

The Case of the Missing Case

John Henry Carrozza

The Case of the Missing Case

By John Henry Carrozza

Good night for a murder, I thought, as I stared through the smoke of a sagging cigarette into the night from my office window. The fog was thick as mustard, the low clouds hanging like loaves of bread above the tomato-colored neon sign that cried "Eats" into the dark city air, which was cool and crisp as lettuce. Good night for a ham sandwich, I thought, and then I heard a tapping at the door.

I hadn't had a case in weeks, so I assumed the visitor to be my landlord, for whom I had no bread to offer.

"Come in," I beckoned, still facing the city street, collecting my thoughts and letting them go, as if merely breathing the din of a tired city, which I was.

Behind me I heard the door open softly, click itself shut and then the rapping of footsteps across the linoleum of my office floor.

"What can I do for you?" I asked, then drew on a short cigarette.

"The money," said a deep voice.

"I haven't got your money," I replied, letting my hand slip into the pocket of my raincoat (private dicks always wear raincoats), my fingers wrapping quietly about a .38.

"Then I'm afraid I'll have to kill you," the voice said.

I put out the cigarette on the window sill as I blew a ring of smoke and then said coolly, "Over my dead body." I spun around and drew my gun, firing three times into his chest before he could react. Limply, he fell to the ground, his revolver landing on the desk beside a half-empty glass of bourbon. I slid the weapon into my pocket and turned once more to the city lights, pulled out another cigarette, lit it, and drew in a deep breath.

"Yes, are you Mr. Macbeth?"

The cigarette leapt from my mouth and performed a double-somersault with one and a half twists before landing in a puddle beside the leaking radiator and receiving perfect tens from the stapler, a paper clip container and yesterday's Daily News, and an eight point five from an aging paperback copy of Milton's Paradise Lost. The extremely feminine voice took me by such surprise that by the time I knew what I was doing I had recited ten Hail Mary's and was well into the Apostles' Creed.

At last, I turned from a half-open window and greeted a half-open blouse. My eyes moved slowly from the visible space between her breasts to a charming gold necklace bearing a cross and a small gleaming diamond to the base of her slender neck to her pursed, smiling lips to her penetrating blue eyes.

"Mr. Macbeth?" She repeated. "Are you alright?"

"Er, I...um..." I was unable to conjugate the verb 'to be' as emotion overwhelmed me. This dame had the most beautiful earlobes this side of the Galapagos Archipelago. My heart was pounding out the verses to "Love, Love Alone," but in the excitement inserting the chorus from "Oklahoma!"

"I have something for you, and I thought you should have it right away," she said rhythmically - in six-eighths time, with an accent on the fifth beat.

She set a file folder she was carrying onto my desk, but I did not look down. My eyes were transfixed upon hers, and hers were transfixed upon a man juggling imaginary wildebeests across the street. She continued talking, but all of my attention was drawn to her countenance ... or should I say countessence? Eventually she turned to go, her gait to the door resembling an entire samba line, and I realized that I could spend an entire weekend in Geneva with her left thigh, although I imagined I would have a hard time getting through customs.

For several moments after the door snapped shut behind her, and her mottled shadow diminished beyond the wired glass, I stood a gibbering dummy, imagining the wonderful and illegal things we could do together, until my shirt sleeve had been entirely

devoured by the electric pencil sharpener and I awoke with a start, my head pinned to the coffee-stained desk.

Those eyes, I thought...those legs...that face...that...that case!

Suddenly reality returned, like my brother Diablo the time he escaped from prison, only without an iron door handcuffed to its wrist. I had not a clue as to what the siren had said, and now I was responsible for whatever problem she had come to hire me for. I didn't even know how to reach her...or was she to reach me? Wait! I suddenly remembered she had left something with me. I scanned my desk frantically for anything I had not seen before. There was a pen and pencil set with the names Eudora and Stanley Goldberg engraved upon it, but I remembered that it was only a wedding gift I had received by mistake. A pile of folders caught my attention, particularly the one on top which was blue and pink and read "Visit Beautiful Auschwitz - Home of the \$2.50 Broccoli Quiche." An inspection of the folder's contents turned up only the morning's mail, which included three bills and twelve letters from bill collectors. Soon I had searched the entire desk but could not find anything marked "Top Secret" or resembling a case file, except for a collection of clippings I had stolen from the Federal Bureau relating to a fire plug arsonist, which I kept on my desk to make it look as if I were working.

