

Simeon

By Kim Cushman

At the end of the Taconic Parkway, Eddie O’Leary stopped at a diner for a rare cheeseburger and a beer, to steady his nerves and review the game plan. It wasn’t that he was worried about the job, he told himself – there was very little risk involved – no, it was just that he’d been out late the night before and was under the weather. The farther he’d driven from the city on a gray November afternoon, the more surreal everything had become – the faces in the passing cars, the names of the towns – to the point that upstate New York now seemed like a foreign country. Austerlitz? Where the hell was he, in Poland?

But give him a hair of the dog and he’d get his bearings, as usual. He slid into a booth with slashed vinyl seats, and his battleaxe of a waitress brought him a Pabst Blue Ribbon. Eddie took his first, reassuring sip, opened the manila folder and studied the color photocopy of the dust jacket – the bedroom eyes and red lips floating in a night-blue sky, suggestion of barrette, cigarette smoke and tears, the carnival of lights below. The eyes were a lustrous, golden yellow. Hard to believe that a book could be so valuable. He’d read *The Great Gatsby* for high-school English, and it was good, sure – “the orgiastic future” and all that crap – but not *that* good. Larry had been deliberately vague, but Eddie had done enough online research to know that it was worth a lot more than \$55,000 - the price listed by a rare book dealer out in California for a first edition - “very good, tight,” but without the jacket and without Fitzgerald’s autograph. The copy he was supposed to liberate had both of these, in addition to being a first, and, novice though he was, Eddie knew that they added tremendously to its value. Larry wasn’t generous – why should he be under the circumstances? – and yet he was willing to pay Eddie two grand plus expenses for just a few hours of work, which meant the book would fetch a small fortune.

It was owned by a woman who lived alone in an isolated old farmhouse in southwestern Vermont. Somewhere out in East Bumfuck. A Mrs. Harriet Van Guildler. She was in her early seventies, apparently, and an alcoholic – an easy mark.

How had Larry found out about it? The details were sketchy – something about her estranged son who lived in the city. Of course, Larry had been in the business for years, he had his connections. The smug little bastard, with his wimpy goatee and turtlenecks.

The cheeseburger came with a limp side of lettuce and tomato, fries and a pickle. He ordered another beer. Taking a bite of red meat, Eddie remembered the day a few months back when he’d first gone into Larry’s bookshop in the West Village, hoping to sell a couple of beautiful leather-bound volumes of Mark Twain, numbered and signed by the author. Just the thought of it made the skin prickle on the back of his neck. He’d been running with a fast crowd, going out four or five nights a week – poker at the Yale Club, ballgames at the Stadium, dancing at after-hours clubs, golf weekends at Apawamis out in Rye. Kamikazes and cocaine. The nice little inheritance he’d received from his grandmother was long gone, and there was no way his job as a paralegal for a law firm on the fifty-second floor of the MetLife Building could support that kind of lifestyle. Credit cards maxed out to the tune of \$17K, on the verge of missing his minimum payments as

well as the rent (thus triggering a cascade of late fees, higher APRs and eviction proceedings), he'd slipped the Twain off the shelf and into his coat before leaving a party on the Upper East Side. To this day, Eddie had no idea how Larry had known the books were stolen. Maybe it was the bookplates or the mysterious little notations penciled in the upper corners of the flyleaves. Or maybe he hadn't known for sure, maybe it was a shot in the dark. In any event, like a fool, Eddie had confessed, and now Larry had him over a barrel. It was either do this job and a few more, or Larry would turn him in.

Although he'd been mortified at the time – and, like a cornered animal, furious, so furious that he'd almost vaulted over Larry's desk and knocked his teeth down his throat like bloody Chiclets – now Eddie saw it as a stroke of good luck. He knew he wasn't cut out for the legal profession. Occasionally there was a nice trip, all expenses paid, to New Orleans or Los Angeles or even some offshore account in the Caymans, but otherwise it was so fucking tedious – digesting transcripts of depositions, Shepardizing. And even if he could come up with the money for law school, pass the bar and make partner, behind the façade of respectability, the fancy Italian suits and swank offices with the bird's-eye view of Manhattan, it was a sleazy business. Because more often than not, your client had in fact broken the law, and usually the clients of the big New York firms had broken it in a big way. A few of the young lawyers he worked with were still idealistic, still saw themselves as legal eagles, like the Art Deco eagles on the Chrysler Building, ready to swoop down from on high in defense of Truth, Justice and the American Way, but the rest of them knew damn well they were vultures. Instead of the pale enabler, paid in blood money, experiencing the vicarious thrill, I'd rather be the crook any day, thought Eddie. It's more honest.

