

THE WIDOW'S GARDEN PARTY

BRUCE RUBENSTEIN

Every spring the widow Cavanaugh invites me to her garden party, every spring I attend, and every time I swear it's my last. It's not my kind of party. No pig's knuckles, no sauerkraut, nary a bent copper, a gangster nor a hooker to be seen. There's supposed to be some hooch in the punch but I doubt it.

The high point of the evening comes when the widow, Francine is her name, reads a "poim" she's composed for the occasion. A little coterie of admirers gathers round while she stands next to the garden fairy and emotes.

Her poem always begins with flowers bursting forth in the spring, then cuts to a few stanzas that may or may not be about love bursting forth in her brief marriage. Frankly, I find this embarrassing and I've learned over the years to take it in out of earshot. At a distance it can be charming. She doesn't recite until dusk has fallen. There is always a faint scent of flowers on the breeze. Tiny colored lights are strung through the shrubbery, and along the stone walls that separate her huge back yard from those of her Summit Avenue neighbors. I remember one evening, it might've been last year, when a bright quarter moon gleamed off the milky glass wings of the garden fairy and cast its pale glow over Francine's little heart-shaped face.

She's gained a pound or two since we met, but she's still a fey creature. You almost expect her to float away like a balloon when her "poim" is finished. Instead she curtsies, then flits amongst her lady friends, and some frail-looking young fellows who are keeping the gals company, for praise and hugs.

About then I hear someone in the nearby bushes clear his throat. That will be her father, Arthur Brandon, who offers me a slug of scotch from his flask. The two of us hang in the background and reminisce for a while. He's always a little apprehensive around me, but he needs someone to share a nip with on these occasions and I'm glad to oblige.

Arthur called me the summer of 1934. He said he had a case he wanted me to pursue, and asked me to come to his office for the lowdown.

I guessed what he had in mind. His son-in-law had been snatched three years earlier. There'd been several other high-profile kidnappings around that time, all wealthy men or their relatives. The difference was, they'd been returned to their families after the ransom was delivered. Frank Cavanaugh was never seen again.

Arthur was a surprise, considering his legendary status. I'd always pictured him as a gimlet-eyed miser, well-organized, ruthlessly efficient. He was nothing of the sort. He was a husky, balding fellow seated behind a huge, cluttered desk, vest unbuttoned, tie loosened, and some stubble under his jaw that he missed when he shaved. He mumbled to himself as he rooted around among the documents strewn over his desk. Eventually he found a key, unlocked the top drawer, and pulled out a bottle. I guess he knew my reputation as well as I knew his.

There were two lines outside Arthur's bank when the 1930 panic got rolling, one for the run that all banks were suffering, and one made up of people who'd heard that Arthur played his cards right before Black Tuesday, and had plenty of liquid assets. They wanted in. From then on Arthur was banker to the elite in St. Paul.

We had a few nips. He showed me a picture of his late wife, and told me his daughter was just like her. Sweet and guileless. "I'm going to tell you something I didn't tell the police," he said, when we got down to cases. "I marked those bills, most of them at least. In indelible ink, just a tiny curly-cue under the Federal Reserve seal. Took me all night. Here, look."

He picked up a magnifying glass and showed me the mark on a century note that he laid on the desk for my perusal. "I gave them four hundred of these, McDonough. Forty thousand dollars, and it didn't buy my daughter's husband back. You heard what they did with him, didn't you? She has nightmares about it."

Couldn't blame her for that. Her husband had fallen into the hands of amateurs. The Barker-Karpis gang had snatched Bill Hamm the brewery magnate, and the banker Edward Bremer. They'd demanded \$100,000 for Hamm, \$200,000 for Bremer, and got every nickel. The hostages had been slapped around some, but were in reasonably good shape when they were released.

Cavanaugh's kidnapers had demanded a relative pittance, the mark of the novice as far as the bulls were concerned. That was borne out by something they'd discovered a few months later, which made its way into the newspapers. A car thief who'd been collared over in Minneapolis gave the

coppers some information in return for leniency. He told them that awhile back he'd been hired to steal a getaway bucket by a man who wore a mask when they met. They'd made a deal for a few bucks on the spot, more when a big payoff came through. During negotiations the masked man let it slip that the car was for the Cavanaugh snatch.