I wanted to cry, but private detectives have a reputation to uphold, so I drained the remainder of a bottle of bourbon instead and smoked a pack of cigarettes - after removing the plastic wrap, of course. Later that night, still feeling dejected, I lifted myself wearily from my rolling chair and dragged myself down the street to Eddie's Bar, which I frequent (some would say constant), pausing only to lean against a flickering streetlamp and sing "The Days of Wine and Roses" before completing the three-block journey to the place the locals call "the joint," and which the tourists call "the place the locals call 'the joint'."

As I sat at the counter, conducting experiments on the effects of global warming on ice flow patterns in my bourbon with a swizzle stick, I was joined by a long-time friend, Bernie Strudel, a

student at New York University for the past ten years whose only accomplishment is an ongoing affair with his ethics professor.

"Mike," he said. Everybody calls me Mike, even though my given name is Bethuma. "You seem bent, frazzled, worn-out, wasted, long in the face, depressed, glum, manic, at sea without an anchor..."

"Bernie," I interrupted. "Yeah, thanks for noticing."

"So, what's the trouble?" he pursued.

"It's this dame," I confessed. "She comes into the office today. Got a body like a rocket. Lays some kind of heavy case on me, first I've had in months, only I'm too busy thinking about what's in her pockets ... and not just her pockets but her purse, and before long I'm into her kitchen cabinets, about to look behind the Quaker Oat Meal, when I realize she's gone and I've got no case, no clue ... not even a name."

"What'd she look like?" my friend asked politely.

"Like a goddess."

"Sounds like Elaine Babettesky, my ethics professor. Only goddess I know. She have a necklace ... gold cross with a diamond on it?"

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"Walks like a samba line?"

"Exactly!"

"That's Elaine alright."

"How do I find her?" I asked excitedly, my mind exploding in heinous thought.

"Well, when classes are out, like they are now, being that it's August, and well, of course there are no classes in August, except for summer school, but she doesn't teach summer school ..."

"Just tell me where she is!" I screamed, attracting the attention of the entire bar, even though there was nobody else in it.

"Alright, calm down. She runs a travel agency on Fifth Street, just down from your office. Same building in fact. Specializes in German concentration camps, although this time of year those tours get booked up pretty quick."

"Of course!" I cried. "That explains the Auschwitz folder!" I could feel my blood boil in anticipation, my toes curl in ecstasy, my lower intestine inviting my spleen over for crepes.

"Wait a second," I suddenly ventured. "If she works in the same building, how come I've never seen her before?"

"Back entrance," Bernie explained, and we finished our drinks joyfully, with much singing and dancing, although after two rounds of pas de deux we were both exhausted and collapsed in a barrel of cheese sticks.

I woke up the next morning with a terrible headache, which prompted me to remove the giant c-clamp from my head. I must have gotten smashed senseless and raided Lupo's Hardware Store, an unfortunate ritual I seem to perform every time I'm smashed senseless. First thing I do, I decided, after I get myself out of this chicken-wire suit, is do some checking up on the bombshell named Elaine and try to figure out what she wanted me to do for her.

I took a cab down to the university, where for twenty bucks the file clerk let me have a look at Miss Babettesky's resume, and for another twenty he let me open it up and read it.

"Mind if I borrow this for a couple of days?" I asked the seedy clerk, tormenting him psychologically with my eyebrows (a trick I learned from Freud's book Oedipus, Eyebrows, and You).

"Sure," he replied casually, then added schemingly: "But it'll cost you."

"Yeah, well how about this," I offered. "You let me walk out of here with the dossier and I don't let your boss know how much I had to pay to get a look at it."

He winced. "Alright," he gave in, and I left with the folder. I was glad he saw my line of reasoning. I had a revolver in my pocket, and I sure would have hated to use it. Especially in that suit.

Bernie had given me the name of Elaine's boyfriend, Alan Alda (just a coincidence). He worked construction on the lower east side, near the docks. When I got there, the foreman said I could talk him for twenty bucks. For twenty more, he said, I could even

take him to dinner and a movie; but I declined, as there was nothing decent showing.

Alan was a scrawny man - well-groomed, wore glasses, and had a class ring from Princeton. Not the kind of guy I expected to find wearing a hard hat and a tool belt. When I learned that his job was to catch falling rivets in a bucket of sand I became more at ease.

"So you and Elaine are pretty close, huh?" I asked between puffs on a Lucky Strike.

"Yeah," he confessed. "Once she even let me see her without her glasses on."

"She wears glasses?"

"What?!" He scoffed. "That two timing..."

"Look here," I cautioned. "It's not what you think, see. I'm a private detective."

"Oh yeah?"

"Do you mind answering a few questions for me?"

"Sure," he said. "But it'll cost you."