Given his family background and college education, he knew a lot of wealthy people, intellectuals with large libraries. No more of this working 9 to 5 bullshit, shaving every day, straphanging on the IRT, face to face with some knish-breath, harangued by the panhandlers and crazies. All you had to do was roll out of bed in time for the next cocktail party. Nobody expected you to swipe a book – that was the beauty of it. Nobody read any more these days – Eddie sure as hell didn't, he'd rather be watching the Steelers on his high definition plasma – and nobody suspected that a book could be worth more than twenty or thirty bucks tops.

As for Larry, he'd get his soon enough. Eddie was confident he'd be able to outsmart him when the chips were down. He'd stick with him just long enough to learn the ropes, how to decipher those hieroglyphics on the flyleaves, how to identify the valuable books and where to fence them – or, better yet, who the big collectors were, the bibliophiles willing to pay top dollar, no questions asked, and then he'd strike out on his own, quit the firm and pull the old double cross. Memo to Larry: You're goin' down, dipshit.

Rehearsing his cover story for the alkie, Eddie finished his burger, then ate one last fry and wiped his greasy fingers on a paper napkin. It was a crime to impersonate a policeman, of course, but he had no intention of getting caught.

“No smoking,” growled the battleaxe, the phlegm in her throat betraying a two-pack-a-day habit.

Eddie had absent-mindedly started to light up a Camel. God damn it, he thought, what's this country coming to? Everything's restricted nowadays, so fucking PC. With a grimace of disgust, he plucked the cigarette from his lips and stuck it behind his ear.

“Just about the dumbest thing you can do, given all the lawsuits and Surgeon General’s warnings,” said a man in a booth across the aisle, talking to his companions but looking at Eddie.

“Blow it out your ass,” Eddie snarled. The man quickly looked away. And he probably *had*, too, the busybody, probably flatched in his pants. He didn’t know what he was up against – how could he?

Eddie caught himself. Better settle the tab and get moving before two hairs of the dog turned into a hide, Mr. Hyde, that is, and tables were overturned and the blood of country bumpkins spilled on the linoleum. Someone was bound to call the cops, and the last thing he needed was to spend the night in some jerkwater lockup. He had a job to do, and to say that he needed the money was an understatement.

Out in the parking lot, he lit that cigarette. The Big C was for the little people. He felt good – his head was clear now, his mild case of the jitters gone, and although he was on unfamiliar ground, a city boy out in the boonies, at least it was solid ground, not the dreamscape of an hour ago. He took out his cell and checked his voicemail: two messages, one from Sasha, the ballerina he’d chatted up at P.J. Clarke’s, the other from – well, well, well – Christine, the secretary he’d met at a cocktail party thrown by some lawyer from Skadden Arps. Dark-haired, a little swarthy, with the suggestion of a mustache, the quivering aspic of her gluteus maximus jutting out so far you could shelve the penal code on it. He’d taken her into the bathroom and made her grab her ankles. Later she’d gone into hysterics and the lawyer had asked him to leave, which he did, but only after pissing in the bedroom closet. Who would he look up when he got back to the city, Sasha or Christine? Maybe both, one right after the other. He inspected himself in the outside mirror of his Crown Vic rental and was pleased with what he saw. You sophisticated beast, he thought, and howled like Warren Zevon singing *Werewolves of London*.

Larry’s directions proved accurate enough. As the sun was setting, he went out five or six miles of winding dirt road, past a dairy farm, up into the foothills of what he guessed were the Green Mountains, now elephant-gray, ridgelines pink. There it was on the right, unmistakable, a big pale yellow house with a stone wall and pond in front and a tumble-down barn in back.

He pulled into the drive and got out of the car. Not another house in sight. Perfect.

He went along a flagstone path and rapped on the side entrance. He had to knock twice more, and harder, before it was finally opened by a train-wreck of a woman. She had the blowzy complexion, thick middle and spindly legs of the longtime, heavy drinker. Her shirt and slacks were rumpled, hair shoulder-length, pepper-and-salt and stringy.

“Mrs. Van Guilder?”

“Yes?”

He flashed his fake badge. “I’m Trooper Paul Dunbar with the Vermont State Police. I wonder if I might ask you a few questions.”

