

Once Upon a Time



An Inspector Green Mystery

Barbara Fradkin

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RENDEZVOUS
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This is a work of fiction, and although all the locales in the Ottawa and the Ottawa Valley exist, the people and events are the invention of the author and any resemblance to actual people is purely coincidental. The events concerning Occupied Europe, however, are all based on truth.

September 2nd, 1939

*I hear her footsteps on the mossy riverbank
 See the sun-flamed red of her hair
 As it swoops in rhythm to her run.
 She tilts her head, shields her eyes.
 But still I hide, drunk with hope and disbelief.
 She has come to me, my rebel princess.
 Slipped the sentinel gaze of the village,
 huddled in its uneasy rest.
 Run across the cornfields behind the mill
 And out to meet her poet.
 Nothing to offer her but words spun into shimmering webs,
 to catch her lofty dreams.
 She spots me then and smiles,
 And I open up my arms.*

After fifteen minutes of waiting, the old man pulled the sweaty tuque off his head and scowled at the snow through the window. His long plaid scarf pricked his neck, adding to his annoyance. He could see little through the pale wintery light in the room, but he could hear his wife thumping around in her bedroom upstairs. Drawers opened and closed.

What the hell was the woman doing up there! He felt a surge of alarm as he remembered the letter. How stupid of him to leave it in his desk drawer. He should have burned it as soon as he got it. When they got back home tonight, he would. Once today's ordeal was over.

He looked around the room at the refuge he had sought to create. A modest parlour with a crumbling brick fireplace, a scratched piano and shelves haphazardly stacked with books. All he had ever wanted was this little cottage in the country, his pipe, his whiskey and an armchair by the fire. In his retirement cottage, he had told his wife. Far from cruel strangers and prying eyes, from a past that still lurked in his head.

Yet in the end he had not escaped. He leaned back in the armchair and willed away the sudden tears that filled his eyes. She would see them—nothing escaped her—and she would fuss. Not overtly, for she knew better, but quietly, fluttering around the kitchen to make him tea, watching him with silent questioning eyes. And now, because of that monstrous letter, how long before she knew?

A final thud roused him, and he looked up to see her descend the stairs, pulling a pair of thick woollen gloves over her gnarled hands. She frowned at him as she came across the room, picked up his tuque from the window ledge and pulled it firmly back down on his head.

"I'll get the car and pick you up out front," she said.

He heard the thump of her cane as she shuffled through the kitchen and pushed open the screen door against the thick snow on the porch. He glanced at his watch impatiently. Of all days for snow! She

take forever crossing the yard, so scared she'll fall and break something again. And then she won't be able to start the car.

He heard the shriek of the shed door, the thud of the car door, and finally the screech of the ignition. He cursed her aloud. Too heavy handed, no feel for an engine. But then he heard a hoarse, reluctant cough as the old Dodge came to life, and he hauled himself to his feet.

Outside, he squinted against the stinging snow as he watched her inch the car across the yard. She will think it's too cold for me to stay in the car. She'll want me to go into the clinic with her and wait in a room full of creaky old women. More complications.

He surveyed the white fields in silence as they drove down the long lane to the highway. They were going to be late, perhaps too late. But once they were on the highway, the driving was good. The roads were salted a glistening black, and the trip to Ottawa took only two hours, even at her cautious seven kilometres an hour. The windshield wipers beat a steady rhythm against the snow, and he stared out the window at the passing farms, his thoughts lost in winters long ago. Wondering, worrying...

"If I'm through in time," she said, "we'll drop by Margaret's for early tea."

Her intrusion into his thoughts startled him. "We just saw her on the weekend."

"But they're on our way home, and she's expecting us."

"I want to get back," he replied peevishly. He felt her eyes upon him with their questions, but thankfully she said nothing.

It was eleven-thirty when she pulled into the parking lot at the hospital, and the wind whipped the snow about. He made no move, and when she turned to him questioningly, he said, "I'll wait here."

"But it's cold outside today. And I'm not sure how long I'll be."

"Leave me the keys. I'll start the car if I have to."

She seemed about to argue, so he closed his eyes and feigned fatigue. A moment later the door opened, and he felt a frigid blast of air. Halfway out, she paused, hunched against the swirling snow, and turned to him.

"Get out, woman!"

Pressing her lips shut, she pulled herself out and slammed the door. He watched her battle the drift with her cane as she crept across the road to the clinic door, then he reached inside his duffel coat for his small flask. With a grunt of pleasure he brought the flask to his lips and took a long swallow. Maybe that will keep trouble away, he thought, and glanced at his watch. 11:37. He peered out through the frosted front windshield. Nothing moved. Not a car, not a solitary soul. He'd never put much stock in hope, but he allowed a faint stirring of it as he settled down to wait.

* * *

When the call came in to Major Crimes, Ottawa Police, Inspector Michael Green had been in his office battling paperwork for over four hours, and his mind was mush. The time was 1:43 p.m. He heard the phone ring on Sergeant Brian Sullivan's desk, heard a brief exchange of words, and the Sullivan's brisk trademark: "On my way."

Green waited three minutes to allow Sullivan to check in with the Staff Sergeant—no point treading on too many toes—then headed out of his office, hoping for a casual interception. But the squad room was empty. Sullivan's desk was locked, and his duffel coat was gone from its peg. Damn.

Restlessly, Green wandered down the hall to the coffee machine and returned with his fifth cup of

pallid fluid. He left the door to his little alcove office ajar, inviting someone to interrupt him as he returned to his monthly report.

