would I handle things differently than Hammett's Continental Op? I would find out shortly.

The gang split in two. The larger group headed up the shore while the smaller group ran for Wendell's house. I looked around the room for the security guards. I spotted none. It was now me versus a goddamn outlaw army. The raiders swung open the sliding glass door and poured into the room. They aimed their rifles at us. Lights bounced around the room alighting on those with Armani suits, designer gowns.

"No one will get hurt if you do exactly what I tell you," shouted a burly figure with a thick Slavic accent. The Russian Mafia. How appropriate.

A beam had briefly focused on me and then passed on. I wasn't wearing an Armani suit. Since I'm not very good at taking directions, I pulled my gun out from under my blanket and leveled it at the fellow. He didn't see me. I began to pull the trigger, when a hand bashed my gun aside. My bullet smashed into the window. Glass shattered out on the deck. A wet breeze blew in the opening.

As I turned to face my attacker, I felt a blow to my head. The entire universe crashed in on me, a Fourth of July explosion went off inside my head. My last memory before I fell unconscious was of a whiff of perfume, Pure Poison by Dior.

Blurry vision, then a face. Wendell.

"You okay?"

"Sort of. What's going on?"

“They cut us off, everyone out here on this spit of land. Stalled a truck on the bridge. No lights, no phones. Those Russian hoods collected our cell phones, started going through all the houses, stealing cash, jewelry. I think they’re leaving now.”

I rolled my chair to the window. God, my head hurt. My vision was still not quite clear. However, I made out figures on the dock. Darts of lights. The Russians. They were throwing bags on their boat. The engine started up. They leapt in. They were making their getaway and there was nothing I could do about it. Yes, there was one thing. Find Marsha. She was behind it all.

“Marsha?” I said to Wendell.

“You don’t think?”

“I do think.”

“Yes, you could be right, but I didn’t think she would have the nerve.”

“She had the nerve to steal the magazine from you.” Marsha was obsessed, like you, I wanted to say. And obsessed people will do anything, take any risk. I guess I sensed that in her. Part of her allure. I scanned the living room looking for her. There. I spotted a redhead by the door to the library. She saw me watching her, smiled, then ducked through the door. I raced towards her, guests fleeing from my path. I didn’t care who I ran over. I was determined to reach her, stop her.

I heard the crash of splintering glass as I entered the library. She stood in front of the *Black Mask* cabinet, shoe in one hand, a large plastic bag in the other, glass shards all around her. She also had a light strapped to her head. Must have been in her purse. She dropped the shoe and began shoving magazines into the bag. I rushed over to her, gun held tightly in my hand.

“Stop,” I shouted at her.

She turned and faced me, her face aflame, like her hair, excitement bordering on madness, light drilling in my eyes. “It’s about time.”

“What do you mean?”

“I should be on that boat with the rest of them but I had to wait for you. They have my share, a fake passport, tickets. Those Russians can provide anything. How the Communists kept them in check all those years I do not know.”

“So why did you wait?”

“You need to play your part. That’s why I brought you here. I didn’t figure on you really trying to shoot one of them, so I had to hit you over the head. Sorry about that. Dangerously delayed things. I guess it adds a bit of spice. Let’s get on with it.”

“With what?”

I knew what. I just didn’t want to make it easy for her.

“The script. You say, ‘You’re dropping that bag and not moving until the cops come.’ I say ‘I’ll split it with you. I keep the collection but you get half my cut of the Russians’ haul. Could be a cool mil for you.’ You say?”

Damn it, I wasn’t about to be played like that, used to fulfill some warped dream of hers. I had sacrificed too much to achieve independence. I will not be played.

“I say ‘fuck you.’ I’m taking all those rare magazines in your hand and you can swim across the canal as far as I’m concerned.”

She looked at me, shocked. “You can’t say that. You’re a PI. You have your code. You can’t steal.”

“Fuck your code, fuck your plot. Henrietta was right. It’s all bullshit.”

She lowered her head so that the beam from the light strapped to it highlighted her chest. Then she ripped open her blouse exposing boobs to die for. The princess hadn't done that in 1925. Unfair.

"Want me?"

Of course, I did. Right then, right there, in the dark, on the floor of the library, *Black Mask* magazines spread around us. But that's not what I said.

"No, Marsha, I don't want you. I want those fucking magazines. I'm looking forward to a good read. Now button up."

"I'm walking out of here," she said, "with the magazines. And what're you going to do, smartass?"

I knew this was coming. The crazy lady wanted me to shoot her. It was more important to her that I replicate the plot of *The Gutting of Coufignal* than to escape, not to mention the pain of a bullet wound. It was only at that moment I fully realized that Marsha's obsessive collecting had led to insanity. I wondered if she herself had known the lengths she would go to relive a Hammett story. After all, she had prepared an escape scenario.

I wouldn't give her the satisfaction. I rolled right up to her, grabbed the bag of magazines from her hand, and gave her a shove. My upper body is very powerful. She fell to the floor. I headed for the door. I wanted her to see me leave with them and she did.

Once outside I gave the bag of loot to Wendell and told him to hide it. I wanted Marsha to think I had escaped with them. Cops entered the living room, the lights came back on. I told the cops about Marsha. I hid in the kitchen so Marsha wouldn't see me. I watched as they hauled the lady, cuffed, out the door, blouse buttoned, face flush. She was pissed. Not because she got caught, but because I ruined her plot's ending. Good.

God, she was a sexy lady.

Tim Wohlforth's story The Masseuse is included in the Mystery Writers of America's Death Do Us Part, edited by Harlan Coben. Recently published by Little Brown. His story Jesus Christ Is Dead made the Distinguished Mystery Stories list in Otto Penzler's 2005 Best American Mystery Stories. Another Crip & Henrietta story was published in the Plots With Guns anthology published by Dennis McMillan. He is a 2003 Pushcart Prize Nominee. He has received a Certificate of Excellence from the Dana Literary Society. Wohlforth has had seventy-two short stories accepted for publication. A contemporary noir novel, No Time To Mourn, was recently published. He co-authored the non-fiction book, On The Edge: Political Cults Right and Left.

Lee Child has called him "an exciting new voice."

www.timwohlforth.com tim@timwohlforth.com