She sized him up – the buzz cut he’d gotten the day before, the better to play his part, his clean-shaven features, frame buff from pumping iron three nights a week, dark blue windbreaker, crisp blue button-down shirt and khaki chinos. His chief concern was that, at twenty-four, he looked too young. She glanced over at the white Crown Vic –

Eddie was sure she couldn't read the plates. "You're out of uniform," she said in a cultivated voice.

"I'm undercover, ma'am."

"Come in," she said, seemingly glad of the company.

He stepped up into a kitchen smelling of hot chicken fat, dishwasher soap and, underlying both of these, something else he couldn't identify – something disagreeable. Floor done in orange-brown tiles, high ceiling, white cupboards. Cast-iron frying pan on a grease-spattered stove.

"There's a coat rack behind the door. Would you like a beer?"

He grinned – this might actually be fun – and made a show of checking his watch. "Don't mind if I do. One of the advantages of being undercover is that the usual regulations don't necessarily apply."

He removed his jacket and hung it up. She opened the refrigerator, pulled out two cans of Genesee, a brand Eddie had never heard of. Then, more than a little unsteady on her feet, she led him through the dining room to the living room. It had a big oriental rug, bookshelves all around, floor to ceiling, an overstuffed couch and three armchairs, a stereo, an old Sony television with rabbit ears, a table strewn with magazines and newspapers, and, in the far corner, a big woodstove, red glow showing through the vent. To the left, a dim hallway, at the end of which he made out a banister. He studied the books for a moment – there had to be hundreds of them, maybe thousands – a needle in a fucking haystack. Here and there between the shelves were photographs and abstract paintings. The blade of a sawfish was suspended from a beam. On a coffee table, seashells and a flickering candle whose scent couldn't quite overpower the unpleasant odor he'd detected in the kitchen. The room was very warm.

Mrs. Van Guilder motioned Eddie to a chair directly below the sawfish blade. "The sword of Damocles," she said with a little smile, sitting across from him on the couch.

Some mythological story – Eddie vaguely remembered reading about it in college. They opened their flip-tops and drank. "Quite the book collection you've got here."

"There's more in the study and in the upstairs hallway. The result of half a lifetime in academia."

"I have to admit I've never been much of a reader myself. The one book I can remember enjoying was *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. That was back in high school. We didn't read many novels at the police academy. Do you have any Fitzgerald, Mrs. Van Guilder?"

"Oh, yes," she said, gesturing in a way that seemed to indicate the second floor, "I've got *all* of his books." She lowered her chin. "So, young man, what's this about?"

"Have you noticed any unusual activity in the neighborhood recently?"

"What sort of activity do you mean?"

"Unfamiliar cars going by. More traffic than usual late at night."

She thought for a moment. "I don't think so. Why?"

My God, it was as hot as the steam room at the club. The sweat was popping out on his brow. "Well, I'm not supposed to discuss an ongoing investigation. However, since you've been so hospitable, I don't mind telling you - but if the lieutenant finds out I'll be reprimanded, so this is strictly on the Q.T., all right?"

"Scout's honor."

“We have reason to believe that there’s a meth lab operating not far from here.”

“I think I’ve heard about them on the news. It’s a growing problem, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Meth is the poor man’s cocaine. It’s become the scourge of rural areas in the Midwest, and it’s spreading east. Several farms and a feed store nearby have reported thefts of anhydrous ammonia fertilizer, which the drug makers mix with starter fluid, paint thinner and cold medicine to produce methamphetamine.”

“Am I a suspect?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Call me Harriet.” She gave him a playful smile. “I’m disappointed. I was hoping you might feel the urge to restrain me.”

Was she coming on to him? By God, she was. Memo to the old dipso: Your days of doing the nasty are over.

She raised the beer can to her lips, threw her head back and shook out the last few drops. “Are you ready for another?”

He played catch-up, stood and took her empty. “Allow me, Harriet,” he said with mock gallantry.

He noticed a leather pocketbook on the counter to the left of the fridge and made a mental note to take whatever cash she had. Passing back through the dining room, he paused to admire himself in the mirror above the telephone table. He was amused to see that the phone was one of those clunky black rotary jobs. Well, what do you expect from an old bag living out in the sticks, he thought, she’s not going to have a cell.

Ten minutes later, he was elaborating on the meth trade, using information he’d found on Wikipedia, when he heard a thump directly overhead, then another.

Mrs. Van Guilder saw him cock an ear. “That’s Simeon, getting up from his nap. He should be joining us shortly.”

What? Larry had said she lived by herself! This could queer the whole deal. “Your husband?”

“Oh, no,” she replied, eyes twinkling with amusement. “I used to have a husband, but I made a monkey out of him.”