Some time later, his phone rang, and he pounced on it, hoping it was Sullivan asking for his help. Chief Superintendent Jules, head of Criminal Investigations, saying a call had just come in on a multiple homicide in Rockcliffe Park. Not even that. He'd settle for a wino who had rolled into the Rideau Canal.

But it was his wife Sharon, who had a day off from the hospital. She sounded cheerful, and in the background he could hear his infant son babbling excitedly.

"I just wanted to warn you the roads are really slippery, honey. And the driveway has six inches of fresh, fluffy snow on it. Pristine and untouched. To celebrate our first snowfall in our new house, I bought you a shovel at Canadian Tire."

Ah, the joys of home ownership, he thought. My very own stretch of asphalt from the street to the Dreaded Vinyl Cube in the cow pastures of Barrhaven. He could almost see the twinkle in her eye, but at this point even shovelling would be a welcome relief. "Don't worry, I'm coming home early tonight. Maybe even five o'clock."

There was silence on her end of the line, followed by a chuckle. "Five o'clock? Inspector Green coming home at five o'clock?"

"We're having a temporary lull in murders in this town. It's too damn cold even for the crooks. I'm doing nothing but supervision and paperwork."

"Paperwork!" He could hear her astonishment. "Boy, you must really be desperate. Next thing you know, you'll be inventing a murder!"

He was still laughing when he hung up, but the smile faded quickly at the sight before him. Piles and piles of jumbled phone messages, computer print-outs and unread articles. He had not joined the force to push paper, but in the past couple of years, he'd felt himself being edged farther and farther from the streets and into committee rooms. He was drowning in paperwork and its electronic cousin e-mail. At the click of a mouse, minutes of meetings and drafts of endless policies could be sent whizzing off to every middle manager on the force, whether they wanted to read them or needed to know them. All to prove how important and busy the sender was.

The Chief of Detectives, Adam Jules, knew better than to expect Green to respond in kind, but Green's job as administrator required some minimal output of paper. Annual reports were nearing, and the new Police Chief liked neat arrays of statistics to take to City Hall. He liked stats such as types of crimes reported, solvency rates, crimes by district, etc. To Green, homicide investigation was the cream of police work, as well as the only work he was good at, but to Chief Shea it was a mere footnote in his vast law enforcement vision. Fortunately, the press and the public loved homicide, which was why Jules forgave Green his abysmal administrative skills. Seeing his potential fifteen years ago, Jules had yanked Green off the streets, where he'd been mediocre at best, and into criminal investigations, where his tenacious drive and intuitive intelligence had given him one of the highest solution rates on the force.

But that was before amalgamation with the outlying forces had turned a tightly-knit, street level police force into a lumbering bureaucracy, and himself into little more than a cog. He sighed. How long since he'd been out on a call?

Some time later, his phone rang again, but this time it was Jules' clerk, wondering when she might expect his report. She had a gaping hole in her computer screen where his Major Crime statistics were

supposed to fit. He toyed with suggesting that she make up whatever she wanted, provided it made him look good, but decided against it. Jules' clerk was very young and pretty, but she had absolutely no sense of humour. Choosing the wiser course, he mumbled vague promises and hung up—just in time to see Brian Sullivan emerge from the elevator and stride to his desk, shedding his heavy duffel coat. His face was ruddy from the cold. Casually, Green drifted over.

Despite the difference in their ranks, he and Sullivan had been friends for over twenty years, ever since they'd been rookies together on the streets, and there were many times Green longed to trade places with him, so that he could roam the streets again while Sullivan sat on committees tossing around words like "vision" and "strategic plan."

"So, how's it going?" Green asked.

Sullivan looked up from the notebook he had just opened. "It's a bitch out there. Crazy for November. What will it be like by January?"

"Tropical. You know this country, we wouldn't want to be boring." Green sat on the edge of Sullivan's desk. "What was the call?"

Sullivan shrugged and scribbled a few notes absently. "Oh, nothing much. An old man was found frozen to death in the parking lot at the Civic hospital. I went out to the scene, talked to the parking lot attendant and the man's family, but it looks like natural causes. I was just going to write it up, pending MacPhail's report."

"What does MacPhail say?"

"There were no real signs of violence, so one of the regular coroners attended the scene. But MacPhail will do the autopsy tomorrow."

"What do you mean 'no *real* signs'?"

"He has a small gash on his forehead. But not enough to knock him out, let alone kill him. This was a big guy. He was old, but he must have been quite something in his youth, and even today it would take a lot to knock him down."

"What did the family say? Where did he get the gash?"

"They don't know. But he probably got it as he fell. The wife said he'd been sick for months. Short of breath, lousy colour. She'd been trying to get him to see her GP."

"All the same, did you check motives?"

A scowl flitted across Sullivan's face as he turned to Green. Standing, he was at least five inches taller and almost twice as broad. His linebacker physique had expanded to hang slightly over his belt and high blood pressure was just beginning to mottle his handsome face. "How long since I made detective, Green? Twelve years? You think I don't cover the bases? The guy had no enemies and no money to brag about. But he was a drunk, it was written all over him. He probably stepped out of the car, passed out and never knew what hit him. End of story."

"End of an old man, too."

"I know that. I'm just reporting the facts, I'm not passing judgment." Sullivan's scowl softened. "It's fifteen below out there today. You know better than anybody what that kind of cold can do to someone with heart disease. He might have gone outside, taken a deep breath and dropped like a stone. I'm telling you there's nothing here. This is just another sick old drunk whose number finally came up."

