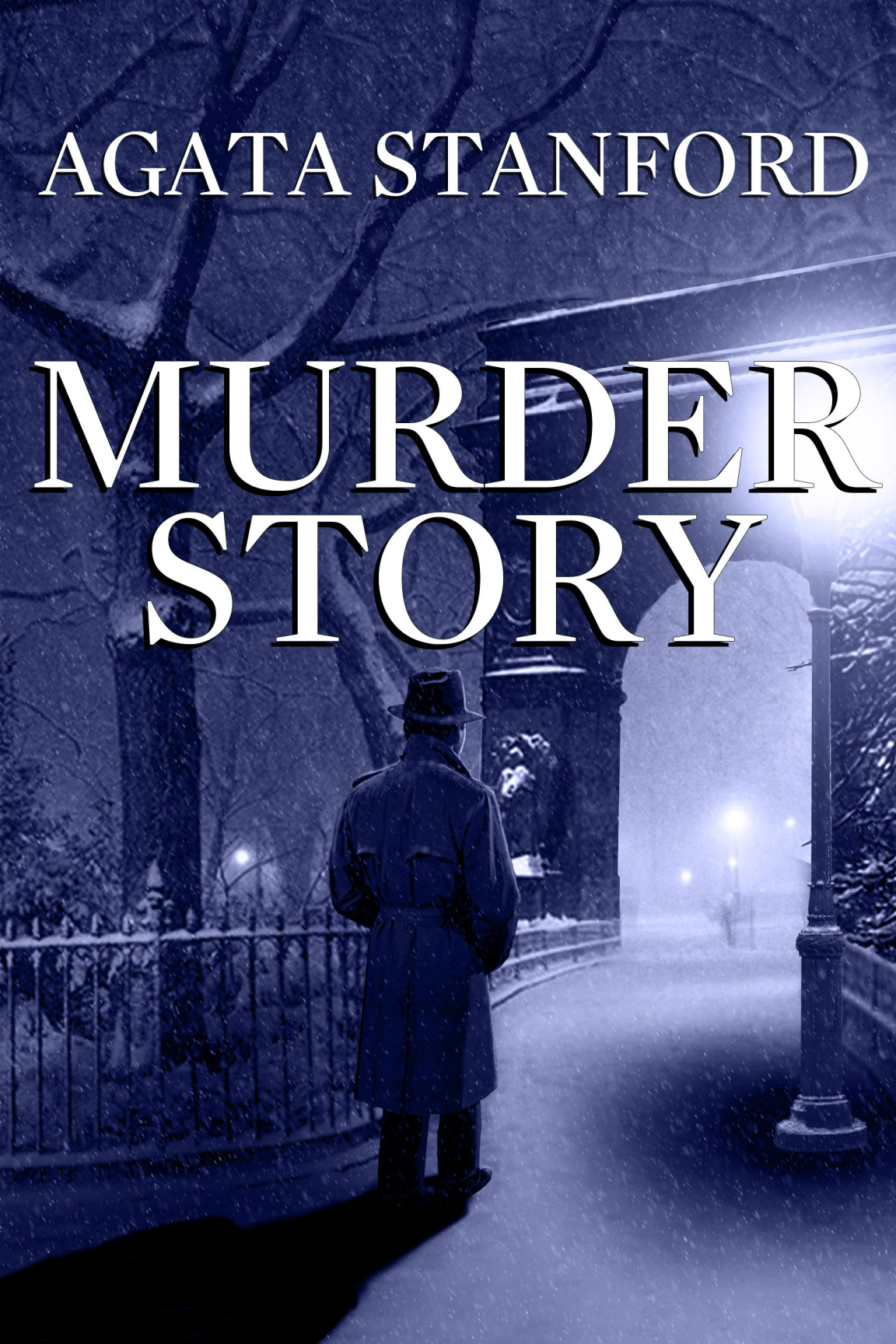
AGATA STANFORD

MURDER STORY



MURDER STORY

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Agata Stanford

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For my good friends, Eric Conover
and Shelley Flannery

Also by Agata Stanford

The Dorothy Parker Mystery Series:
The Broadway Murders
Chasing the Devil
Mystic Mah Jong
Death Rides the Midnight Owl
A Moveable Feast of Murder
The Murder Club

MURDER STORY

The greatest evil is conceived and ordered in clean, carpeted, warmed, and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voice.

—C. S. Lewis

". . . and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

—Shylock, Act III, Scene I, *The Merchant of Venice*

Chapter One

When I was five, I watched my father kill my mother.

