

“A Treat of Agatha Christie’s”

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Sweating money, or so he believed, the personal investor took a job at Capitol City Bank, monitoring a safe deposit box stronghold. This move would help fortify his retirement fund; a million was becoming a necessary goal. A million is conservative, in the investor’s mind; five or six mil could offer much comfort. This was his private progressive goal alongside finding a suitable wife. Being just 40, he still had time to amass the money he wanted... hence, the vault job.

Sitting as he did in a swivel chair near the tellers, Sven Sjomán had lots of downtime to listen in on them. He did this intermittently and silently as he awaited box-renters. Might a cheery teller be marriage material? The four were singles, with the one male being overtly gay. (After meeting a transexual at the “metrosexual” Polarity club, Sven had begun entertaining flippant thoughts of bisexuality and a husband and surrogate mother to his offspring; although he’d run from the club, he now allowed his daydreams to wander gay sometimes; he’d also gotten plugs to fill in around thinning hair.) The three women, one just out of high school, one a middle-aged divorcee, and the third older and widowed, could maybe be wives; all had personality issues, and only the younger could procreate, from what he ascertained from their talk. Why he listened to them at all was because he was denied use of his smart phone on the job, and so was quite bored. Their prattle kept him awake. At very least, the tellers could bake, and alternately brought treats for the staff – today the elder woman had a platter of brownies to share; Sven chewed on one while he eavesdropped.

“Do you know who’s a good writer? Agatha Christie. She writes real page-turners, not the garbage that’s passing for detective fiction these days — those junk books by Kellerman, Patterson, Clark, Child. I like Clark okay I guess.”

“I never read one of Christie’s books! (I did see some of her movies.)”

“Ooh, a movie of hers is coming out soon: ‘Murder on the Orient Express’! I’m going to be first in line to see it.”

“Spoiler alert: All the passengers on the train commit the murder.”

“Why did you tell me that? You’re evil, just evil.”

“I’m gonna read it anyhow. Once I finish Hillary Clinton’s autobiography it’s gonna be on my nightstand. I love female writers. *Murder on the Orient Express*, it’s called?”

“We can’t say ‘Orient’ anymore. They need to change the title of that movie to ‘Murder on the Asian Express’ before it’s released.”

“The movie is a remake. You can watch the old one—I’m sure it’s much better.”

“You can’t say ‘Oriental’—that’s true—but I think you can say ‘Orient’ still.”

“Did you know that Agatha’s most popular book in this country, *Ten Little Indians*, is an Americanized title? In the U.K. it was originally called—get this!—*Ten Little Niggers*.”

“You’re making that up, to crack a racist joke!”

“I swear on my dead grandmother’s secret brownie recipe that it’s the truth.”

“What a bigot your Christie was.”

“It was a different era, with different meanings attached ‘nigger,’ which, incidentally, had nothing to do with the blacks in this country.”

“I think the title should be re-Americanized, again, to *Ten Little Native Americans*.”

“No, it shouldn’t, because ‘Indian’ is a term for East Indians, from India.”

“Niggers from India? Nope! I’m going to skip your book suggestions and just watch the movies. It’s safer.”

“Plenty of movies to see!”

“Agatha sold over two million copies of her books, you know. She was no slouch.”

“Your point? I read Stephen King! His books have been made into movies too.”

“I read somewhere that King was so high on cocaine in the 1980s he can’t remember writing some of his novels.”

“Was he? That fat ugly outcast?”

“He was hateful! The whole point of his first book (*Carrie*) was: Christianity slows down human development with its rules and laws.”

“That is an evil thing to say.”

“He said it, not me.”

“I did like the remake of that movie, because of the smart-phone video of Carrie’s first period in the gym shower—it was crystal clear why Sue Snell doused her with pig’s blood. Not so in the first one. But I have to say... I think John Travolta did a bang-up job in DePalma’s version, next to Spacek who was a true charmer as the pig; the new Carrie was far too pretty to be convincing.”

“King is a horror writer. Completely different genre, mind you, than Christie.”

“Lots of people mix up detective or mystery or crime fiction with horror.”

“Didn’t Edgar Allen Poe invent the mystery genre? Yes, I think he did.”

“Poe was also a drunk and a heavy drug user. He died alone and penniless in the gutter.”

“What a shame!”

“Oh, I know it. Such a waste.”

“Yet his books remain, and his status remains.”

“Poe was a true genius. Like Christie.”

“But not like King? I suppose your Agatha never took a drug in her life.”

“I took an unprescribed Oxycontin once.”

“No! What was it like?”

“I’d never do such a thing! You could’ve gotten arrested.”

“By who? The karma police?”