Maybe so, thought Green. Disembowelled dead bodies were not his favourite part of a murder

investigation, but by tomorrow morning, when the autopsy was scheduled, he might be in need of a small break from his paperwork

* * *

Dr. Alexander MacPhail was a tall, rangy Scot with a shock of wild grey hair atop a long, pockmarked face. He grinned as he pulled off a pair of surgical gloves, tossed them into a bin nearby and clapped Green on the shoulder. His rich Scottish brogue boomed in the empty basement hall of the hospital.

“Hello, there, laddie! I haven’t seen you in a while. How’s the air up there in the upper echelons these days?”

“Stifling.”

“Aye, hot air tends to be.” The pathologist cast him a mischievous glance. “So would you just be down here for the fun of watching me work, or would you be wanting something?”

Green grinned. “You know what I think about your work.”

“A dirty job, but someone has to do it.”

“I’m just curious about the old man in the Civic parking lot yesterday. Any information on him yet?”

MacPhail gestured to the closed door marked MORGUE but painted an unlikely lime green. “Do you want to come in and meet him? I’ve just sewn him back up.”

“No thanks.” Green hoped he didn’t sound too hasty. “What does it look like?”

“Well...actual cause of death was hypothermia. But the old bugger had a whole book full of medical problems. Chronic hypertension, arteriosclerosis in both coronary and cerebral arteries, cirrhosis of the liver, some atrophy to the brain. Any one of his parts could have failed him temporarily at that moment.”

“What about the contusion? Brian said he had a gash on his forehead.”

MacPhail chuckled. “Sorry to disappoint you, laddie, but it wasn’t enough to kill him. Stun him perhaps. He could have slipped in the snow and struck his head. In a man his age, that might have been enough to disorient him. He may have lain there resting, not even aware he was cold.”

“Was it a fresh wound, then?”

“Inflicted shortly before death, yes.”

“What kind of instrument? Sharp, blunt, big, small?”

“A smooth, rounded object about an inch wide.” MacPhail used his hands to demonstrate the size and shape. “Not much bleeding, and it didn’t get any chance to swell before he landed face down in the snow.”

“Is it consistent with someone trying to strike him?”

The pathologist’s eyes twinkled. “More consistent with hitting his head against a hard object—probably the car mirror—as he was falling.”

Curiosity outweighed his distaste. Bracing himself, Green nodded towards the morgue door. “Can I see him?”

The morgue was a brightly lit room painted the same incongruous chartreuse as the door and filled with huge stainless steel receptacles. MacPhail had the consideration to pull a sheet over the body, but Green could tell from the contours of the sheet that the man had been big, probably once muscular.

MacPhail had replaced the cranium expertly, but the face was mottled red and white. It was a large beefy face topped by thinning strands of white-blond hair. Glazed in death, the eyes were a pallid brown run through with red. Green focussed on the gash on his forehead.

“Strange shape for a car mirror.”

“Car mirrors come in all shapes. Laddie, trust me. This one is a natural causes.”

Probably, Green acknowledged, but he'd seen enough blunt instrument traumas in his career to feel a twinge of doubt.

* * *

It wasn't much to mark the passing of a life—a name, age, address and next of kin. Eugene Walker was eighty. Home was a rural route number in the rolling farmlands of the Ottawa Valley between Renfrew and Eganville, about a hundred kilometres west of Ottawa. But MacPhail's notes indicated that until the funeral, his widow was staying at her daughter Margaret's home here in the city.

Even when he pulled up to Margaret Reid's elegant westend home, Green wasn't sure exactly what he was looking for. Three cars stood in the double drive—an aging Dodge, a small hatchback and a shiny silver BMW. He extracted his police badge and held it in readiness, but even so, the look of surprise was blatant on the face of the man who answered the door. Green suppressed a smile. He was never tired of that look, which reassured him that he was not growing staid and inspectorish. He was forty-one years old, but because of his light build, his youthful face, and the fine spray of freckles across his nose, he looked barely thirty. His baggy trousers and navy blue parka gave more the impression of a city postman than a high-ranking police investigator. Green had learned to cultivate this lack of physical presence. Like a good spy, it allowed him to move and observe unseen.

Still, at times he would have appreciated a more authoritative bearing. As now, when grieving relatives needed someone to lean on, although the relative standing before him did not appear about to crumple into his arms. The man looked in his mid forties, dark-haired and probably handsome at one time, but now baggy-eyed and gone to seed. His eyes were slightly bloodshot, but that was his only concession to grief. He frowned as if Green were a pesky vacuum salesman interrupting his busy day.

Green introduced himself briskly, apologized for the intrusion and asked to see Ruth Walker.

“Is this really necessary, Inspector? She's resting, and she already spoke to a police officer yesterday.”

“Yes, Sergeant Sullivan. I'm just following up. Your name is?”

“What's this for? The old man had a heart attack, he's dead. It was quick and painless. What else is there to know?”

“Routine. Are you Donald Reid, his son-in-law?”

“I don't see why you need to know, but yes.” He blinked several times. When Green continued to stand in the doorway, he stepped back with a scowl.

“Very well. Come in.”

Mrs. Walker took about five minutes to come downstairs, and in the meantime Green absorbed impressions about the house. It was a quiet house, not just hushed in grief, but constrained. Everything had its place. The living room was furnished in expensive woods, testimony to the family's material success. Colour-coordinated watercolours adorned the walls, and china figurines sat on the mahogany table tops. Not a room for children, Green thought, although he had glimpsed a flash of teenage boy

in the kitchen as he passed by.

When Mrs. Walker entered, she was leaning on a younger woman whom Green assumed to be her daughter. Dressed in red slacks and a red and white striped sweater, with not a strand of her cropped black hair out of place, Margaret Reid was the image of her living room. She perched emotionless on the edge of her chair.