“Ah. Well, anyway, good, whoever he is, I’d like to ask him some of the same questions I’ve been asking you.”

“I don’t think he’ll be of much help to you.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Eddie thought he saw something moving in the hallway, but when he looked it was gone. Wait, there it was again... No, nothing. Was his mind playing tricks on him? As if to confirm that it was, that he was hallucinating like Ray Milland in *The Lost Weekend*, a small brown monkey of the organ grinder variety came into the room on all fours and jumped up on the magazine table, where it sat, looking anxiously at Eddie. It was a foot or so tall, the tail at least that long again, with black hands and feet and an Elvis pompadour.

“Allow me to introduce Simeon,” said Mrs. Van Guilder. “He’s a capuchin from South America. Simeon, this is Detective Dunbar from the Vermont State Police.”

So *that* was the mysterious odor! Eddie could scarcely contain his laughter. And to think he’d been worried that an animal with a lima bean for a brain would upset his plans.

As if she could read his mind, Mrs. Van Guilder said, “The capuchin is considered the most intelligent of all the monkeys. Simeon was specially trained as a

nurse's aide. He knows how to dress bedsores, administer injections and prepare medicine cocktails. Every morning he brings me my coffee in bed, and every evening he brings me my medicine." She drained her second can of beer. "Simeon, two Singapore Slings, please."

The monkey jumped down off his perch and scampered for the kitchen.

"You've got to be kidding," said Eddie.

"I couldn't be more serious."

"Can he make a Kamikaze?"

"Certainly – he's memorized the *Old Mr. Boston Bartender's Guide*. Would you prefer a Kamikaze?"

"I would."

"Simeon!" she called in a high-pitched voice. "Yoo-hoo, Simeon!" When the monkey had dutifully reappeared, she said, "If you don't mind, dear, make that *one*," she held up a finger, "Singapore Sling and *one* Kamikaze."

Presently the sound of bottles, ice cubes and a cocktail shaker carried out from the kitchen. What a fucking riot, Eddie thought, I'm going to have to get one of these little hurdy-gurdy men for myself, dress him up in a red coat and fez and have him wait on the gang. "Do you mind if I smoke, Harriet?"

"Not at all. There's an ashtray on the coffee table."

Simeon came back on two legs, the pink Sling in one hand, a bowl of nuts in the other, and the second drink in the grip of his prehensile tail. Puckering his lips, he put the nuts on the coffee table, served his mistress and then Eddie. Then he hopped up on her lap and murmured, "Um-um."

"Thash a good boy," she said, stroking his pompadour.

Eddie examined his cocktail. Well, it had the right color, just a tinge of green, and was suitably garnished with a wedge of lime. Mrs. Van Guilder's Sling was garnished with a maraschino cherry and a slice of pineapple. He took a sip... Perfect.

This is way too easy, he thought. She's half in the bag already, starting to slur her words. As soon as she passes out, I'll help myself to the Fitzgerald, her pocketbook and anything else I want, then waltz on down the highway.

It was almost nine o'clock. They were on their third round of cocktails, and Eddie couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so lethargic. His tongue was thick, sour-tasting, his eyelids heavy. It's the heat, he thought, it must be 90 degrees in here. Mrs. Van Guilder, however, seemed to have gotten a second wind. A while back she'd had the audacity to put on a jazz record by some bird named Pete Fountain and suggest that they dance, but Eddie had declined – dancing was something he didn't do with a centerfold, much less an old dipso. Since then she'd been rattling on about the stalemate between the President and the Congress, pausing only to tell her pet monkey to throw another log in the stove or fetch another drink. She must have a hollow leg, for Christ's sake. She hadn't even excused herself to take a leak. "I could care less about politics," he said.

"*Couldn't* care less."

"Don't do that."

"Do what?" she asked, feigning innocence.

"You know damn well. That's the third or fourth time."

"Well, then, speak correctly."

“Just don’t do it,” he said, with a touch of menace.

Eddie realized he wasn’t going to make it back to the city that night. He’d have to take a room at a motel. He’d noticed one on the left-hand side of the road, just before crossing the Vermont border – the Monument Motel.

“Glee club or Sing Sing?” asked Mrs. Van Guilder, giving him a penetrating look.

At first he was confused by the question, but then it occurred to him that his cover was blown. Had she seen through him from the start? Probably.

The uneasy feeling he’d had on the Taconic Parkway crept over him again. Maybe he should just walk away.