Alone—my father quit the city to places unknown never to be seen again—I was sent to live with my mother's elderly aunt and her husband for a short time. At her death, less than a year later, my uncle, unable to cope with the needs of a child, shuffled me off to the Orphans Asylum on Fifth Avenue. I had not spoken a word since witnessing my mother's violent end, so it was believed that I was "slow." It came as a great surprise to everyone when I suddenly spoke up to correct a teacher's misstatement. I might have been thrashed had I not referred to the text, paragraph, and line number, to support my case, and except for the amazement of the teacher at the sound of my voice. Soon, it was discovered that I was quite clever, with an artistic bent. Mine was not a Dickensian existence; I did not suffer the cruelty imposed upon Oliver Twist. But for the taunting of a few vicious boys, my jailors were kindly, if strict, the life regimental, and I accepted their indifference as well as my circumstances as a cross to bear in this life. I was

born to Jewish parents, but that did not stop the nuns from drilling into me the love of Our Savior, Jesus Christ. Yearning for acceptance, I dutifully learned my prayers well and gave thanks for the meager sustenance provided for me. When I was older, I was taught a trade, and because I had no love for draftsmanship, I found employment and excitement instead at the *Herald* as a messenger boy. I was fifteen and on my own and determined to become a great newspaperman. My love of the tabloids was unrequited, however. Murder, not of the barroom-brawl variety but the more lascivious sort—sex, greed, jealousy, and murder at a good address—was the order of the day and commanded the headlines.

As a copyboy, I had dreams of becoming a reporter. I thrilled as I observed the camaraderie among the brash, clever, fast-talking men who covered the news—and those new foreign correspondents reporting from the war in France or from the Revolution in Russia in ’17, coming home with their stories, padded with fabricated acts of heroism, no doubt, but swallowed whole all the same by the likes of me. They’d frequent the saloon down the block from the paper, and they’d let me join them for a beer. How I wanted to be like them! How I worshipped these big, rough and rumple-suited, hard-drinking men! For a time I basked in the warmth of familial belonging; they’d ruffle my hair or squeeze my

shoulder affectionately and tell me the ways of life and how to hone the craft of reporting. I wanted to become one of them.

And I had my chance when the likely choice to rush off and get the scoop on a murder was off witnessing an execution at Sing-Sing, while other reporters had been sent to cover an anarchist bombing of a factory in New Jersey, a fire in Harlem, and a freight train derailment on the Hudson. There was only me, so the city editor reluctantly sent me to cover the stabbing death of a shop-girl at the mansion of a wealthy merchant on Fifth Avenue.

This was my chance! I practically flew uptown, ready to make my name in print, imagining my byline, the slaps on the back I'd receive from the seasoned columnists as they bought me round after round of boilermakers!

I saw the ravaged body of the young woman and I threw up and fainted at the scene. No one from my paper saw me. I was able to get the story, but it was no different the third and fourth times I was sent out to a murder scene. I'd become violently ill. What could I say other than that it was a reaction to the sight of blood, not an uncommon affliction? But it wasn't just the sight of blood; it was the memory of violent murder come back to torture me, and I could not tell anyone the reason, about the evil my father had set upon my mother. I felt shamed, nonetheless;

I wound up assigned as the assistant to the drama critic, who bullied me into shape as a second-string reviewer. Manhattan was a carnival of ongoing entertainment, and I saw the great offerings of the Tenderloin during that first year with Alexander Woollcott, and for a while I indulged in carefree escape into a world I had never dreamed I might be a part of. But the War changed everything. Because I was classified unfit to serve, I remained at home. I became dissatisfied with the vacuous task of my job at a time of turmoil in Europe. When Woollcott went off to France to write for *Stars and Stripes*, I was not chosen to replace him in his absence, but remained second-string, assigned to review the Second Avenue Yiddish shows and the Vaudeville lineups. As second-string drama critic I became known around the newsroom as *Ersatz* Stringer, my surname lending itself to ridicule. I was young. I felt humiliated. Only the old press boys address me as Ersatz now, when our paths cross. Its implication always rankled in me, and even when spoken with affection I hear mockery.

So I realized I'd probably never be a great newspaperman. But I liked to write. I began to write my own stories. And then a book. Everything changed because of the book. I was not just relaying my observations of the adventures of the people of New York for a daily publication; *I* was creating the adventures for the first time.

Writing a book is like watching a silent movie. You think you know, but you don't know where it's all going to lead. The story unfolds in its own time, at its own pace, from beginning to end, like a life. Like a twisty-turning, uncharted life.

I see now that my life, too, is a book. A book I cannot edit. I can only hope to write a pleasant ending. Since we all die, there are no really happy endings.

The first sharp twist in the plot of my life was that night when I was five, the next, an imperceptible veering when I was thirty. That veering started in 1927 when I walked into Romany Marie's Café on Christopher Street. I wondered recently, what if I'd never entered Marie's? What if I had walked on to the Brevoort Café? Or Polly's Restaurant?

Six authors we were, and of the others I had only slightly known Mark Wendt of the cowboy books, whom I had met briefly at a book party, and Daniel Cousins, who signed on with Niles Pickering around the time I did. Daniel's contract with Pickering had not been renewed, because he, like me, had failed to produce a publishable work of fiction for several years.