A few weeks later the masked man came around to pay. He told the buggy bandit that the scheme had been to stash Cavanaugh in an apartment until the ransom was in hand, but the palooka in charge of that arrangement failed to pay the rent, resulting in some make-do at the last minute.

Bad as the kidnapers were at planning, they were worse at improvising. They'd driven out in the country somewhere, dug a hole the size of a grave, trussed Cavanaugh up like a pig on a spit, tossed him in, spread some earth on a tarp they stretched over the top weighed down at the corners with rocks. Something was rigged to keep him breathing, but the whole thing collapsed when it rained that evening and the poor fellow suffocated, which explained why payment of the ransom didn't result in delivery of the goods.

"The police told me about it, and I told them to make sure Francine never found out," said Arthur, "but next day there it was on the front page. Poor thing fainted dead away when she read it." He shook his head sadly. "I had a hunch I couldn't trust the police. That's why I didn't tell them about marking the bills."

"But what was the point of marking 'em if you didn't tell the coppers?"

He explained that he was pals with a network of bankers from Wall Street to San Francisco. He'd alerted them to be on the lookout, and quite a few bills had shown up on the east

coast within a year of the kidnaping. He'd hired a private eye out there, but the investigation went nowhere. Now, after a long hiatus, the bills had begun turning up again, only this time closer to home.

"That's what I know for a fact," Arthur said. "Here's what I know in my gut. Frank was lured by a woman. Women were his weakness."

"A common failing," I observed, but irony will never be Arthur's long suit. He just nodded and continued to explain the role a vamp must have played in the kidnaping.

Frank Cavanaugh got a phone call shortly before noon the day he was snatched. He told his secretary he'd be out on business through the lunch hour, and never returned. The secretary told the police it was a woman who'd called. She assumed it was another secretary, because that's how the hoi-poloi make appointments with each other.

Arthur thought otherwise. "You see, Frank didn't have many appointments, because he didn't have much to do. He wasn't cut out to be a banker, that's for sure. I had him downtown with me for a while after the marriage, trying to teach him a few things, but by the time he was abducted I'd sent him over to our Midway branch. I have a competent fellow in charge there, who didn't let him get in the way. That was about all I could hope for."

The marked bills were showing up at a bank in Duluth. Arthur wrote the banker's name down and said he'd be expecting me. Then he handed me a sealed envelope. "I want you to track down the kidnappers and give this to them," he said. "Unopened."

That was half the job and it was odd, but not as odd as the rest. Arthur wanted me to meet with his daughter when I

returned. I was supposed to tell her that I'd donned a pair of brass knucks and got a confession out of one of the torpedoes who'd kidnaped her husband, who'd told me that Cavanaugh hadn't been buried alive after all. He'd tried to escape because he missed her so, and they'd shot him dead.

"Tell her they dumped his body in the river or something," he said. "Then she can forget about finding his remains. I can't bear to see her pining away any longer."

The next day I made my way to the Union Depot and boarded the morning train to Duluth. I chose a window seat and threw my patrimony - a carpet bag with a wooden handle - into the luggage rack. We chuffed slowly up the Phalen Creek ravine, passed through my north side stomping grounds, and nearly came to a stop behind the shop ponds so the boiler man could throw a shovel of coal on the pile.

The dirt-poor families that lived in old boxcars on the siding relied on that coal for their winter heat. It was an act of kindness by the Great Northern that kept many from freezing to death, but raised the mortality rate from black lung too. My schoolmate Tommy Quinn hacked himself into an early grave from coal smoke, which sad betiding led to the only enduring relationship with a woman I've ever had. I got to spooning with his sister Maggie behind St. Andrew's after the funeral, and we'd been seeing each other off and on since.

We gained speed quickly once we left the yards. Rows of stunted corn flashed by. Off in the distance I saw a water tower shimmering in heat waves off the surrounding farm land. A dust storm had blown through a few days earlier. Everything - trees, corn, barns - was coated with Kansas topsoil.

Funny how your thoughts, which might seem to be

highballing down a track of their own, find their way back to whatever is pressing. Thinking about coal fires, Maggie, and the intimacies Maggie and I had shared, reminded me of something wicked I'd done with another gal. It happened on the only occasion when I'd crossed paths with the widow Cavanaugh's late husband.

