

**DEAD MAN TO
STARBOARD**

A Village Mystery

J.E. Rohrer

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Ordering Information

The Books in the Dead Man series by J.E.
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This book is dedicated to all those Baby Boomers who have struggled with a period of unemployment, particularly those who were managers.

CHAPTER 1. FACE OUT OF CONTEXT

The wet road cast off reflections from the street lights, but there was enough light to see the man in the street in front of me. Being observant was not my strong suit, but even I could not miss seeing the guy.

At first, he looked like a crumpled heap of old clothes tossed into the middle of Main Street. He was about a block from the signal at the corner by the Sentry grocery store. You know the one I mean: if you turned one way you headed toward the hospital, if you turned the other way you headed toward the Holiday Inn Express.

The body was wet, of course, because everything was wet. The poor guy's wet clothes glistened in my headlights as I slowed my Ford Focus. For a minute or so, I just sat there, the car idling. After all, this was not something you saw every day and I was having trouble taking it in. Was that what it appeared to be, a body in the middle of the street? Finally, I got out and walked toward it hesitantly.

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He clearly had been a business type. He was wearing a blazer, white shirt, tie, dress slacks, and wingtips. He was face down and his head was turned at an angle. A puddle of what had to be blood surrounded him.

The sound of another car stopping gradually registered. A car door opened and the sound of footsteps approaching caused me to turn and look. An elderly man stood there. He wore a stunned look on his face, one that probably mirrored mine. The driver's side door of his pickup stood open and the overhead light illuminated an elderly woman who was busy talking into a cell phone.

I started to call 911 then realized the woman in the other car was already talking to them. I was in shock and everything seemed to be in slow motion, especially my rational thought processes. Perhaps I should have checked the body for a pulse, attempted first aid, or thought of some useful action to take instead of just standing there. But all I seemed to be able to do was stare blankly at the body.

"Well, this is a mess," I said.

The man next to me hesitated, then replied laconically. "Yup." He looked me over with a frown, then said again, "Yup. Sure is." He

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looked like a farmer with his overalls and seed hat.

We stood there saying nothing more while we waited for the police to arrive. The woman got out of the car and came over, standing on the other side of the man and peering around him to direct a frown at me.

Why was she frowning at me? I could be a little slow on the uptake sometimes. Then it dawned on me. She thought I had hit the guy with my car. Just because my car was there first and I was standing by the body, she assumed I was the guilty party. Pretty darn unjust, don't you think? Some people were just plain judgmental, always ready to believe the worst of their fellow man.

A siren could be heard approaching quickly. Then another. The city police car pulled up and we could see an ambulance coming. It was starting to look like I would not make it home any time soon. Since I couldn't seem to stay awake past ten in the evening, this was going to be a real hardship.

The level of activity picked up right away. The police officer moved us away from the body. The EMS team rushed over with a stretcher and started to examine the body. The

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crackle of radios punctuated the night air. Traffic was starting to become blocked, so the cop began directing it around the scene. The elderly couple and I just stood around, waiting for someone to ask us what we knew. Which was, of course, exactly nothing, but going home would probably not have been seen as acceptable behavior. So there we stood, shifting our weight from one foot to the other every few minutes.

Another car pulled up and two people I had met before emerged. They were police detectives. The senior officer was named Broder and the number two was a tough woman named Schmidt. Frankly, I was a little relieved. Those two would know that I was not at fault.

Both of them recognized me right away. Without needing to discuss the division of labor, Broder took the old farmer and his wife off to one side and began taking their statements. Schmidt walked up to me. I gave her a smile and said, "Hey. How's it going, Detective?"

She ignored my sally and glowered at me for a minute, then said, "Looks like you've really done it this time, Schumacher."

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Shoot. This was not fair. This woman should know I was an honest citizen who would never run over a pedestrian. Come to think of it, I had never liked Schmidt, not from the first time I met her.

On the other hand, wasn't this what the police always do? They accuse witnesses of being the perpetrators. Maybe real perps fold under pressure when the cops accuse them, making for a speedy resolution of a crime. On the other hand, given the number of unsolved crimes in this country, maybe the police should rewrite their rule book.

Being a curious sort, I had to ask her about it. "Is there some kind of rule book for cops that tells them they are supposed to make every witness feel like he is a suspect? Something like "Interrogation for Dummies?"

Usually, I was not this impolitic. Okay, often I was. But when it was important, I could usually keep my mouth shut. If I sound a little defensive on this point, it is only because my wife keeps telling me that I embarrass her at cocktail parties by offering outrageous opinions. People should be able to exchange ideas openly without everyone getting upset, don't you think?

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Schmidt's face turned red and the muscles in her jaw bunched. "Actually, Mister Schumacher, we only accuse people of running over pedestrians when we actually find their cars in the middle of the street right next to the victim."