It was not long after the publisher's sudden death and the collapse of Pickering Press that I

would occasionally stop in at Romany Marie's Café for a bowl of soup, which Marie Marchand, the middle-aged proprietress, garbed in gypsy fare, would generously provide as sustenance for some of us struggling artists. Marie has quite a distinctive face: dark, broad-jawed, determined, but not an unkind face. I could see her sizing up the physique of any newcomer to her establishment. Eyes scrutinizing from across the room, she seemed to measure the protrusion of a new arrival's shoulder blades through a threadbare coat, the absence of hose, the state of shoe-leather. Dimples creasing her wide mouth and a sparkle brightening her black eyes, she'd welcome her new patron, sit him down at a table, and bring him a steaming bowl of her husband's famous stew from the pot that was always simmering atop the woodstove. That man might be the starving alcoholic, Eugene O'Neill, when he was first trying to write a play, back during the winters of '16 and '17, before his great success on Broadway, or an enthusiastic, if malnourished, Buckminster Fuller, images of new designs for living playing out in his young head. Whoever frequented the café, young or old, rich or poor, there was always a warm welcome from Marie. In the winter, Marie's was a haven from my drafty flat a couple of blocks away, the woodstove radiating its smoky heat, the nutty aroma of café noir à la Turque permeating the toasty room.

In the evenings, when Cherish was working, I would pass the time there in the company of other artists, or those aspiring to be, often students or professors from New York University at Washington Square. Conversing with likeminded folk was stimulating entertainment—after a day spent alone with my typewriter—talking politics and philosophy. Sometimes, when I found myself without companionship, I might be entertained by eavesdropping on the most preposterous blather proffered by some horny old-coot instructor, playing the intellectual—beard, pipe, scarf rakishly tossed across his neck—hell-bent on impressing, and ultimately bedding, the nubile student he's managed to entrap at his table. The brighter of her sex would reject these lectures, designed to seduce by displaying the fellow's intellectual prowess, which was more often than not just a tired old thesis repeated semester after semester by rote, and remove the hand that had found its way to her knee and walk out of the café unscathed and uncompromised; the more gullible young doe might actually believe the blowhard's salacious leer to be a passion for the subject of his discourse, taking the tired "insights" as serious reflections of a superior mind. These scenes would be played out in the foreground of droned recitations of bad poetry and uninspired musical renditions limited to three chord sequences on the guitar.

"There's nothing more seductive than a brainy man," said Cherish once, many years ago, after my novel was published to good notices. She was talking about me, of course. And there is nothing more seductive for a man than when the woman you lust for *thinks* you a genius.

John French Sloan retires to the café at day's end; he keeps to a small circle of friends, and the portrait he painted of Marie a few years ago is hung over his favorite table. We usually nod politely at one another, but that's the extent of our acquaintanceship. And the beauty, poetess Edna St. Vincent Millay, frequents Romany Marie's. She wrote her little verse there, the one that begins: "My candle burns at both ends…." There is an unfriendly aloofness about Vincent, who is very much aware of her ethereal appeal and expects it to be appreciated.

Late one afternoon in the spring of 1927, I was at Marie's when Daniel Cousins walked into the café. The fact that we were both castoffs from the Pickering "empire" was the only thing we had in common at the time. I suppose you might say misery loves company, so when I saw him walk in I invited him to join me.

Cousins has a head of unruly, black hair crowning heavy, slightly hangdog features. Still, there is a handsome ruggedness about him. Underlying this solid countenance is an air of melancholy to be seen in big, sad brown

eyes, which lends a gentleness to his demeanor. Although a pleasant fellow, his initial reticence can be a bit off-putting. I came to understand that his seeming aloofness is not because he is unapproachable, but because he is innately shy. Eventually, he began to appear at Marie's more regularly, several times a week after work at his copy-editing job at the *Saturday Evening Post*, and soon I became privy to his personal history.

He was born in nineteen-hundred, in Providence, Rhode Island, the second son of two born to Italian-immigrant parents, Enrico and Carmella Cugini.

Daniel's father was a fishmonger who died of sepsis after he pricked a finger on a fishbone; his mother, a seamstress, now widowed, had found herself sole support of the family. Her sewing skills proved clever, and she was industrious. She pawned her late mother's jewelry, given to her by her father when she left the old country. She bought a few yards of fine silk and rented a room above a haberdasher's shop. With the bolts of satin ribbon and the lace she'd brought in her trousseau to America, she began designing and selling lingerie to the Newport crowd, which led to her remarriage to a wealthy widower. Because she was "in trade" as the proprietress of Carmella Lingerie she'd never been accepted by her husband's society friends, and within a year they were divorced. She was financially secure

through her industrious business dealings, the divorce settlement was generous, and Carmella never had to sew a stitch again. But, as it was not in her nature to retire to a life of leisure, she expanded her business by opening stores in major cities across the country.