The Chamber of Commerce chose Frank Cavanaugh to be Boreas, King of the Snow, for the 1928 Winter Carnival. He selected the usual assortment of society janes and dishy downtown shop girls to be his Princesses. Boreas and his pals wine and dine the Princesses, and do battle with Vulcan the Fire King. It helps if both monarchs are hams, because their clashes are mostly rhetorical. Cavanaugh fit the bill nicely. Not only was he a man about downtown, he was an amateur thespian who looked good in a costume and was very quotable.

At the end of the Carnival, Boreas is deposed and Vulcan reigns supreme. As the Fire King himself said when he knighted me: "Vulcan battles to end the cold of winter and bring warmth back to Saint Paul."

You might wonder how I attained knighthood. Easier than you'd think. I hung around Tin Cup's with some neighborhood fellows, amongst them Joe Rogers, who was well-known because everybody knew him. I don't know how they knew him, but his nick-name helped. He came by it honestly, by confronting a Hun who had the temerity to walk into Tin Cup's and order a drink. "Get the hell outta here!" said Joe. "Who're you to order me around?" the Hun replied. "I'm yer worst nightmare, ye heathen bastard," was Joe's now-famous rejoinder. The Hun backed out cursing, and Joe's been "The Night Mayor of Rice Street" ever since.

Due to his notoriety The Night Mayor was named Duke of Soot for the 1928 Carnival. He arranged knighthoods for several of us from Tin Cup's. We spent ten days during the shank of the winter doing battle for Vulcan. Our routine consisted of dressing up in red capes and devil's horns, rubbing coal dust on our mugs, and riding round town drunk on a fire truck. We had a free pass to leap off the truck any time we saw a bunch of dames, and bring warmth back to St. Paul by giving them a big sooty smooch. The gals always acted alarmed, and some of them were truly outraged (I personally got slapped twice), but mostly they put up a token struggle then left the mark of the Vulcan on their puss for days to show that they were certified tomatoes.

Good clean fun, but cold work on a winter eve. It was comfier crashing the Snow King's soirees. That was how we made war on His Highness. By busting in and besmirching the Princesses.

Boreas employs his own shock troops. Traditionally they're coppers, which means they're just Rice Street rowdies in uniform. My friends Jack Moylan and John O'Connor were in the Palace Guard that year, as was another bull I knew, a bent gumshoe named Jimmy Philben. Jimmy fled St. Paul a few years later, about half an hour ahead of the G-Men

On the evening I was thinking about on the train, Frank Cavanaugh was at The Lowry Hotel, regaling his court with bootleg hooch and funny stories. The gals' laughter turned to mock horror as we descended upon them. The Palace Guard put up some token resistance, and I vaguely recall His Majesty protesting vigorously - "good sirs, unhand these maidens forthwith" or something like that - but what I recall vividly is a kiss I got from a shop gal. She was nearly as tall

as me, with taffy-blonde hair done up in thick braids on top of her head and that toast-colored skin Norsky dames sometimes have. When I kissed her, she stuck her tongue in my mouth.

I was shocked. I still made the odd confession back then, and the first thing that came to mind was, how am I going to explain this? I must've looked stupefied.

She stepped back. "Aww, did I scare'ya?" she said. "Thought you wanted a kiss."

The Night Mayor swooped in and grabbed her before I could respond. Then the Duke of Clinker's crew arrived and added to the chaos. I never did get her name, but I can still see the smirk on her face and feel the heft of her. She was quite an armful.

King Boreas is the Chamber's official glad-hander until the next Carnival, so Frank Cavanaugh was in the papers regularly over the following year. I'd often see pictures of him shaking hands with one mucky-muck or the other. That must've been right after he married Francine, when his father-in-law still had hopes for him.

The conductor came through to check the luggage racks. "There a bar car?" I asked.

"No hooch until after lunch is served, and we'll be in Duluth by then." He must've seen the disappointment on my map. "Try looking at the scenery," he said.

People are always suggesting things I can do instead of drinking. The scenery was right up there with some of their other ideas - bowling, model aeroplanes - nothing but stumps and blackened tree trunks as far as you could see. When I was a kid you could smell smoke back in St. Paul, from the forest fires up here.

Duluth turned out to be a little town perched on a steep hill, next to a large body of water. I didn't see just how large for a while. The water was mostly hidden by industrial buildings and big piles of reddish-brown rock when we rolled in, and my first stop was a windowless gin mill a few steps from the depot.