Her mother, on the other hand, wore an old beige cardigan and ill-fitting tweed skirt. Her hair billowed in a cloud of grey curls, and her face was blotched with tears. Green had expected a broad heavy farmer's face, but Mrs. Walker was delicately boned, with deep-set blue eyes and a finely pointed chin.

"How do you do, Inspector? I'm Ruth Walker. How may I help you?"

Green was not an authority on British accents, but he had watched enough *Masterpiece Theatre* productions to recognize this one as rich, precise and public school. The tilt of her head and the grace with which she extended her hand made him feel shabby. He drew out his notebook and summoned a modicum of the dignity his cheap parka permitted.

"First of all, let me extend my condolences on the death of your husband. The way he died so unexpectedly must have been a shock."

She eased herself stiffly into a heavy velvet chair opposite him. Her blue eyes held his, but her thoughts they moistened.

"Yes, it was. Although I suppose I ought to have seen it coming. I've known for some time his health wasn't well."

"In what way? Dizzy spells?"

"Not exactly. More shortness of breath."

"Had he ever fallen before?"

She hesitated, and in her instant of discomfiture, the surly son-in-law snorted. "Lots of times. He always had one bruise or another. It means nothing, detective."

Green kept his eyes on the widow. "Had he seen a doctor recently?"

Ruth looked across the coffee table at him. Through the veil of grief, he saw a faint smile. "Oh, he didn't take Eugene anywhere. If he chose to go, that was fine. But he didn't choose to."

"Why?"

"I expect because he didn't want to hear the bad news. He was from the old country, Inspector. They're rather more fatalistic than you are over here. When it's time, it's time. No use fighting it with pills and machines."

"Do you think he was depressed?"

"No, not exactly depressed. I mean, he was ready to go. I think he had..." A spasm crossed her face but disappeared before he could analyze it. "...made his peace."

"Almost as if he were waiting for death?"

Her eyes fixed his intently. "Exactly. It was always Eugene's dream to retire to the country, and once he did, he rarely left the house. He spent most of his day in his chair, just looking out the window."

He smiled. "Dreaming about Trafalgar Square, probably. Or his favourite country pub."

Out of the corner of his eye, Green saw Margaret open her mouth, but Ruth shot her a quick glance.

which silenced her. “Eugene liked to say that his life began when he came to Canada,” Ruth said. “And that happened before was best put behind us. He never talked about it.”

It jarred with the picture Green had begun to paint. He thought of his own father, who also spent his days sitting in a chair, but who had his own reasons for not wanting to relive the past. Green wondered what Walker’s reasons were, and if Ruth’s glance at Margaret had been meant to silence her. “Odd,” he mused casually. “Most elderly people love to reminisce. Sometimes the old days are all they talk about, especially if, like your husband, they have little else they can do now but sit in a chair.”

She didn’t rise to the bait. “Yes, a disheartening way for a strong, proud man to spend his last days

There was a quiet finality to her words, as if she were closing the door. Respecting that, he moved on. “Can you run through what happened yesterday?”

At this point the surly son-in-law, who had subsided in the corner, re-entered the fray. “Inspector, really don’t see the point in this. Ruth, you don’t need to put yourself through this.”

“I don’t mind, Don. He has a job to do.”

Green admired her quiet dignity. With barely a quiver, she recounted the events of yesterday from their departure to her discovery of the body at one o’clock. Only when she described the sight of him did she falter, pressing her fingers to her lips. Green sensed Don beginning to rise, and he held up a warning hand.

“Where was he in relation to the car?”

“I’m not sure. He—” She broke off, her hands fluttering up to her face at the memory. “He...he was lying alongside the car, his head towards the front wheel, I think.”

In perfect position beneath the side mirror, he thought. “Driver’s side?”

“Oh, no, passenger’s side. Eugene hadn’t driven in years.”

“I’d like to look at the car. Is it one of the cars outside?”

“Yes, Don fetched it.” She turned. “Don, could you...?”

Seeming relieved to be rid of him, Don led Green outside to the Dodge Aries. Despite its age, there was little rust, but mud coated its sides. Salt stains from the recent drive into the city formed an irregular splatter pattern over the mud, but there were no unusual marks on the passenger side of the car. Nor were there any protruding edges; even the door handles were recessed.

But even more importantly, because it was such an old car, it had no mirror on the passenger side.

September 2nd, 1939

*The sun is sinking, soon the village will stir.
 She curls in the nook of my arm,
 her hips soft against mine,
 And her skin like silk beneath my touch.
 Copper tassels of cornfield dance in the sunset
 And a breeze ripples the birches overhead.
 Far off I hear muffled thuds,
 catch a glint of silver in the sky.
 Then a plume of smoke, a second, a third.
 She lifts her head. "Our village?"
 No, what would they want with our village?*

"I don't remember nothing about no fucking cars, man!

That was the worst day of my life! I remember the body— fuck, I'll never forget the body. Worst nightmare you could ever have, finding a stiff in your own lot. I was so freaked, I don't remember nothing else."

Green's small mid-morning break had now extended into his lunch hour, and he knew the clock was ticking on his freedom. He had traced the parking lot attendant to a small clapboard shanty on a narrow, crowded back street of Mechanicsville. The young man had called in sick to recover from the upset of yesterday, and he ushered Green into the dingy living room, kicking newspapers and clothes aside to make a passage. The sweet odour of marijuana clung in the air. He gave a nervous whinny.

"It's my brother's place. I'm just staying here till I can get my own."