When I asked Daniel why he kept his copywriter's position at the *Saturday Evening Post*, he replied that he was too old to be supported by his mother and that the job offered him discipline, and was encouraged by Dr. Curry, the alienist he had been seeing twice a week for over a year, as beneficial to an artistic nature. He needed a place to go to each day, to do a simple job, to be responsible to others while he contemplated his next book. But, he—like myself—had been contemplating new ideas for books for a long time without much success. His one and only novel, one I consider a quiet little unobtrusive work of brilliance, was years in the past.

I told him how much I liked his debut novel and asked what he was currently at work on, but he mumbled something about how he'd been plagiarized, how he'd never trust leaving a manuscript with a publisher again.

Confused, I asked how and when and by whom his work had been stolen. He replied that an unscrupulous publisher to whom he had sent the novel, after having rejecting it, had published

the book under the authorship of another writer a year later!

I was taken aback by this accusation, and when I said that it was outrageous, that there were laws, that he should sue, Daniel said that these nefarious people didn't use an identical sentence from his book when they lifted the theme, the plot, the characters, the general tone from his manuscript, so there was nothing, really, that he could do on the legal front. He'd paid for the best lawyers to look into it to no avail, so they got away with their thievery. Appalled, and a little disbelieving of his claim, I asked who had done such a thing?

"Jim Morrow published it; Frederick Feldman, a… *friend* of his, who never wrote anything other than a gardening column for the *Daily News*, passed my book off as his own."

The weighty implication of the word *friend* had me thinking….

The other writer who frequented Romany Marie's, and who was also a Niles Pickering author, was Mark Wendt.

Mark is a good-looking fellow: mid-thirties, tall, blond, blue-eyed, with the grace of a dancer. There is an air of the theatrical about Mark, in the sense that when he enters a room, he commands attention with no visible effort at all. He appears to accomplish, with no conscious affectation, a seasoned actor's stage entrance.

I doubt it was conscious and calculated, but he would enter the café and stand in the doorway, eyes scanning the room, walking a silver dollar in and out through his fingers, and because of his natural charisma all eyes would turn toward him. He always gave the impression that he was glad to see me, that he had actually come to Marie's looking for me. I soon realized that that was not always the case. It was just his amiable, all-inclusive manner that he displayed with everyone he had known a passing acquaintance with. Women, especially women, the young and middle-aged ones, believed he held a special interest in them. I would watch their longing, lonely eyes turn at his entrance, and he would always smile and say their names when he moved past their tables nodding hello, perhaps offering a compliment for a jaunty hat, a well-adorned shawl, before moving on, table by table, working the room like a suave maître d' at the Waldorf.

Mark had had a career as a Broadway hoofer before taking up the pen, I found out as he slowly revealed bits and pieces of his life. Now, he was enjoying a string of successes writing Western novels, popular among adolescent boys and adventure-starved men, but I had heard through a friend that he wanted to be taken seriously as an author.

The first time we met at Romany Marie's was during the fall of '27, when I looked up from

my notebook to see him approaching my table. He smiled boyishly, and asked if I remembered him, which of course I did, so I pulled out a chair. He was rolling a coin through his fingers, like a magician, and I asked him to show me how he did it. I fumbled and kept dropping the silver dollar on the table. Then, when I reached for it where I thought it had fallen, the coin was gone. Mark told me to check inside my shirt pocket, and there it was!

"Sleight of hand," he told me, "a magician's trick."

I said he was very talented, and he said that the coin trick had nothing to do with talent, just nimble fingers and lots of practice. "Writing, the way you do it, takes talent and a nimble mind, Ernest."

I was flattered when he looked at me with such an expression of reverence, and offered the most effusive praise of my work, of the book I'd written years ago to good reviews, but which had never had a second printing. This whispered veneration was unexpected and I felt a little thrill and a sudden lift of encouragement. I was a bit embarrassed, too, I admit, especially when he asked about my "process."

I thought to myself, *What process? I haven't got a process.* But, I kept mute.

I had come to believe that the book I had written, which was received with much praise from

the critics, had been a fluke. Upon rereading it not long ago, I wondered who could have written something so true, so viscerally wrenching, so… profoundly *good*? I was coming to terms with the possibility that I was a one-shot wonder. Could I have once been that man, that acclaimed author, Ernest Stringer? Ernest Stringer…

What happened to Ernest Stringer, the author of *A Treasure of Tomorrows*? Were mine the very same fingers of its author, fingers that had tripped violently across the keys, tapping at sixty words a minute, words, dialogue coming through faster than I was capable of typing them out onto the page, fingers that these days fell ineffectively on the Royal's keyboard? What happened to the man whom one lofty reviewer acclaimed as "the modern Henry James"?

That was five years ago, and today I was a publishing business pariah, a flash-in-the-pan, not having produced anything worthwhile since.

I was tired of telling those well-meaning people who liked the book and would ask when the next was due to be published that I was busy at work on a new story, which was a lie, of course, an effort to buy time. "A writer doesn't like to talk about his work," would be my reply when asked its theme, knowing, dreading the truth: There was nothing at all I could find to say for another book.