Once fortified, and having gotten directions, I trudged up the hill to Second St., and entered a brick building with North Shore and Iron Range Bank of Commerce chiseled into the granite facade. A guard gave my carpet bag the fish eye, but it wasn't too long until I was ushered in to the president's office.

I leaned across the desk to shake hands with a tall fellow who rose to greet me. He had thinning blond hair and a grip like a teamster. Arthur had written his name down, but I couldn't pronounce it so I simply uttered mine.

"Martin McDonough."

"Jusseri Jalkanen. Sit down."

Turns out the Finns pronounce J as Y, which made his first name sound like "usury," which probably explained the wry smile when he introduced himself. He had lots of gold in his teeth. Behind him was a picture window that looked out on what might as well have been the Atlantic Ocean. There was no end to it.

"That's a lake?" I said.

"Dat's Da Lake," he replied. "Lake Superior. Every morning I wake up and tank God for dat lake." He jerked a thumb the size of a dill pickle back over his shoulder toward the yards. "See all dem rock piles? Dat's iron ore. Dey send it down here from da iron range in hoppers, and load it on ore boats. Whole damn country's in a Depression, but dey're still

making steel in Gary, Indiana, and as long as dey do, da railroad and da mining company need a bank in Duloot. And by God I got one. Two blocks from da terminal. - How's Arthur?"

"Fine, but his daughter is still grieving."

"Terrible ting, dat." He opened a drawer and pulled out two century notes. "Here dey are."

We examined the little curly-cues. They say money talks, but those bills weren't telling me what I needed to know.

"Any idea where they came from?" I asked.

"Yah. In a deposit from da lending co-op, up in Virginia. It'll take some detective work to find out how dey got dere. But dat's what you do, ain't it?"

I assured him it was, with more bravado than confidence. I was a long way from St. Paul, and the coppers who provide most of the information I trade in.

"How far is Virginia?" I asked.

"Too far to walk. Fifty miles, uphill all da way." He stood, and motioned me to join him looking out the window. "Dere's a train unloading right now, see. - Tell ya someting. Dey never even fired da boiler on dat bastard once dey got'er out of da mine. Just aimed'er for Da Lake and braked'er on da curves. Twenty hoppers with seventy tons of ore in each one. Took about an hour to roll'er down here. Going back, now dat's different. Tree, maybe four hours. I can get you on if you want. Why not? You could save a few bucks. Udderwise it's da jitney bus, and dat usually breaks down."

I agreed and we strolled down to the yards together. I asked if he got many century notes through his bank. Very few, he told me, but more from where those marked bills came from than anywhere else. The Virginia lending co-op

tended to be the collection point for cash from the Crane Lake area, he explained.

That rang a bell. Crane Lake was an old bootlegger's route out of Canada, a remote and wild region where many a gangster and percentage-copper kept cabins. Red-hots on the lam often holed up there, ready to pop over the border on a moment's notice. I knew for certain that the fugitive gumshoe Jimmy Philbin lived on Crane Lake. He told me so himself when he tennis-shoed into town for his father's funeral, wearing a wig and dark glasses.

Jalkanen and the engineer conversed in their native tongue while the boiler fired up, then it was time to get aboard. Jalkanen wished me luck. "Careful," he cautioned. "Dat's no ordinary bank up dere."

I'd have questioned him about that, but we were underway.

The engineer was a laconic fellow and the boiler man was busy shoveling coal most of the time. To call the trip uneventful would be an understatement. I could see how rolling down to Duluth might be a thrill a minute though. You could tell from the way the engine labored that we were climbing a steep grade, and every few miles a hair pin curve slowed us to a near halt.

The land was mostly logged over. Poplar grew where the big pines had been, thick but not high. Off in the distance I could see a few stands of remnant evergreen. We whistled our way through some villages, Cotton, Forbes, Central Lakes, and arrived in Virginia about three hours after we left Duluth. It was dusk when we came to a stop at the lip of a huge, horseshoe-shaped hole in the ground.

"Dat's da Mesabe," said the engineer. "Biggest open pit

mine in da worlt.” I could see train track looping down the side of the pit, and some electric lights aglow at the bottom, but not much else.

“We’re at da end’a Chestnut Street here,” he said, as I climbed down from the locomotive. “Dere’s some saloons and a hotel a few blocks back.”