It took some coaxing, and a small shot of the whiskey Green found on the counter, to get Chad Leroux to retrieve his scattered memories. The young man rocked back and forth on the couch smoking incessantly and talking in staccato bursts.

"I was checking a couple of cars. Out, like. It was fucking cold, booth's got no heater. Had my hood on my parka up, so I couldn't see shit. This guy in the car—he pointed out the old lady to me."

"Was the lot busy?"

Chad shook his head vigorously. "Most days noon is really busy, but nobody was going out there, didn't have to. 'Cause of the storm, you know? The lot was plowed, but it was still tricky."

"Was it slippery?"

"Was it ever! And you never knew where, with the snow on top. I saw one poor old guy with a car go right down on his ass earlier."

One more point for MacPhail's theory, Green thought ruefully as he invited Chad to continue.

"That's all! The guy in the car says 'Something's wrong with that lady over there'. I turn around, see her way down near the end of the lot, waving her arms all about and screaming 'my husband, m

husband', and—" Chad broke off, sucking in cigarette smoke to ward off the panic. "Fuck, I never d like bodies."

"No one does," Green muttered drily. "Were there other cars near hers? Can you describe them?"

Chad rolled his eyes and blew smoke out his nose. "Who the fuck noticed!"

Green leaned forward, his eyes fixed on Chad's. "It's important. Concentrate! Picture yourself back there in the snow, the old woman screaming—"

Chad's head whipped back and forth. "I can't, man! I don't remember nothing! I know I should have noticed stuff like that, but I just thought 'Shit, the guy's croaked! And maybe somebody's going to blame me!'"

"Nobody's blaming you, Chad," Green soothed. "It's quite normal to forget everything else, but it's there, somewhere in your mind. I want you to lean back on the couch and shut your eyes." Green waited until the young man was ready, then dropped his voice. "Take three deep, slow breaths. Now I want you to picture yourself in the parking lot. It's cold, the wind is blowing in your face. You're walking through the snow, the old lady is up ahead screaming at you... Are you there?"

Chad had closed his eyes dutifully, but his body twitched, and his breathing was erratic. It took a few moments of further coaxing to get him properly focussed on the cars nearby.

"There's mostly empty spaces." Chad wet his lips. "But right next to her, there's one—no, two cars."

"Good. Can you describe the car right beside hers?"

"Medium sized. It's dark—maybe dark blue or charcoal grey, maybe even black. Sedan, four-door type. Nice and shiny."

"All right, concentrate on it. Describe anything—make, licence—anything."

Chad tried to oblige. His eyelids fluttered as he searched the invisible scene. "It was like the shape of the Aries, only newer. Like a Lumina or one of them GM family cars, but fancy. Buick LeSabre maybe? Tinted windows."

"Okay, that's great, you can open your eyes."

Chad sat forward, eyes alight. "Hey, that's something! It really works. Did you—like—hypnotize me?"

Green smiled. "Nothing that exotic. I just helped you eliminate the distractions." He stood up, and Chad followed him with obvious relief. "Tell me, Chad, do some of the vehicles park in the lot on a regular basis?"

Chad looked blank for a moment, trying to translate. "You mean every day like? Oh, sure. Doctor's offices, nurses and them. They use the lot, pay by the month."

"And do they have their favourite spots?"

"Some of them."

It was a slim hope, but a hope nonetheless, Green thought as he headed towards the Civic Hospital. Maybe in the parking lot he would find the dark, shiny sedan which had parked next to Walker's car the day of his death. And against which Walker must have smashed his head as he fell to the ground.

But ten minutes later he found himself in the parking lot amid endless rows of dark, shiny new sedans. The attendant on duty walked him down to the end of the lot and showed him where the body had been found. The whole area had been so trampled that it was useless as a crime scene, and there were no cars parked in the immediate vicinity and no dark sedans within fifty feet. Nonetheless

mainly to impress the parking attendant who hovered nearby, he crouched in the snow and sifted through it with his fingers. It told him nothing.

This is pointless, Green. The old guy hit his head on something, stunned himself and froze to death. You've wasted enough of the department's time. There is no mystery here. *Nada, bopkes*, zip. What was it Sharon had said? Invent a murder?

The breath of freedom is over, Inspector. Your paperwork awaits.

* * *

Reluctantly, Green headed back towards the office. No fresh snow had fallen since the day before, but the temperature had stayed low, and the snow showed no inclination to melt. Ottawa's efficient snowplow trucks had cleared the main streets, but the sidewalks and small roads were still rutted with ice. That, and a rash of fender benders caused by hotshots who'd forgotten how to drive in the winter, had slowed traffic to a crawl. Slipping in a CD of soft rock, Green let his mind drift over the case. Something puzzled him, not so much about the manner of the old man's death as about the reclusive old man himself. And about his widow, a gracious, elegant lady who Green suspected had put up with a good deal.

It made a small, poignant tale of a marriage, compelling from a human interest standpoint, but, he acknowledged grudgingly as he pulled into the station parking lot, from a major crimes standpoint, it was not much to get excited about.

Back behind his desk, he turned on his computer and obediently settled down to his report. After an eternity, his phone rang. It was Sharon. He glanced at his watch instinctively, but it was barely four o'clock. Time crawled when you were having fun.

"I'm leaving in half an hour," he promised.

She chuckled. "I don't think I can stand this new suburban you. And actually, I think you should swing by the synagogue and take your Dad home first before you come home."

"Dad?" His mind drew a blank.

"It's Thursday—his pinochle afternoon. It's too cold and icy for him to walk home. He's pretty frail, and I think those pinochle games are getting really depressing. Sort of like, let's see who's left standing this week."