With the events of those past few months leading up to the death of Niles Pickering, I had

considered leaving Manhattan, settling in some small town where nobody knew me and trying my hand at selling insurance, rather than enduring the increasingly skeptical expressions on people's faces. I sensed that I was unconsciously projecting the desperation of a dried-up has-been as smiles stiffened and pitying silences replaced their prior admiration and enthusiasm. After a while, nobody asked what I was working on. That was worse. It was more demoralizing than I could stand much longer.

So, now, to steer the conversation away from the exalted alter-ego I had once been, and for lack of imagination, I brought up the untimely death of Niles Pickering.

Mark said that he had gone to the funeral, even though Pickering had not renewed his contract.

I admitted I had been dealt the same hand, but I said I was surprised that, before his death, Pickering would let go of such a prolific—as well as profitable—author such as he.

"Creative differences; I refused to write any more Cowboy books," he admitted, playing with the silver dollar. "Anyway, he had a plan in the works to turn his literary house into a pulp factory."

"What! Like cheap romance and gangster stories?"

"Right, like the stuff you see at the newsstands, magazines and cheap books."

Ah, I thought. It was Mark who had bolted from Pickering!

I was reticent about my situation. I, like Cousins, kept things close to the vest. But after a while, and because of Mark's candor, his desire to write important books, I confessed to Wendt that I was at a standstill in my career. When he asked how I managed without a steady income, I didn't tell him about the other stuff I had been hacking out for publisher Harvey Price, whose hidden subsidiary published decidedly salacious fare, worse than the pulp magazines at the newsstands. No, the books I was hacking out could never be displayed to the general public. They were for a distinctly different audience. These sex stories kept food in my mouth and a roof over my head, though I was loath to admit I was the man behind the moniker, Lance Pierce! I had Price's assurance that no one would *ever* know it was I who was writing this trash. Only Cherish knew.

Mark said that he wished he could write as well as I.

Here was a man entertaining thousands of readers with well-written novels about the Old West, while I was just a one-shot deal. Mark Wendt said he "wanted to be more; he wanted to be an *artist* like me. I found his admission disconcerting. He'd found a niche and was a

success; I was struggling, writing trash, and had no real vision for my future. Ashamed for not telling him how low I'd come, I kept all those feelings of worthlessness to myself. Some people might think that to be prolific means a lack of artistic acumen. I wasn't about to correct them.

In October 1928, Daniel ambled in one time and joined us, and we gossiped freely about people we knew in the literary field, and about how the Yankees' "Murderers Row"—Ruth and Gehrig and the rest—had crushed the St. Louis Cardinals in the first game of the World Series that afternoon. After the stunning defeat of '26, when at the bottom of the ninth the Babe's attempted steal of second base gave the Series to St. Louis when Hornsby tagged him out, the Yanks were hot for a victory.

Mark, with tickets for the second game the next afternoon at Yankee Stadium, asked me and Daniel to join him. He was bringing the young son of a widow he had become acquainted with to the game. Although I was a diehard Giants fan, I wouldn't pass up the chance of going to a Series game, whoever was playing. It was a great day for New York, and I enjoyed the new friendships of these men.

Marie didn't serve liquor at her café. There were too many residents of the Washington Square area of the Village who didn't like her gypsy style and the Bohemian influence that was moving west toward the park, and they would have liked to

see her and her artsy patrons gone. She wouldn't chance being shut down by the Feds, so she stuck with the nonalcoholic brews, which meant that if you wanted a beer or a stiff drink you had to find a speak. Late one night, at Mark's insistence for a more potent beverage, he sprung for drinks at Chumley's.

Chumley's, at 86 Bedford Street, cannot be seen from the street. We walked into a narrow alley between buildings that led into a small courtyard. Just ahead was an arched wooden door. Mark knocked and a square wooden panel slid to the side and an eye stared at us. It approved, I suppose, because a few moments later the door was unbolted and we were bid enter.

Chumley's opened a couple of years ago. Its proprietor is an Englishman with definite socialist leanings. I'd heard talk about its intellectual patronage, of course. Edmund Wilson and John Dos Passos, and men holding Marxist views frequent the place. It's been said to be a hotbed of sedition. I, knowing little about it, looked at my friends for elaboration. Daniel said that the Pen and Frog Society has regular meetings on the second floor, accessed through the dumbwaiter hidden behind the toiletry shelves in the ladies' room. He pointed to the ceiling and said, "That is where the plot to overthrow the United States government is always on the agenda."

Cleverly, the front for sedition is a speakeasy, another illegal venture, and although the police are not aware of the treasonous activities being conducted on the second floor, they are well aware of the variety of "tea" being served downstairs.

"Why, all a cop with a thirst for gin needs to do is stop in and ask for an "English tea," said Daniel. "If he prefers Seagram's 7, he just asks for "Canadian tea." The "Tennessee tea" will get you a Jack Daniels in a porcelain teacup. It's the real stuff, too!"