The joint I chose was called The International. It was well named. The bar man spoke English, but the patrons were gathered in knots, gabbing in alien tongues amongst themselves. They had one thing in common though, the crust of red dirt on their boots and pants cuffs.

A couple moochers who apparently knew some key words in each language were working their way from one end of the bar to the other. I kept an eye on my carpet bag as one of them hovered nearby. He was a tough looking guy in a corduroy workers cap. His boots were clean.

“Ain’t seen you here before,” he said.

“Ain’t been here before,” I replied.

The conversation improved some after I bought him a drink. His name was Pete Urbina. He told me he was from Jugo-Slavia, that he’d mined copper in Michigan, and iron ore here and over in Hibbing. He’d quit because of the dust. He’d been organizing for the CIO until the strike settled. Then he got to drinking too much.

“The OIC cops worked me over coupla times,” he said.

“What’s an OIC cop?”

“Oliver Iron Company. They don’t like organizers.”

“I’m lookin’ for a cop,” I told him. “Actually he’s an ex-cop. Lives over on Crane Lake. Jimmy Philbin, ever heard of him?”

“Nah, but them Crane Lake guys don’t give yuh their

right name anyways. How come you're lookin for a copper?"

I told him I was a private eye and Jimmy was an old friend. He advised me to skip the flea bag down the street and stay in the municipal cabins on Green Lake, at the edge of town.

It was good advice. I spent a comfortable night for a buck, plus fifty cents for bedding. The cry of the Loon lulled me to sleep.

Next morning bright and early I walked into The Virginia Cooperative Bank, a storefront with no tellers, no cages, nothing but a strongbox and a desk. A fellow with a black mustache and broad shoulders crossed by suspenders was seated behind the desk. A sign on the wall said: LOOK AT THE BANANA! EVERY TIME IT LEAVES THE BUNCH IT GETS SKINNED! JOIN THE CO-OP.

"I'd like to ask a favor," I said.

"You the guy talked to Petey Urbina last night?" he replied.

"Uh, yeah."

He reached under his desk and pulled out a Colt .45. "I'll do'ya a favor, ya Pinkerton bastard! I won't shoot'ya if ya turn around and walk out the same way ya come in."

"Easy. Jesus! Do I look like a Pinkerton?"

It was a dumb question, but it set us on the path to resolution. I told him the truth, embellished for dramatic effect. He lowered the pistol as I spoke, and eventually stuck it back where it came from. I'd say he was intrigued by the heartrending story of a brutal crime that left a young widow pining, and a brave intrepid private eye in search of justice. I was moved myself.

"So you think this copper was in on it?" he asked, when I

finished.

I shrugged. “He knows who’s who up there. That’s a start.”

He opened the strongbox and pulled out a roll of bills wrapped in a deposit slip. “This is from the Crane Lake Store,” he said. “Came in yesterday.”

There were three century notes in the wad. One had the curly-cue mark.

“Think they’ll remember where it came from?” I asked.

“Maybe, but they ain’t gonna tell you. They don’t like people snoopin’ around, ‘specially private dicks.”

“Told’ja, he’s a friend.”

“Yeah, and I believe’ya. But they won’t.”

He helped me arrange a ride up to Crane Lake. A sawbuck covered the trip in a Model A, with my big-mouthed drinking buddy Pete Urbina at the wheel. I grumbled about the fact that he nearly got me shot, but Pete just scoffed. Should’ve known better than to say you’re a detective, that was his attitude.

I’d have discussed it with him but the ride wasn’t conducive to conversation. Breeze whistled through the open windows, and the rattling of the frame made it hard to think, let alone talk. The so-called road was naught but two parallel ruts through pine woods, aspen thickets, bogs, and the edges of scummy green swamps. It was rocky and potholed, but Pete didn’t let that slow him up. In fact it spurred him to accelerate. “MIGHT GET STUCK IF WE SLOW’ER DOWN,” he shouted, when he noticed my alarm.

I shut my eyes and devised a ruse. In case I survived.

A few similarly awful roads intersected ours. We turned on one of them and fifteen minutes later, to my immense

relief, we pulled up in front of a clapboard shack at the edge of a big lake. A dock with a few boats tied to it poked into the water. The sign said Crane Lake Store - Cabins For Rent.

“Good luck,” said Pete. “You’ll need it.” He left in a hurry.