The image of Eugene Walker's frozen body face down in the snow was incentive enough, and Green abandoned his desk gratefully at the stroke of five. Sid Green lived in a seniors' residence in Sandhill just off Rideau Street, barely a mile from the tenement where Green had grown up. For the past fifteen years, Sid had walked up Rideau first to the old Jewish Community Centre, and when that closed, to the adjacent synagogue to play pinochle with a handful of elderly immigrant Jews like himself. For fifteen years, a touch of *shtetl* Poland had flourished in the middle of Ottawa.

Now, as most of them passed eighty and various parts of their bodies failed them, the number was slowly dwindling, and when Green pulled up outside the synagogue, his father's scowl told him that today had not been a success. In a daily life of so few successes, his father had little optimism to spare.

"I want you to take me to Bernie's house," Sid said as Green guided him into the car.

Green was reaching for the seat belt and stopped abruptly. "Why?"

"He didn't come to the game today."

“Maybe it was too cold for him.”

Sid waved an impatient hand. His white hair stood in thin tufts, and his eyes watered from the cold. He drew his coat tightly around his throat. “Bernie never missed a game.”

Green started the car. “So call him.”

“Marv did. There was no answer.”

“Dad, he was probably just out visiting friends.”

Sid snorted. “And who are we, chopped liver? We’re all he’s got. Where would he go?” He stole a glance at Green’s set profile, and his voice dropped. “Something is wrong, Mishka. Bernie is looking very bad these past weeks.”

With resignation, Green steered the car in the direction of Bernie Mendelsohn’s apartment, which was a crumbling low-rise mainly occupied by the elderly poor. He left his father in what passed for a foyer and went in search of the building superintendent. They were just jiggling the lock to Mendelsohn’s apartment when the door cracked open, and an old man in pyjamas peered out.

“Bernie!” Sid exclaimed. “Why didn’t you answer our call?”

“What call?”

“You missed cards! Marv tried to call.”

Mendelsohn closed his eyes briefly, then turned to make his way back inside. Green noticed that his hands shook, and he limped badly. Quickly, he thanked the super and followed his father inside. The apartment was barely fifteen feet square and lit with a single yellow bulb hanging from the ceiling. Clothes were scattered everywhere, and open food cans were piled haphazardly by the sink. Green had only been there once before, but he remembered it as scrupulously clean. Like Sid, Mendelsohn had been widowed for nearly twenty years and had his set routines.

“I didn’t hear the phone,” Mendelsohn was saying. “I’m sorry, I was asleep.” He sat down on the edge of his bed, and Sid took the rickety white kitchen chair. As there was no other place to sit, Green leaned against the wall and waited. Both men were frail, but his father, even with his heart condition, looked far healthier. Mendelsohn’s skin had a yellowish cast and hung on his frame in folds. A quick glance around the room revealed a collection of prescription bottles by the bed. While the two friends bickered, Green went over for a closer look.

“You think I don’t have eyes?” Sid demanded. “I can’t see you look bad?”

“I’m eighty-four years old. You think you look so good?”

“Bernie—” Green interrupted, holding up a vial. “These are pretty strong painkillers.”

Mendelsohn snatched the vial away with trembling hands. He shoved it into his pyjama pocket and took a deep breath. “Michael, I have a few aches and pains. Tell your father to leave an old man in peace.”

Sid rose and came across the dimly lit room to peer at Mendelsohn. His wheezing was erratic in the stillness. “Aches and pains nothing. You think I don’t recognize cancer? My Hannah took ten years to die, Bernie. And near the end, when it was in her liver and bones, she looked like you.”

“Well,” replied Mendelsohn quietly, “I won’t be that long. Not ten years. Not even one.”

Green stepped instinctively forward to take his father’s arm, but Sid did not waver. He flinched but kept his gaze on his friend.

“When did you learn?”

“Three weeks ago. The painkillers are strong, and they make me sleep a lot. But it won’t be so long

Thank God it won't be long."

"So..." Sid murmured. "Bernie. Don't you think it's time to call Irving?"

"Irving? Why should I call Irving?"

"Because he's your son."

"Son! Sure. What do you think, Sid? That everyone has a son like Mishka here?" Mendelsohn wiped his lips and drew a palsied hand across his chin. For a moment his eyes misted. "I should be so lucky if Mishka would not have left an old man to die alone. But not Irving Bigshot Mendelsohn. He had to go to the United States, no law firms good enough for him here in Canada. I know his kind. Only when they want matters, and the hell with the weak old father who just gets in the way."

So great was his bitterness that even Sid was alarmed. He looked pale when they left the apartment some minutes later. As he buckled his father into the car, Green picked his words carefully.

"I didn't know Irving very well because he was a couple of years ahead of me in school, but I see now to remember he was always a *putz*."

Sid sighed. "Yes, Irving had a big head, but it was not easy always to be Bernie's son."

Green glanced at him, wondering whether he should even stir up the memories. The two elderly men had more in common than widowhood; both had been in the camps, both had lost children there. "You mean Bernie's second son."

Green held his breath until his father replied. "Bernie doesn't talk about it, but they are there always in his memory."

"They must have been very little when they died."

"And that makes them easier to forget?"

"No," Green soothed hastily. "What I meant was—how does he know how they would have turned out?"

"You have dreams for your child. You will see. You see in the baby the man he will become. Bernie has always loved you, Mishka. He sees you like the little boy he lost."

"What exactly did happen to his kids?"

As he asked, Green kept his eyes casually on the road, but he heard his father's breath catch in his throat. For a moment, Green thought he was actually going to answer, but then his father waved a peevish hand. "Watch the puddle. I don't want to step out in a puddle."