Sven Sjoman ate two more brownies and fitted one into a napkin then slipped it into his blazer pocket. He’d gotten stocky lately; his girth was thick, dense and sexy despite a lack of exercise and diminished libido due to a drop in testosterone—his levels were above average and any injection would create too many red blood cells, as his urologist had explained; Sven eventually dropped the steroid quest in favor of an herb purporting to increase testosterone naturally. It was purportedly a healthy lifestyle choice. He checked his watch-sans-bling then took his first break to piss coffee and herbs and check his teeth for brownie residue. Clean teeth being essential to dating whoever might walk through the door. His enamel remained as thick as his limbs; must be genetics, he surmised, with an audible sigh over the genetic impossibility of never being a model or much of an athlete. But this was not his bane, merely a distraction; he knew beauty never guaranteed a good spouse. Today as usual his bane consisted of searching for a suitable wife. The search had gone on far too long, in his opinion; his middle-aged bones ached from loneliness. His retirement fund was far from the point of allowing him to quit the job and take on more consulting. He felt comprised of different stuff than his coworkers as he moved casually about the quaint colonial décor of the bank with an eye on his polished

Italian shoes (from a clearance rack, yes!) and coarsely-creased suit-pant legs, because the tellers dressed in rumpled gently-used clothing that looked like it came from thrift stores.

Just as Sjoman dabbed off the last bit of brownie with another napkin and was resettling into his chair, a K-9 unit of Capitol City police entered the bank with two well-groomed and highly-trained Doberman Pinschers on leashes. A teller sneezed discretely. The sniffer dogs would alert on any illegal drugs stored in the safe deposit stronghold; the K-9 unit as a whole made its way past the tellers and handed Sven a search warrant. The warrant pertained specifically to Laurel Grant-Rutherford-Reilly, plus “outlying boxes, to include the entire vault.” Immediately: the teller’s windows ordered closed, the front doors barred from entry. Any patrons in the room were directed to together sit on an obtuse oversize ottoman leftover from an office after a recent resignation. Sven allowed the unit access with mannered compliance, and even assisted the bank’s security guard in moving some event tables with collapsed legs into the stronghold and setting them up so a dog could sniff at the upper half of the boxes.

While they worked, it took only a second for Sven to look up Laurel in the bank database: Age 21 and attractive, very thin and rather tall, according to her photo I.D. stats. She was a sophisticated vixen, Sven thought, judging by her inscrutable smirk in the photo; the woman was too mod for his affections. Probably she was on drugs too, looking at her again. Her face was complicated. He anyway felt time pass slowly while the police dogs sniffed the vault, because the tellers were silently feigning busy-work at their stations and his timepiece had no second-hand to watch.

After business was restored and all police had vacated the bank, Sven again assisted the security guard in moving collapsible tables. Meanwhile the four tellers loudly regained their voices:

“Speaking of dogs! Yesterday I watched an episode of ‘Dog the Bounty Hunter’ on a whim. It was such a cute story! First we find out that one of his Doberman puppies is sick—the puppy is in shock, because its family pack mob-attacked it for biting a toad in the yard. Then Dog brings it to a vet and, long story short, it’s going to live.”

“‘Dog the Bounty Hunter’ is about dogs?”

“No, it’s about people, mostly. Dog hunts felons who skipped out on his bail—he’s also a bit of a preacher. The bulk of that show was about a druggie who skipped out on his bail because he was high on the meth. Dog let him go into rehab instead of prison.”

“He was too lenient, in my book.”

“Do you think Dog’s puppies are going to work for the police?”

“That would make a cute story too.”

Over the next week the specifics of the warrant and its outcome trickled down to Sjoman’s paylevel: Sven heard that the dogs hit on four boxes in the stronghold—

none were on Laurel's box and when it was anyway seized, the box was "clean as a whistle" without even fingerprints. (Come to think of it, Sven had seen her a week before, probably to clear out her box; she'd sauntered in, cool and collected, without a bag, only to leave with a small soft briefcase bursting at the seams amidst the scent of imported coffee.) Of the four alerts on boxes, one was a "false hit" and the other three remained in question. The fake alert was on a box that belonged to a widow, Peggy Harthouse; her stash of legal documents somehow triggered the dogs despite the box containing no drugs at all. Of significance, her stronghold had proofs of a recently deceased husband plus a murder suspect in the contractor that had hired him; her compiled evidence was all circumstantial due to electrocution while installing a private escalator, making it murder instead of an accident.