The sound of the Model A rattling through the woods faded and died.

The old gent behind the counter listened politely as I explained my predicament. “I need to find my friend Jimmy Philbin,” I told him. “His father died recently and I’ve got some documents he needs to sign, so his mother can get her hands on some lettuce the old man left.”

The gent smiled, and tapped a bell on the counter. A door behind him opened. A younger fellow emerged from a dimly lit alcove that might have served as an office. He had a pistol holstered on his belt. The old gent repeated what I’d said.

“What’s your name?” the guy with the heater inquired. I told him. He asked how I knew Jimmy.

“From St. Andrew’s parish. From the saloon, Tin Cup’s place.”

His eyes narrowed. “Let’s see the papers,” he said.

I pawed around in the carpet bag and came up with the envelope Arthur had given me. “They’re in here, but I can’t let’cha read’em. Lawyer told me Jimmy should open it, nobody else.”

“Oh yeah? And how do you know Jimmy’s here? Who told you that?”

“Jimmy did, when he came to town for his old man’s funeral. The lawyer knew too.”

He thought it over for a few moments, and sighed.

“C’mon,” he said. “I’ll show you where his place is, and

rent you a boat. If you get back here before nine or so I can rent you a cabin for the night too. Otherwise you're on your own."

I grabbed my carpet bag and followed him. He untied a rowboat and showed me how to fit the oars into the locks. "See that out there," he said, pointing at a dim hump of shadow rising ever so slightly above the choppy surface of the water. "That's an island. Jimmy's place is out there.

It's further than it looks," he added, as I stepped aboard.

"Really? It looks like it's half way back to Virginia."

He allowed himself a flicker of a smile. "All'a three miles," he said. "We hang a lamp on the dock at night. Say hello to Jimmy." He gave me a shove off.

I rolled up my sleeves and put my back into it. The wind was against me, but intermittent. I didn't check my progress until I needed a rest. It was disheartening. I could've swum to shore. I leaned into it again, and tried to think about something other than the distance I had to row.

The investigation came to mind, of course, and it soon occurred to me that my modus operandi is always the same, even when I'm two hundred miles from anything familiar. You have to start somewhere. I start with the coppers. They generally know who did it even if they can't prove it, and sometimes they did it. I hated to think that Jimmy Philbin was behind Cavanaugh's murder, but as theories go it wasn't bad. He was an infamous percentage-copper, so blatantly on the take that Chief Tommy Brown, a man whose palm has been crossed more times than a priest's heart, didn't hide his disdain for him.

I rowed for hours before I was close enough to pick out details on the island. There were two cabins and a dock. I

spotted what might have been a person behind one of the cabins, but when I got nearer I could see it was a scarecrow. A big one with straw pigtails and a slouch hat.

I stood on the dock and stretched, working the kinks out of my muscles. I was sweaty and exhausted. My back ached. A black fly landed on my arm and bit me. Another one buzzed my ear.

Having been amply warned that sneaking up on residents of Crane Lake wasn't advisable, I purposely clunked around on the dock after I tied up. All I heard was the echo of my footsteps.

I walked around back of the cabin closest to the water. A yard with a garden had been hacked out of the underbrush, and someone was down on their hands and knees under the scarecrow, pulling weeds. I could tell by the rear end I was looking at - large, shapely - that it was a woman. I didn't want to embarrass her, so I cleared my throat.

"Yeah what," she said, in an irritated tone.

"I'm lookin' for Jimmy Philbin."

"Gone huntin'."

She tossed some weeds on the lawn, jerked out a stem, then another, and gave no sign of stopping any time soon. It was hard not to stare at her backside, which swayed a bit as she weeded.

"Uh, when's he comin' -"

She stood, whipped her sunhat off, and turned to face me. It was her. The tongue kisser. She must have seen the look on my face, but she didn't recognize me. She wiped her brow, and pushed back a few strands of taffy-colored hair.

"What do you want with Jim," she said.

"I'm a friend."

“Uh-huh.” She smiled, which lit up her puss, although it was not a good-humored grin. She had a nicely upturned nose, plump cheeks and big blue eyes. She was wearing a pair of frayed coveralls, and based on the way she’d jiggled when she rose I guessed nothing underneath, but I was wrong. She reached under the bib, revealing one lovely round breast in the process, dug around a bit, and then I was staring at the business end of another pistol.