"But the serious stuff goes on upstairs and is unseen by the general public and the Feds," said Mark.

"Sounds like the kind of club kids make in hideouts," I said, but I didn't add that I grew up at the orphan asylum where such things were never a part of life.

"Yeah, secret handshake, coded messages," said Mark. "Ours was in the basement of a brownstone, Upper East Side, where the old woman we called the 'cat lady' squatted with her fifty cats."

"When we moved to the city from Newport when I was ten, I had no friends here. The neighborhood kids didn't like me, but when I found a construction shack that was left behind after they'd finished digging the subway near Ninetieth Street," laughed Daniel, "I had an idea. I told the boys that if they'd let me play with them, I'd get

them a clubhouse. It took some engineering, but we hooked the shack up with chains, and a horse-cart dragged it through the yard to an empty lot behind a tenement house. I was a member of the gang, now."

"Your ingenuity paid off," I said.

"I felt like the king of the world. We covered it with brush and junk—anything we could find—to hide it."

"Our place smelled like cat piss, but it was our secret club," said Mark.

That's the night I learned more about Mark Wendt.

Born in '97, he was the only child of immigrant parents who lived on the Upper East Side, Ninety-Third Street, the Jewish neighborhood where the Marx Brothers grew up. His father was killed; he was a sandhog—drowned while on the job digging the East River section of the Pennsylvania Railroad tunnel. His mother waitressed to support them.

"I was a scrawny towhead, and a dreamer," he told me. A dreamer who, when lost in his fantasies, would wander across Lexington Avenue and get beaten up by the Irish kids, or by the German kids a few blocks south, "which was—still is—the way of the streets around town." He chuckled, "I always sported a shiner. Like a warrior's badge of courage.

"I wasn't like all the other neighborhood kids. I was small for my age, and kids made fun of me and pushed me around."

So he kept to himself and starting reading anything he could get his hands on.

"I hated school; the bullying was worse in the schoolyard. All I wanted to do was hide, escape. Reading was my escape."

Things changed when he approached puberty, and he shot up like a weed. It didn't make him many friends his own age, but the younger kids in his neighborhood gathered around him and he would tell them stories, mostly tales he'd made up himself, about knights and ladies and Arabian adventures.

It was discovered that he had a nice singing voice, and when he was twelve, he quit the sixth grade and joined a troupe of singers who performed for two-bits a night, a catfish dinner, and all the beer you could drink at an oyster joint on Forty-Sixth Street. There, he met Omar the Great, a down-and-out magician, a onetime headliner who sought comfort in a bottle after his wife and daughter were killed in a fire. Omar took a liking to the kid and taught him sleight-of-hand and card and coin tricks and several magic illusions, which Mark cleverly incorporated into a song-and-dance routine. It was novel enough to get him a featured spot at Harry's Harem, a nightclub frequented by theatricals and agents from the Albee Circuit.

That's where he was seen by the casting agent for George M. Cohan's new show, *Hello, Broadway*, back in '14. So Mark Wendt began a career as a chorus boy in a string of shows. But what he did best was make up stories, which he began writing down. In '22 he got published. He's got eight books under his belt, all about the Wild West.

"Never been west of Jersey, but people eat that crap up," he said, in a self-deprecating manner.

He'd married a chorine, but she ran off with another guy years ago, before the books became popular and the money started rolling in. There were women, of course, since then. There would always be women who wanted Mark, I thought, but then he talked about Katie, a recently widowed young woman he knew, whose son, Bobby, he took to the ballgame. He was trying to help her, he said, had called an editor friend at Scribner's who was able to get her a job as a clerk. I thought, at first, it was because he, too, had been the only child of a widowed mother struggling to support her child, and he was doing a charitable act. But, as he spoke more and more about her, I saw a certain *something*, a change, the brightening of his eyes, emotion driving his words, and I knew he had more than a passing interest in the woman.

So the two things we three had in common was that we had shared the same publisher for a

time, and we were all three single children who had suffered the loss of a father.

It was to be a dismal winter for me. Harvey Price said he wasn't going to publish any more of my sex stories. Sex could be had easily these days, he said. It's everywhere you look when you walk down the street. "Free love," without inhibitions. Everybody under forty was doing it, talking about it. Sex was in vogue these days and the fashionable topic of public discussion. The Bright Young Things of today told each other all about their sex-lives. To shock was in style, and what better way to silence interfering parents than to talk about free love?

"Who needed to read about it when you could go out to a speak, get a girl tight, and fuck for free?" said Price.

Sex had gone mainstream in books, too, "if you could get a copy of that new book by D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley*, or that jerk-off tome, *Ulysses*," he added crudely.

So I had to take a job again, only now I wasn't a second-string drama critic; I was writing book reviews for ten bucks a pop for a magazine that I didn't think would last the year. And my lack of earning power made me uneasy when it came to Cherish.