Skirting the slush, Green drew the car to a stop outside his father's apartment and got out to help him. The senior citizens' building was a bulky low-rise conveniently placed between a bakery and a drugstore. Sid had moved there under protest eight years earlier when he could no longer manage the stairs, but his heart still lay with the little brick tenement in Lowertown where his son had grown up and his wife had slowly slipped away. Sid scowled now at the squat, ugly cube as if it were an alien thing.

"Are you going to be okay, Dad?"

"Sure, sure. Eighty-three years old. All my friends are dying. I can't walk even one block. My hands shake, I can't open a door. A man should thank God for such a life."

* * *

Green was surprised how unnerved he was by his father's words. Both his parents were Holocaust

survivors who had lost all their family in the war, but as an only child Green had seen nothing bizarre about the strange hours of silence and the lonely isolation of the home in which he'd been raised. He'd seen their fatalism and their protective paranoia as an irritating restriction on his youthful urge for adventure, and it was only when he'd started reading about the Holocaust as an adult that he'd begun to wonder about the depths of their pain. But all his parents had ever afforded him, as now, was a distant glimpse.

Later that evening, once their son had been securely tucked into his crib, Green fixed Sharon and himself a cup of Earl Grey tea. With a grateful sigh he sank down beside her on the sofa and drew her into his arms. Slowly, between soothing sips of tea, he told her about the visit to Mendelsohn's apartment and his father's reaction.

"He almost talked about it, honey," he said. "It's the closest he's ever come to telling me anything, to saying he never forgets."

She snuggled against his chest and cradled her cup of tea. Her eyes were half shut with fatigue, but her black curls bounced vigorously as she shook her head. "I'm sure he doesn't. I couldn't imagine losing Tony. I'd lose my mind. But your father, he's had loss after loss after loss."

The thought unsettled him, and he sipped his tea a moment to ponder. He remembered his father's reaction to the long months of his mother's dying. His mother had talked non-stop, even refusing morphine in order to stay alert, so desperate was she to cram twenty years of motherly advice into nine months. But his father had spent long, unnecessary hours at the factory and ceased to talk almost entirely. It was from his mother that Green had received his first glimpse into his father's past.

"Don't stop him from working," she said. "That's how he was in the camp after the war. Busy, busy, everything had to be just so. You stop, you think."

After her death, his father had sunk into a deep apathy from which he'd been roused only briefly by the birth of Green's daughter by his first marriage, who was named Hannah in her grandmother's memory. When Green's self-absorption torpedoed that marriage, Hannah had been yanked from both their lives by Green's irate first wife before either man had much chance to know her. Green winced now as he thought how he himself had been responsible for that loss.

Bit by bit, Green, with the help of the hopeful widows in the Jewish seniors' club, had coaxed his father back into a meagre social existence and into the companionship of his card-playing friends. And now even that was proving a mixed blessing.

Green sighed. "I hope Dad can bounce back. It must be hard watching everyone dying around you."

"And poor Bernie. He's had such a life too, and what a way to end it. With a crummy apartment, a handful of grumpy cronies and a son who doesn't care."

"I don't know that Irving doesn't care. He's got his own life, and Bernie's not the most approachable guy in the world. His motto was always 'You think God cares?' I know he's gone through a lot, but as a father I'm not sure he was the best."

"Was yours?" she countered. "For that matter, are you? Even without the scars of the Holocaust, we fail each other in so many ways. Because of our pride and our hurts. Bernie fails his son, his son fails him. Even me—am I everything I should be to my poor parents? They want to come up for Tony's birthday, and I put them off till Chanukah, because I don't have the energy to deal with them. We all have needs that no one can fill. People get busy with their own lives, so in the end, one way or another, we're all the old all face death alone."

That thought stayed with him, reminding him of Eugene Walker, who had faced death alone at one

o'clock in the afternoon in the middle of a busy hospital parking lot. Sullivan had dismissed him just another old drunk, Donald Reid had called it a quick and painless heart attack, MacPhail a simple "natural causes." It was true it wasn't top priority on the major crimes docket, but there was still the nagging mystery of the head wound, and surely the end of a man's life—and the cause of that end—should be worth at least asking a few questions.

November 7nd, 1939

*Winter is young, just gathering strength.
It hurls through the flimsy walls
into the shed where we huddle at the end of the day.
Six strangers, made brothers by the whims of war.
We rouse the reluctant fire, and by its flame
I see my thoughts and fears in the strangers' eyes.
We are not safe, even here.
Rumours fly eastward on the wind,
of hangings, houses burning and young men,
Poles and Jews alike, kidnapped off the streets,
to stoke the Aryan madness.
She droops against my chest, too weary for words.
Sickness hollows her cheeks and dulls the flame of her hair.
I am fine, she says, and the women laugh.
Laugh. While outside, the Nazi winter descends.*

“Mike, it’s goddamn natural causes!” Brian Sullivan exclaimed the next morning. “I closed the case yesterday.”

“Did you or did you not get photos of the scene?”

“Ident did. Of course.”

“Then just give me a peek. I’m not questioning your judgment. I’m just playing inspector, okay?”
Reviewing the file. What’s the problem?”

“Your imagination,” Sullivan replied. “You’ve got that look in your eye.”

“It’s just a hunch, a piece missing in the puzzle. Humour me.”

Sullivan gave him a long, wary look, then booted up his computer, inserted a CD and pulled up the photo file. Green scanned the photos quickly. Some were closeups of the body, others of the large area. One gave a clear overview of the death scene, showing the placement of the body and the surrounding cars. Green squinted intently.