"Now hold on, see. I just gave my last twenty to the foreman."

"Well then I'm afraid I can't help you." He turned to go.

"Hold on," I called after him. "Do you take a credit card?"

"American Express."

"How about Diner's Club?"

"It'll do." He pulled a stamp machine and a carbon from his belt, and after I had my receipt, we got down to business.

"What's her favorite movie?"

"The Sorrow and the Pity."

"She ever have an allergic reaction to chives?"

"No."

"How about her mother or father?"

"Yeah. She does get a runny nose whenever her mother calls."

"Does she play backgammon often?"

"From time to time."

"She any good?"

"She's better at parchesi."

"Does she have any pets?"

"Yes, an anteater named Hitler."

"Hitler?"

"No, I don't believe he had any pets."

"I see. Where was she on the night of October 25th, 1963?"

"I don't know."

"1964?"

"I don't know." He began sweating about the brow. I could see that I was finally breaking him.

"Who does her laundry?"

"I don't know." His eyes began darting about nervously.

"What's the capital of Paraguay?"

"I don't know!" He screamed, falling to his knees.

"Please, I'm telling you everything I know! I'm begging you!"

The poor man was unravelled. I had gotten almost all of the information I needed.

"Just one more thing," I said, and his eyes begged for mercy. "Are you a Presbyterian?"

He froze for an instant. "How...how did you know?"

"Nevermind," I said, grabbing him by the arm. "I'm taking you in for the murder of Rabbi Samuel Bekenstein."

"What!" he shrieked. "No, it wasn't me! I swear it wasn't me. I was in the sauna. It was Johnson. Johnson said he would take care of it! I didn't kill anybody!"

"Johnson, eh?" I let him go suddenly, falling to the ground. "Just as I suspected," I said as I stood up and dusted off my coat. It was a risky ploy, teasing him with the backgammon question, but it paid off.

Later that evening I was sitting behind my desk throwing darts at my toes (fortunately, I am a very poor shot), when there came a knock at the door.

"Come in," I beckoned, hoping he would take the bait. He did...hook, line and sinker.

The door opened and in stepped a shadowy figure.

"You must be Mr. Johnson," I said. "I've been expecting you."

"Johnson N. Johnson's the name," he said in a deep, raspy voice. "What can I do for you?"

"Have a seat," I said. "I'm also expecting somebody else. Care for a cigarette?"

"No thanks," he said, sitting down uneasily in a leather armchair, one of a pair I found at an auction house on twenty-first street. They had supposedly belonged to Mussolini's cousin Terrance, who won them in a raffle. They were thought to have perished in a house fire that took the life of his French maid, Bridgette, but it is now believed she sacrificed her life to save the chairs, owing to an apron string melted to one of the pillows.

"How about a drink," I pursued. "Bourbon? Water? Bourbon-water?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Would you like to dance?"

"No, thanks. I'm trying to quit."

"Good for you. I've been trying to quit for years. It's just that every time I get nervous, I have to break into a waltz."

Just then came another knock at the door.

"Come in," I offered again, toying with the odds that the same ploy would work twice.

The door opened and Miss Babettesky sambaed into the room, then stopped abruptly when she saw the figure seated to her right.

"Johnson?" She queried.

"Babettesky?" The man stood suddenly, taken aback. "I thought you were dead," he muttered.

"I thought you were a German Shepherd," Elaine replied.

"I got over it."

"So did I."

I interrupted. "Now look here, kids. I know you're both wondering why you're here, so let me explain."

They both stared at me as if I were that machine down at the plaza that clucks and lays an egg for a quarter. The difference is I charge fifty cents.

"Have a seat," I offered them both.

Johnson obliged, but Elaine was stubborn.

"I'd rather stand," she said.

"Look sweetheart, this may take a while," I informed her.

"In that case I really should take a shower and have my hair done."

The thought of her having her hair done temporarily blurred my vision, but I regained control quickly.

"Please, sweetheart," I said. "Sit down." She did.

"You see, I'm afraid you picked the wrong dick to work on your case, Miss Babettesky."

"What case?" She asked innocently.

"It's too late for that now, sweetheart. You see, I know who really killed Baron Howzschevitz, and it wasn't your brother Lenny, as you expected me to believe."

"What are you talking about? Who's Lenny? Who's Baron Howzschevitz?"

"Don't play dumb with me Elaine. Or should I say...Helga."

"What?"

"Helga Meinkampf, I believe. Your first mistake was the Auschwitz brochure you mistakenly left on my desk, instead of the dossier on Howard Lemke, which I was to have traced to the library on Baker Avenue, who's librarian once charged your brother two dollars for a twenty-cent late fee."