“Jim doesn’t have many friends,” she said. “Lotta people want to arrest him though.”

“Not me.”

“Came all this way to say hello, did’ja?” She lowered the weapon until it pointed at my privates. “BANG!” she hollered, and she laughed when I jumped. - “If you’re the buzz, then I’m Amy Semple McPherson. Who are you anyway? ”

I hesitated. She stopped smiling. “C’mon, out with it. What do you want here?”

“Well, I am a friend of Jimmy’s, from back in St. Paul, and I’m hopin’ he can give me some information.”

“About what?”

I thought about it for a moment, then told her the whole story. What did I have to lose? It was just a hunch, but it looked to me like I could hand her the envelope and call this case closed.

That was how it looked to her too. “So gimme it,” she said, when I finished. “I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Promise me you’ll give it to Jimmy?”

That amused her. “Why should I promise you anything? I’m the one with the pistol, remember. You’re just a peeper without enough sense to arm yourself when you come to

Crane Lake.”

I took umbrage at that. I didn't know I was coming to Crane Lake, I explained. I left for Duluth yesterday, and the rest was just following my nose. “Besides, how do you know I'm not packin'?”

“By looking at'cha, that's how. There are enough droppers around here so I know one when I see one.” She tucked the pistol back where it came from, baring a breast again in the process. She caught me looking and smiled, friendlier this time.

We walked out on the dock together. I pulled the envelope out of the carpet bag and handed it to her. She immediately tore it open and began to read.

“Oh, this is rich,” she said. “Listen, you'll get a kick out of it.”

“But I'm not supposed to -

““Dear Frank,”” she read. ““It didn't take long to figure out that it wasn't a real kidnaping. The police took me aside a few days after you disappeared and said they were afraid you'd been grabbed by inexperienced criminals. They deduced that by the paltry demand you made. To be precise, they said the perpetrators were “aiming low.” Of course, the moment I heard that term I thought of you.”” - She laughed out loud. “Know why Frank didn't ask for more? He was afraid he couldn't get that much.”

“You tellin' me Frank Cavanaugh is alive and kickin'?”

She put a finger to her lips. “Listen to the rest.”

It was short and to the point. Arthur said he'd been keeping track of Cavanaugh's “peregrinations” by the marked bills. The fact that he was getting closer to St. Paul worried him.

“You didn’t think things through very well, which doesn’t surprise me,” he wrote. “You had enough to get a good start somewhere else, but you’re essentially a bum, so no line of work suggested itself. You spent the money foolishly, and rather quickly and doing nothing must be damned expensive, given your lack of intellectual curiosity.”

She sighed. “He knows Frank as well as I do, and I’ve been stuck with him for three years.”

The letter ended with a warning. Arthur told him that if he was thinking of showing up again and resuming life with Francine, he should think again. “If you ever show your face here I’ll see to it that you spend the rest of your life in the penitentiary,” he wrote. “I’d have you arrested now, but Francine tells me that you never mistreated her, so I’m willing to call that your one redeeming quality and write the whole thing off. It would break her heart if she knew the truth. Just stay buried. - Arthur.”

She tucked the letter in her pocket. “I gather that Arthur is Frank’s father-in-law, and Francine is that sylph he married,” she said. “She doesn’t know how lucky she is.”

I shook my head in wonderment at the tricks life plays on everybody, especially me. “You don’t have somethin’ to drink, do’ya?” I asked.

“Maybe I do.”

On the way back to the cabin we stopped at the cooler - a pit in the ground with a heavy wooden cover, and a boulder on top of that “to keep the bears out.” She instructed me to roll the boulder off, and took out a crockery jar.

“Home brew,” she said. “I wouldn’t touch it myself, but you’re welcome to it.”

We sat in the kitchen, at a rough-hewn wooden table. She

told me her name was Jeannie Halgren. She grew up near a lake in Minneapolis. “You know, a beach, a boulevard, an ice cream stand. That’s what I thought a lake was.”

I told her about our previous meeting.

“Did I do that?” she said. “I ought’a be ashamed.”

There were books everywhere - on the floor, piled on chairs, a bookcase full of them. She said she read everything she could get her hands on, but especially novels and books about accounting. “There’s nothing else to do,” she explained, “and besides, I’m trying to educate myself so I can make a living when the idyll is over.”