Cherish, beautiful Cherish.…

We met in ’24 at a cocktail party, and she approached me, famous author at the time, to say I had “the features of a ragged Titan prince.” It was a double-edged compliment, and I laughed.

“Which one?”

“*Man with a Glove*,” she said. “I fell in love with you at the Louvre.”

The attraction was instant, heady, and powerful and we could not take our eyes off each other. By the next morning we lay exhausted in one another’s arms.

Cherish, with the flame-red hair, my Bohemian woman of the past three years. The woman who first mistook me for a brilliant novelist; Cherish, who had been witness to my fall into a spiraling funk of depression. She knew little of my past. I dared not risk her knowing. I took the job to keep us going, until something better came along, or I could write something someone would publish.

I often wondered why she stayed with me, and when she would come to her senses and bolt out of my life. My greatest threat was Carlos Miguel Hernandez, the muralist, with whom Cherish shared a studio space in the attic of our apartment building.

Carlos Miguel is an earthy Mexican, handsome and charismatic. Dark, wide-set eyes, piercing with a smoldering intensity and set in a

swarthy face, held magnetic attraction for women. His resonant voice rolled out to you with velvety, accented richness, ending consonants smoothed away like feathered brushstrokes. He used the attic studio as a place to store his paints, his tools for the trade, and to prepare huge stencils to outline his designs. He was out most of the day when working on one of his grand murals. His commissions were in the homes of the wealthy or adorning the walls of the lobbies of skyscrapers. And Cherish could be a compelling temptation to any man who glanced her way.

Part of her appeal, beyond her physical beauty, was that she spoke directly. Like a man to another man. Looked you right in the eye and spoke without the device of flirtation, the practiced feminine ploy to get a woman what she wants from a man. With Cherish there were no fluttering eyelashes, no demure smiles, no pretentions, just pure intent. This unconscious detachment had an appeal. Egos, especially those of powerful men, find that kind of romantic disinterest in a woman challenging. And Carlos, jovial, amiable, flashing a smile wider and whiter than snow-covered Alps on a sunny day, was a powerful man. Also, Carlos Miguel was an immensely likeable man. I felt small and puny next to his brawn. A faded, nondescript, pale, lanky, sandy-haired Jew from New York City with a past that made me leery of big, powerful, smiling men like Carlos. I tried to

seize control of the green devil when it rose up inside me.

Sometimes, I thought she stayed with me only because she didn't have the heart to inflict the hurt that would surely come should she go. For Cherish had a heart as lovely and as graceful and as strong as her lithe body. Was it pity I saw when she gazed at me with those amazing eyes? Or was it empathy? I believed she loved me; a person without pretense cannot lie about these things. And she still believed in me when I had lost faith. How poor my life would be without her. I would never let her down, I promised myself each morning when I awoke in our cold flat above the shoemaker's shop.

Cherish found work for a time as an artist's model when she came to New York City five years ago. Her flawless white skin, blue eyes, and Botticelli nymph–like features graced the canvases of many post-romantics. But she was too ambitious to stand still for hours awaiting immortality through the brushstrokes of one or another of the many mediocre attempts to capture her soul. She decided she could do better. She had inherited a flare for things artistic, and her sketches were promising, so she was told, so she enrolled in art school while continuing to model to support herself. After her instructors told her she hadn't the talent to become a great painter like her father, who had been a traveling portrait

painter of some repute, she gave it up. She never talked about her parents or her life before New York, and not wanting to return to the suburb of Cincinnati of her childhood, modeling remained her only option. She considered for a time the stage, but her heart wasn't in it, despite her beauty and the encouragement of admiring men for her to give it a go.

It happened one day, while walking to the studio of magazine illustrator Neysa McMein to pose for a cover of *Life*, that she watched a man pasting up a paper section of a billboard. Having recently discovered and been intrigued with the cubists and the new surrealism, she made a connection. The odd, random arrangement of colored paper laid atop an older image brought to mind a memory from her childhood: the figures of the Christmas crèche in her parents' house that had had a strange appeal to her. It had to do with the contrasting colors of the cheaply painted robes of the Virgin: a deep saturation of cerulean blue and turquoise. The colors infused her senses now, as they had back then. Those colors set side-by-side conjured emotions that she associated with the religious icon.

She told me that a sudden revelation flashed through her mind, an understanding she had not garnered from her time at the art academy: *color as imagery*. The laying on of color to tell a story and to evoke emotions.

Taking out her brushes and paints, she began to play with ideas for artworks blocking vivid color against unexpected contrasting color. After a while, she incorporated elements of the uncompleted billboard she had seen. Scraps of newsprint, partial phrases lending hints to a secret story buried beneath the new. A palimpsest of images to be deciphered by the discerning eye.

Soon she progressed to adding sculptural elements into these collages. She was repeating the imagery of the Virgin, she told me once, "with a blatant disregard for the purity and innocence of all that the Virgin represented, as is currently being expressed in our society."