Sven felt a blip in his heart. This Peggy Harthouse was the same widow he'd had dealings with ten years before, shady due to an eight grand deficit to her newly dead husband's retirement account. It had been his impulse to pocket the "floating" money but he'd reconsidered and called her up to return the eight grand; she'd unenthusiastically thanked him and that had been that. Though he'd considered her to be pretty, the tragedy of her husband's death was imbued within her every movement, which made her undatable, back then. He wondered what she looked like now and looked her up, shrugging noncommittally at the I.D. photo. But after checking her accounts, Sven almost fell off his chair. People got married often because of the tax breaks; he did a quick calculation in his head and discovered that he and she could be millionaires soon, multi-millionaires by retirement, if integrated as a couple. He wondered if she was single, and cured of the trauma.

What a thrill, money, was what Sven thought next.

Of the boxes that were illegally stocked, one belonged to Jack Catch, who lived in Chicago and had not visited the bank's branch for several years. The dogs had anyway sniffed cocaine and marijuana residue stuck to a palm-sized whale-shaped bong, which he'd declared as "an object of posterity or sentiment," alongside friendship bracelets and a tattered blankie-scrap and wooden birdie-shaped whistle and a bark-flaky stick from the forest and a generic starter coin collection. Sven looked up Jack Catch's account up and saw he was past middle-age, and was a successful (in terms of account holdings) professional in the art field of design. Obviously a good lawyer could get him free of any charges, since it was only residue and not drugs per se.

The second box "hit" belonged to an over-the-road trucker named Saul Bartholomew, who rarely accessed its contents. He was five states away when the warrant was issued. Alongside the drugs were the usual assortment of documents and a diamond ring. It came out that the box's few grams of crystal methamphetamine, separately packaged, were untouched "gifts" from an associate trucker who maybe wanted to be his supplier. Yet Saul was sober, or claimed to be. Because Saul had passed every truck-driving test and never had any drug complications, the possession charge was in limbo; he could get out of it, too, as Jack could; with clean urines and a perfect driving record Saul was likely safe enough.

Third was the alert on a box shared by Sheila and Erin Dorsey, mother and offspring, which had been used mainly by Erin despite Sheila adding her will and a few

personal items, such as a gold-and-ruby necklace; Erin's recent stashing of an outfit of male clothes and an expired I.D. (name of Marvin Kennelly) triggered the dogs because in the hollowed-out soles of a pair of wingtips was a large amount of hashish, spread like jam into the hollows. Sven's spine prickled as he accessed Erin's photo ID in the Capitol City Bank system; his search for a wife at the Polarity club had introduced them five years before. Near-aesthetic-perfection, at first glance, was Erin—a few longer glances diffused the woman into a man who'd paid for many plastic surgeries on face and body. Sven disliked her because she'd fooled him; rather, he disliked him, because he'd fooled him. Not that anything sexual had happened. (Essentially, Sven had listened to Erin's tale and decided to run. As he should've; the pick-up could never bear him the children he desired; plus, it was a "metrosexual" bar decrying all sexualities as valid; he'd only wanted a decent woman!) Tranzie Erin claimed to know nothing about the drugs stored in the box, and most likely didn't, considering the soles jammed with hashish had allegedly been bought on consignment at a store catering to teens, and were polka-dotted with fingerprints from people who were too young or stealthy to be part of any police databases. The attire, Erin claimed, was for an emergency escape from transsexualism, which he'd embraced as alternative to living with childhood trauma of being tied up and raped by his brother as a young teen. His (her?) culpability would anyway prove a case, in court, it seemed.

Sven sighed, heavily, reminding himself that he'd passed his find-a-wife-goal-date: his 40th birthday. The four tellers were again in full animation:

"This is turning into quite the mystery!"

"Speaking of mysteries... Agatha Christie was involved in a true life mystery."

"Agatha Christie did what?"

"She lost her marbles for a spell. Wandered off and disappeared for ten days with some sort of amnesia. Authorities found her at a spa! She was staying there under one of her character's names, after leaving her I.D. and suitcase in her abandoned car, which was hidden in the mud flats just outside her neighborhood. As if she'd been kidnapped."

"Oh, the poor dear."

"That was a shrewd move! Faking her disappearance for free publicity? Plus massages and pampering at the local spa. I'd have done the same thing, pretending I was kidnapped. It got all of England interested in her books."

"Did she fake the kidnapping?"

"Bigoted Agatha faked it, all right."

"What do you expect, after obsessing on murder all the time? She probably did go crazy. She was trying to get known famously as a detective novelist, I'll bet. She was trying to replace Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his Watson and Sherlock Holmes."

“Why is it that murder mysteries keep up comfy? I wonder.”

“I did read a blurb someplace about Sir Doyle and Dame Christie. He took one of her gloves from the abandoned automobile and brought it to a psychic, who predicted that she would be found on the exact day she was found.”

“Doyle? He shot up with cocaine, like daily? He published a book called *The Coming of the Fairies*, to help people see them, of all things under the sun. Absolutely weird, that book. He was insane, probably from the cocaine.”