Chad had been right. The car next to the Dodge was a dark sedan, at first glance probably something GM. The licence plate was visible but too small to read even with maximum enlargement.

Within seconds he had the Ident Unit on the line, and a few minutes later, he was examining digital enhancement of the licence plate. Triumphantlly he ran the number through the computer and jotted down a name and address.

“Green, you don’t think some guy knocked off the old man and then left his vehicle sitting there to show up in the police photos!”

Green cast Sullivan a look of exasperation as he pocketed his keys. “Lateral thinking skill

Sullivan. I'm looking for someone who might have witnessed something. This guy was parked beside Walker. Just a few quick questions, back before anyone even sees I'm gone," he added, already halfway out the door.

The owner of the car lived in an opulent brick house on a quiet crescent close to but sheltered from the crush of the city. In the drive a royal blue Buick LeSabre sat sleekly without a speck of slush or salt on its sides. Green examined the side mirror curiously as he passed by. It was also immaculate. For Forensics would be little help there, he thought with resignation, because the car had obviously been washed since the storm. But the mirror was rounder and thicker than the wound on Walker's head, and more importantly, Walker's wound was deeper at the hairline than down towards his brow. For a car mirror to have inflicted that shape of wound, Walker would have had to fall onto it from the sky.

That's one for me, Green thought, as he rang the bell. Dr. Kopec had been on call the night before and was not pleased to be awakened, but the word "homicide" brought him clattering downstairs in his bathrobe. He consulted his appointment book to refresh his memory.

"Wednesday was the day of the storm. Yes, I remember, I arrived about noon. The parking lot was quite full, and I had to park near the end."

"Do you recall the car on your left?"

Dr. Kopec frowned as he tried to mobilize his brain cells without the benefit of caffeine. Slowly, he shook his head. "Not specifically, no."

"The body was found right beside your car. Between yours and the one on your left. When you pulled in, did you see the old man? Did you see anyone?"

Kopec was shaking his head. "I was late and in a hurry. The traffic on the Queensway had been terrible because of the storm. I just got out of the car and headed straight for the nearest entrance. But there was certainly no body."

"Did you see anyone inside the car?"

Kopec sat at the kitchen table staring at the flowered table cloth and frowning as he focussed his thoughts inward. Then he raised his head slowly. "I do remember something. As I was getting out of the car, I heard voices. Male voices. I glanced at the car—just idly, you know—but I couldn't see inside, because the windows were all frosted over. I didn't give it a second thought."

"Male voices. How many?"

"I couldn't tell. Two, perhaps? It was just a low rumble, but it sounded like different people."

"Could you make out any words?"

Slowly Kopec shook his head.

"What was the tone of the voices—happy, angry, conversational?"

"Something gave me the impression of anger. One voice rose for a moment. I heard several sharp words that sounded angry."

"What did they say?" Kopec was shaking his head. "Think!"

"I don't know. They may have been foreign."

Foreign? Green thought blankly. Eugene Walker was a retired Englishman who rarely left the sanctuary of his country retreat. What the hell would he be doing with a foreigner?

* * *

I don't care what MacPhail says, Green thought triumphantly as he left Kopec's house and dashed through the frigid air back to his car. The old man was murdered. No matter that all they really had was a snatch of conversation which could have been the radio and a fresh head wound minor enough to be sustained in the fall. All his instincts cried foul. As a police officer, he'd seen hundreds of beatings and this looked all the world like a lead pipe brought down on the old man's head.

And he'd heard enough evasions and subterfuge in his career to suspect that Walker's family was afraid of something.

He glanced at his watch. He'd told Sullivan he was only going for a quick jaunt, and he had to prepare for a meeting with the Crown attorneys in the afternoon. At this rate, he'd be lucky to get back to the station on time even without one more minor side trip. But he was already out in the west end, already halfway to the Reid house as it was. Half an hour more, that was all he needed.

* * *

"Murder!" Don Reid exclaimed. Green had summoned the family into the Reid living room and had plunged headlong into his theory, hoping to catch their first reactions. The son-in-law leaped to his feet, effectively placing himself between Green and the two women. This blocked Green's view of the widow, but he was able to see the expression of panic which flitted across the daughter's face before she brought it back under control.

"The idea hasn't occurred to you?" Green continued blandly.

"Why should it?" Don blustered. "The old man had one foot in the grave! Even the coroner says so."

"But someone might have helped him."

"Why! What could anyone have to gain?"

"Precisely my question, Mr. Reid."

A shocked silence descended on the family as Don Reid eyed Green, speechless. After a minute, he snorted in derision. "That's ridiculous. Eugene was a recluse, he never saw anyone. He had no friends any more, and he wasn't involved in any activities where he could have made enemies. Right, Ruth?"

Ruth Walker was staring at Green in dismay, and he felt a twinge of pity. He didn't like putting her through this.

"What makes you think he was murdered?"

"I have to investigate all angles, Mrs. Walker."

His evasion deepened her confusion. "Then you're not saying he was or wasn't?"

"I can't."

His bluntness brought colour to her cheeks, and when she saw he was still awaiting an answer, she cast about in bewilderment. "I really can't think what anyone had to gain. Eugene saw no one but the family. He's been retired fifteen years, and even before that he kept to himself."

"Who knew you were going to the hospital that day?"

"No one, except Margaret and Don, of course. But no one would have known he was in the car. Unless...unless it was a stranger—I mean, a robbery, or..."

"It's possible, but for the sake of my paperwork, I'd like to explore some background. First of all, what did your husband do before he retired?"

"We owned a hardware shop in Renfrew. It was a small family business, and it gave us

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