Walk away, with that book sitting on the shelf upstairs like the fucking Hope Diamond? Fat chance.

“Answer me, puppy,” she said.

“What did you call me?”

“You heard me.”

“I’ll snap you like a piece of kindling wood.”

Simeon got down off the couch, nonchalantly approached his chair, climbed up on the left arm and onto Eddie’s shoulder. Suddenly Eddie felt a sharp pain in his ear.

“Ow! He bit me!” He threw a punch, but the monkey had jumped out of range.

Mrs. Van Guilder was having a good laugh at his expense. “You’re lucky he didn’t throw his poop at you – that’s his favorite trick.”

Blood trickled down Eddie’s neck. If there was one thing he couldn’t stand, it was being laughed at. “It’s too fucking hot in here!” he shouted, flinging his cocktail at the plate-glass window to his left, which exploded in a thousand pieces. The cold night air came rushing in.

“Hey!” She was purple with rage. “I think it’s time for you to leave! *Officer!*”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass what you think.”

“Eh-eh-eh!” cried Simeon.

Mrs. Van Guilder heaved herself to her feet and started for the telephone, but he beat her to it, jerked the cord out of the jack and crushed the plug underfoot. When she swung around toward the hallway – there had to be an extension in the study or upstairs – he cut her off, snarling, “Sorry, lady, it’s the law of the jungle.” He did his Warren Zevon impression, howling in her face. She pulled in her chin and retreated to the kitchen, Simeon following. What was she going to do? She was helpless.

Having found a tissue, he wiped the blood off his neck, dabbed his ear, then turned his attention to one of the shelves and started making a pile of books that looked promising – Evelyn Waugh, *The Catcher in the Rye*, Robert Frost...

He turned in time to see her dancing toward him, winding up with the greasy frying pan. He dodged the blow, yanked the sawfish blade off its hooks and struck her with it on the side of the head. She dropped the pan and collapsed at his feet. Simeon squealed and hid behind the couch. “That’s right, you little twerp,” he muttered, “scram, or the alpha male will make short work of you, too.”

He’d meant to hit her with the flat of the blade, but the teeth had drawn blood – quite a lot of it. Her eyes were closed and she wasn’t moving. Eddie stepped over her and walked down the hallway toward the front door, past a darkened room on his right. The staircase was carpeted, long and steep. The second floor landing was dim, a faint

light emanating from a doorway to the left. He took hold of the banister and climbed slowly into an atmosphere of boudoir and monkey.

When he reached the top, he stood for a moment catching his breath, eyes adjusting to the gloom. It was as hot as a rain forest – sweat ran down the sides of his rib cage. The light came from what was obviously the master bedroom. Straight ahead a closed door, another one to the right. Turning, he saw a low bookcase in the narrow passage extending the length of the open stairway, separated from it by a continuation of the banister. The passage had an oriental runner, and at the far end there was a door through which he could see a toilet. Between the books and the bathroom there was a small alcove with an armchair.

Eddie went to the bookcase, switched on the sconce above it, squatted and – bingo! – immediately located the spine of *The Great Gatsby*. He pulled it off the shelf. The dust jacket seemed to be in near-mint condition – just a little of what Larry had called foxing on the back. He gazed into those seductive flapper eyes, then opened the book to the title page. What the...?! It wasn't signed by Fitzgerald, but by a Scott Fitzpatrick! He checked the copyright page... Why, it wasn't even a first edition! Larry, you fucking loser!

Eddie heard a rustling sound behind him but paid it no mind. Right next to the spot where the *Gatsby* had been was a copy of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, with jacket. And there were lots of other classic hardcovers on the shelves – Steinbeck, London, Sinclair Lewis, Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* – many of them apparently firsts. A mother lode. Eddie would take the *Gatsby* as proof that he'd gone through with the job – Larry would have to pay him for his services anyway – and throw in another book or two as a gesture of good faith, but the rest, the *best*, he'd keep for himself.

Mission accomplished. He stood, deciding he ought to tap a kidney before gathering up his loot and going back downstairs. Heading for the bathroom, Eddie heard the rustling sound again and looked into the alcove. A pair of primitive eyes glittered out at him from the top of the chair.

Something warm and foul spattered on his face. Simeon's teeth were bared, his tail vertical and stiff. He sprang... Eddie felt claws raking his cheeks. He stumbled back against the banister, the runner slipped, his feet flew out from under him and he fell headlong into the stairwell. It seemed to him that he dropped in slow motion, as if in a dream, but he struck the bottom of the stairs with a great deal of force, which broke his neck.

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