“How did Doyle know Christie? It sounds like a set-up, to attract publicity.”

“I don’t know the specifics.”

“I do like Patterson. He writes cozies. I get all cozy, reading his work, wrapped in a quilt and sipping English tea, knowing my life is much less complicated than those characters’ lives.”

“And he don’t use the word ‘nigger,’ either, enough said.”

A few weeks later, when Peggy Harthouse appeared to reinstall her legal documents in a box, Sven Sjoman braced himself to meet Peggy again. It had been a decade since the death of Cory Harthouse, with no leads as to his alleged murder despite a few inklings by the police; this he learned after speaking with local detective Ian Silly about Cory’s unattributed “murder” on the private escalator. (Apparently, some question remained about the hiring man, who consulted with Cory at length about installing an escalator in his home; appearing unrelated, the contracted man merely hired Cory to install an escalator, in his home, despite numerous charges and a clean record.) Yet she was “clean,” unaffiliated with the death of Cory and now unaffiliated with drug trafficking via the bank.

When Peggy Harthouse arrived, she remained the fair to glamorous woman he’d remembered. A simple twist to her bedraggled hair and minimal make-up constituted hoi polloi appeal plus that off-chance of transcendence from the middle-class; the woman ate caviar in her dreams. She was also wholly approachable, however reluctant to engage with him on a personal level. Her body maintained that cheerleader legginess common to high school vixens, even at 42, which led Sven into simpering while doling compliments. The “false hit” by sniffer dogs on her box constituted suspicion; otherwise she appeared clean, as did her box. Sven knew this and inquired about it with her anyway, asking Peggy out right if she was storing anything illegal in that box; he was flirting. Next he asked her out on a curling date (she had three kids already, twin boys and a girl; he’d adopt them as his own, while impregnating her with a fourth child; it was proper, in his liberal view) to which she confessed ignorance about curling as a sport. Laughing indelibly, he mentioned that curling was ice-hockey without the blood; it was a passive sport for meticulous thrusters, plus her kids would likely enjoy visiting the new ice rink. She demurely declined.

Regardless, he set her up with a sweet housing deal via Herb Martin, a man who’d been banking at Capitol City two years before vanishing, a few months prior, while

on safari in some remote African locale. Herb's house-sitter was renting out the bulk of the mansion for a paltry sum to the right person in his absence. And somehow Peggy turned out to be the right person. After she moved in, it came out that the millionaire was faking his disappearance and posing as his own house-sitter, which thrilled Peggy's daughter and irked her twin sons. Peggy of course took the set-up as legit even after learning the truth. Which made the idea of dating her an easy task, since Sven only ever wanted to date a posh woman. They would be rich together, he and she, she being installed in a mansion and saving her money; his guise was to entrap a beautiful maiden, pretending that he knew nothing about the "house-sitter"; he feigned he was unaffiliated with the millionaire's rouse and he knew Herb had affairs with boys and was therefore a help rather than a hindrance with gaining the affections of Peggy Harthouse. Anyway her sons later came around, literally and figuratively.

Karma was on his side; all he wanted now in life was a good mate. Blubbering later over their first cup of coffee together, the trauma of her dead husband pouring out of her like cream, Peggy confessed that she was "fertile" and "lonely"; Sven took impassioned interest, considering that for ten years he'd been alone too. He breached that he and she would marry; he'd look after her youngest daughter for a while while praising her collegiate twins, in unison. Yes, she said "yes" to his proposal. He quickly decided to keep it secret from the bank staff, remaining as mute about the engagement as he did about all other facets of his life.

Outside the bank, back at work, wind was blustery. It seemed like a blizzard-in-the-making, what with the spasms of snow flurries and high winds, not to mention the decreased temps. Somehow this would all turn into a cozy, he surmised, riffing on fragments of details from the tellers. And none of this would ever become something dazzling from the annals of police detection. Nobody would ever write a book about sniffer dogs alerting on these safe deposit boxes.

And so went the prattle of the tellers:

"I'm remembering those fabulous brownies you brought in a few months ago—yummy! Could I get the recipe?"

"What you couldn't have known, but which should've been obvious, is my secret ingredient. Are you in suspense?"

"Do tell! Just a hint, pretty-please?"

"I have to say now that I put spice in, with my sugar."

"Spice!"

"In with the sugar!"

"Cinnamon spice, maybe? Like, in snickerdoodle cookies?"

"On a whim? Or is baking a cookie-cutter process?"

“Ha! Patterson and the rest of them, defined...”

“Not Dame Christie! Go ahead and read her, and then read something by another writer and tell me who made the better mystery. I shudder to think that she could be beat.”