She'd sold several works in as many months, enough for the rent and food, but not enough for us to beat the chill of poverty. So I would write the book reviews and try to find some other means of support. I decided to put aside my dream of writing the next Great American Novel.

And then, as if a curtain had been rung, Cherish, creator of the most outrageous abstract canvases, had received an unexpected visit to the attic studio this winter morning by a gallery owner, urged on by the ever-present Carlos, to see her work. Impressed, he promised her a show at his uptown gallery in the spring. She was becoming a success at last. Heartless as it sounds, I dreaded it.

I remember it happened in February 1929. By late afternoon the snow had begun, and in the darkness I fled the apartment to escape, not only the chill that seeped through the walls, but the cold prescience of the beginning of the end of my days with the woman I loved.

I was sitting near the woodstove at Romany Marie's, trying to beat off the terrible reality that I was despicably envious of my beloved's success, and awaiting the imminent loss of her love, when I felt a draft from the front door and looked up from my cup to see Mark stamping the snow off his boots and dusting off his fedora.

Despite his fairness, he looked deathly pale, his face drawn and his usual smile replaced by a stiff slash. I wondered if he had been ill. I hadn't seen him at the café since the New Year. At this time of day the café was nearly empty of customers, just me and a couple at a table across the room.

Mark caught my eye, and I could see a slight hesitation, a look of distress upon seeing me. The easy swagger I had come to expect was now a trudge toward my table. I wondered why he didn't immediately grab the chair to join me; instead, he stood before me, glassy-eyed and with a stunned expression.

Rising from my wallow in self-loathing, I said, “Sit down, Mark, you look beat!”

His eyes flitted around the room as if searching, weighing his options. Reluctantly, it seemed to me, he pulled out the chair and sat.

“You all right?” I asked, as Marie stepped out from the kitchen door. I caught her attention when she stopped short, as if sensing it best to keep her distance, and I motioned to bring a cup of coffee for Mark.

“You been sick?”

He didn’t answer right away, just sat dumbly, staring at me with unseeing eyes. And then, holding my gaze, he whispered, more to himself than in reply to me, “She’s dead.”

He said no more, just the statement of fact, and his eyes never left my face.

Fancifully, I had the odd impression that I was the only thing on earth that he could latch onto, that grounded him, and that should he look away from me he would be inexorably thrown back into some hellish abyss and lost forever. I grabbed his arm. Marie brought the coffee and broke the spell. Sensing all was not well, she quickly retreated.

Mark’s hands were red and chafed from cold and trembled as he made contact with the hot cup, and I knew he had meant Katherine Borso. Katie was dead.

“When?”

"Last night."

I could not think of anything to say that wouldn't have sounded trite. So we sat there, my silence ineffectual, his silence heavy with grief.

"I loved her, you know?" he finally said. "I wanted her, to marry her, you know?"

All I could do was nod and wait. But the silence had to be filled.

"Bobby?" I asked.

"With his dead father's sister in Brooklyn."

"How?"

"Car. Run down by a car. Crossing the street."

Mark's features collapsed into a grimace of pain, and he struck the table with his fist before saying, "Goddammit! She was running after Bobby."

"I don't—"

"Bobby dashed out," he said, and then looked at me. "I gave him a camera for his birthday. A Brownie. Showed him how to use it. Then he ran out to show the boys on the block, no coat. Katie called to him, but he kept going, so she… ran after him… and this car. I saw it happen… from the window."

"Oh, God, Mark!"

"It didn't stop. The bastard never stopped."

"But, that's—"

"She… died in my arms."

"Oh, God, Mark!"

"*I loved her!*" he blurted out with a desperate, wet choking. His eyes closed and his head dropped into waiting hands that gripped his hair.

And then, with a quiet resignation that was rife with loss, "We planned to marry in the spring."

"I'm sorry."

"Yes…"

"So sorry."

He stood up abruptly.

"What are you going to do, Mark?"

"I don't know."

"I mean, where are you going? Right now?"

"I don't know…"

"Stay. I mean, let's go get a drink," I said, as if I could afford a shot. Mark always had money, and if I had to spend the couple bucks I had in my pocket, I would. I couldn't let him wander around in the storm. Not tonight. Not like this. He had nowhere to go. I knew that he had no family. As successful as he was, the people he consorted with made for only casual and fleeting friendships. Publishing people were pretty much all business. Most writers were envious of their peers, especially successful ones, and Mark was successful. Show-people were always moving on; it is the nature of the business. I understood. Writers can live lonely lives.

Before this day, Mark and I were not really close, just friendly people who happened to patronize the same café. We admired each other

for the gift we each thought we lacked and saw abundant in the other. I suppose it was his sudden expression of need that brought us together on more intimate terms.

I guided Mark to Chumley's, and after a couple of drinks to numb his senses, walked him home to his apartment. After getting him to bed, I went off to my own and the warmth of a newfound appreciation of the generous Cherish Winter.

This is the end of the book sample

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