"What are you talking about?" the dame blurted out.

"That was only your mail that was delivered downstairs by mistake."

"Try explaining that to Mr. Johnson here, sweetheart. Or should I say...Dr. Donnis V. Oberfield of Lisbon Cryogenics and Frozen Dinners, Inc."

"What?!" Johnson screamed. "This is an outrage!"

"Sit down Dr. Oberfield. Or should I say ... Mrs. Viola Hammerstein."

At that the man began crying. "It was a setup," he wailed. "Honest. I don't even own a bicycle pump."

"You're insane!" the dame shouted.

"Am I?" I asked pointedly. "What about the box of raisinettes?"

"No!"

"That's right Miss Meinkampf. Or should I say ... Imogene Carnepesci, Italian ice broker and professional hockey player."

"That's a lie!" she wailed. "It was only a summer league!"

The room became silent for several long moments, and as the two sat in matching chairs, sobbing quietly, I began my story.

"You see, I used to play cards with a guy named Lucky Luke. They called him Lucky because he had never been struck by lightning more than once while wearing women's underwear. His mother passed away when he was twelve, and then again when he was thirty-eight, for tax purposes. She kept a scrapbook in high school, and one photo is of her and some friends at a skating rink in Jersey playing canasta for stakes. Before the depression they played for steaks and gravy, but that's another story. Anyway, you see, one of the dames in the picture goes on to become a dancer at Lincoln Center, only she was arrested for doing a fox-trot before the season opened. But this guy bails her out, you see, as a favor to her father, who once lent him change for cigarettes at a diner in Southridge. The guy turns out to be Horace Leedy, a banker turned shoplifter who lives in Queens. What he didn't know was that his cousin was actually the Queen of England in the eighteenth century. As fate would have it, he never found out, and eventually was shot by the manager of a seven-eleven for trying to smuggle out a pack of sliced ham by dropping it and then pretending to kick it accidentally as he tried to pick it up, all the way out the door. The same trick once worked with a '78 Oldsmobile Cutlass, so he figured what the hell. Ironically, the store manager turned out to be the same guy who ran

the Oldsmobile lot, and he would be damned if he'd fall for the same trick twice."

"So, what has this got to do with us?" Johnson interrupted.

"Well, you see, there was a mutual friend named Bertrand Pearlman, a shoe salesman with a rash. He believed in two things: that there was a God, and that there was no God - both because of his wife Helen, who after making love exquisitely would always lash him with a wet herring and yodel 'I Gotta Be Me.' One day he was on his way downtown to have his hat blocked when he was kidnapped by a group of thugs who worked for Leo Capone, a blacksheep brother of Al, who wanted to be a gangster all his life until he discovered that you had to steal and shoot people, so he became a violinist instead. Meanwhile, in London, you, Miss Carnepesci, hit Miss Chartreuse with the candlestick in the conservatory."

The dame gasped.

"And you, Mrs. Hammerstein, waited with the getaway car."

Elaine stood up and produced a machine gun from between her breasts.

"That's all very clever, Mr. Macbeth," she said, pointing the gun at my face. "But you forgot one thing."

Now it was my turn to be at a loss.

"It's true the silverware set was missing a ladle, but did you actually measure the drapes?"

I froze, suddenly realizing the mistake I had made. "So Kierkegard was right." I said. "The eggnog *was* pasteurized in France."

"You catch on fast."

"So, it wasn't you in the basement at Lucci's after all, but Dominic. And the imported tie clip..."

"Vinnies."

"Then that means it was actually Johnson who killed Baron Howzschevitz, not at his home in Paddington, but at the theater in Minsk."

I glanced in Johnson's direction and Elaine turned as well, to find the man holding a .45, his face now in shadow.

"So, you figured it out," he said.

"Johnson?" Elaine questioned. "It was you?"

"Guess again sweetheart," he said, and suddenly reached up and pulled a rubber mask from his face, revealing a goldfinch perched in a tiny chair with a remote control.

"Goldy!" the woman screamed, and suddenly the place was ablaze with gunfire as both parties took aim upon each other.

When the smoke finally cleared away, I crept from beneath my desk to find Elaine's body in a tossed, bloody heap beside one chair, the bird expended beside the other. Too bad, I thought. The dame had the markings of a great secondary character. And I had never even seen her wearing her glasses.

I walked past my desk and opened the window, breathing in the din of a tired city. Good night for a murder, I thought as I lit a cigarette. A man across the street was juggling imaginary loaves of french bread, and I suddenly had the craving for a ham sandwich.