I asked how a nice girl like her got mixed up in a sting.

“I wasn’t mixed up in it,” she protested. “Frank just asked me to run away with him. I figured what the hell, it’s that or another day at Schuneman’s Department Store. I didn’t know about the scheme until we were on the train.”

They’d been to Paris, Miami and New York. She wanted to stay in Paris, but Cavanaugh missed American food. “I’d have stayed in New York too,” she said, “but Frank was already talking about the great fishing on the lake where his pal Jimmy lived, so I knew I was doomed.”

“Was Jimmy in on it?”

“Not really. Frank gave him a few bucks to find a car thief and plant that story.”

I explained that the story was what made things unbearable for Francine, and told her Arthur wanted me to say he’d been shot trying to escape. “He thinks that will help her get over it.” I’d been sipping the home brew right along, but about then I gave up in disgust. “I’m not fussy, but I’d call this stuff undrinkable.”

“Frank and Jimmy don’t even drink it. They use it for

bait.”

“Bait? What are they hunting?”

“Squaws.” She tried to keep a straight face, but she couldn’t. We laughed, and I told her I had to get started if I was going to get back in time to rent a cabin.

“You could stay the night,” she said.

I’d been hoping for that. Nevertheless, I was pretending to give it some careful consideration when she stood and dropped the coveralls. She was wearing a belt around her waist with a pistol tucked into it, nothing else. My jaw must’ve fallen.

“Don’t have a stroke.” She took off the belt and put the pistol on the table. “I’m gonna take a dip in the lake, freshen up a bit. You might wanna do the same.”

Next morning she kissed me goodbye on the dock, and gave me some advice. “Don’t tell the dryad that Frank was shot and dumped in the river. That’s too depressing.” She closed her eyes and thought for a few moments. “Say he was being held by gangsters up at Crane Lake... Tell her that bank robber who comes up here was behind it - what’s his name -

“Dillinger?”

“No, the little psycho who expects’ya to pretend he’s six feet tall.”

“Baby Face Nelson?”

“Yeah, him. Say Frank got away, and Baby Face and his dropper friends looked for him but couldn’t find him. The bears might’ve eaten him - or maybe, just maybe, the Indians are holding him captive.”

That had a gentler ring to it, I had to admit.

She watched me row until I was well underway, then waved once. We’d promised to look each other up in the

nebulous future, but I never saw her again.

I told Arthur the good news first. “You were right,” I said. “A skirt was behind the whole bunko.” Then I explained that I’d given the skirt in question the letter, and before I could object she opened it and read it out loud.

He didn’t pretend to like that. “I knew in my bones Frank was the real culprit,” he said, “but I didn’t contemplate anyone else knowing.”

I told him his secret was safe with me, but he must have had his doubts. That was obvious from the way he stood in the background wringing his hands a few weeks later, when he finally got Francine and me together.

I told her in some detail about Frank’s ordeal. Baby Face kept him tied up at first, but ultimately his charm prevailed, and his bonds were loosened. Soon he was playing cards with his captors, then going fishing with them. One day they put him ashore to pee and he seized the opportunity to take it on the Arthur Duffy. Death by bears is a possibility, I explained, but the bears around there are well fed on berries and fish, and rarely avail themselves of the human alternative.

“The palookas at Crane Lake tend to believe that Frank was captured by Indians,” I said, “and the local people I spoke to are almost certain that’s what happened.”

Her eyes teared up, but I could see the wheels turning behind them. “Thank you so much, Mr. McDonough,” she said. “You’ve been very brave and resourceful.” She offered me her hand, and gave me the tiniest of squeezes.

The following May I was invited to the first of many garden parties. The widow’s “poim” took me by surprise, so I caught most of it. Something about a wild man, “imprisoned by warriors and maids, plotting to return to his sweetheart,

ere her beauty fades.” I’ve stayed out of earshot since, but based on a stray verse or two over the years I believe the wild man is still in the redskin’s cooler, scheming his getaway.

I know why Arthur is apprehensive when we meet. He finds the garden parties just as painful as I do, and wonders why I’d put myself through it year after year unless I had ulterior motives. Next spring I’ll tell him he doesn’t have to worry. I’m not a blackmailer, nor am I the kind of hoocher who gets blotto and does unforgivable things. I come for the same reason he does. I don’t want to disappoint his sweet, guileless daughter.

The End

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