My survival instincts began to awaken, belatedly. "I see your point," I told her. This was not the time to be a smart aleck. Even I could figure that out.

Schmidt flipped open her notebook and said flatly, "Now, tell me what happened." So I did. "I was driving up the street and saw this body, so I stopped."

She waited a moment, ballpoint pen poised. "That's all?"

"Yup. That's all."

She snorted with disgust and flipped the notebook closed. "Listen, you turkey, I don't want any of your guff." She was getting wound up, no doubt about it.

"You hit the guy, didn't you? Ran right into him. You been drinking? Come from a party? Driving a little too fast? Half asleep? You didn't even call anybody, you bastard!" Her eyes were slitted and she was breathing fast. She was starting to scare me.

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"Enough of this, you damn jerk. I'm reading you your rights. You have the right to remain silent. You have the right..."

At this point, Detective Broder came over and put a hand on her arm. "What's up?" He asked her. She was sputtering with anger. He held up his hand. "May I ask a question or two?" He asked gently. She took a breath and waited. "Did you see any damage to his car?" She froze. "Do you smell alcohol on his breath?" Her face got even redder. "Is he behaving in an erratic or unusual way?" He glanced at me then amended the question, "I mean, unusual for him?"

She took a breath, then let it out slowly. "Okay, you handle it," she said curtly and walked away.

"Thank you, Detective," I told him. "She was really going after me."

Broder looked me over carefully. "You're not out of the woods yet, Mr. Schumacher. Mr. and Mrs. Swearingen did not see you hit the victim, but they can't say you didn't hit him, either. We need to know where you have been, where you are going, and what you are doing here at this time."

"I was at church. The Irish Lutheran

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Church. We had a meeting in the basement. I was just going home, minding my own business, when I saw the body. That really is the whole story."

Broder nodded. "Okay. We need to look over your car. It will only take a few minutes."

Sighing, I stepped to one side. I pulled out my cell phone and called my wife. Betty had a system with her cell phone. She kept it in a little bag inside her purse. That meant when it rang she had to first locate her purse, then get the bag out, then get the cell phone out, then punch the correct button. All of these steps took time to accomplish, so generally the phone stopped ringing before she answered it. Not to worry; she would call me back.

She did. "Hello!" Was my cheery answer when she rang me.

"Where are you?"

"I..."

"Are you hurt?"

"No..."

"Why aren't you home yet?"

"But..."

"Should I come get you?"

"No..."

"I'm coming right now!" Then she hung

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up. Fortunately, Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, was a small town, so the fact that Betty did not have a clue where I might be located was irrelevant. She would be there shortly.

The examination of my car did not take very long. Even so, Broder kept me there another forty-five minutes while he went through the victim's wallet and made a few calls. Betty showed up and stood with me while we waited. It was the middle of June, so the evening air was comfortable. I told her the whole story while we waited. She was appropriately sympathetic. "Are you okay? Do you want to sit down? They shouldn't make you stand all this time." That's my Betty, always in my corner. Well, to be honest, she was usually in my corner. But every now and then, she mistakenly thought I was in the wrong. Then, I caught hell.

Finally, Broder came over. He was looking pretty grim. "Is there anything else you want to tell me," he asked?

"Like what?" I was mystified.

"Why didn't you tell me you knew the victim?"

That threw me for a loop. "Who is it?"

He paused for effect. "His name is Tom

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MacFarlane. He was at the church meeting with you. In fact, he has been attending that meeting with you and three other guys for the last six months. It appears that you knew each other very well. What I would like to know is why you didn't mention that to me?"

Tom MacFarlane? He was a good friend of mine. This was terrible.

I gulped air and gave it my best shot. "You know how sometimes you run into people in places where you don't usually see them and you don't immediately recognize them? It's like they are out of context, so your brain does not make the connection."

Broder looked at me, then said. "No, I have never heard of that." Then he shook his head slowly. "But somehow I can believe it about you, Professor Schumacher.

CHAPTER 2. INTERROGATION

At this point, I should tell you a little about myself and Betty and how we came to be in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin. Physically, I was an average guy: 5 feet 9 inches tall, 170 pounds, not big on exercise, constantly working to control my weight. You might say I was a little eccentric; Betty certainly did. I liked a beer now and then, and I smoked a pipe.

Betty grew up in Wisconsin and had relatives scattered around the state. We had been living in the Panhandle of Texas until recently. Over a year ago, we bought a condo in Fort Atkinson, so we could spend our summers here. Last summer was the first time we lived in "Fort". It was a great summer, but it had its stresses, culminating in a heart attack for me. My doctors and Betty felt that a period of group therapy was indicated for reasons that escaped me. What they called erratic behavior and a tendency to imagine things was greatly exaggerated, of course. But I was alone in that opinion.

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When we were back in Texas, we tried to settle into the old routine, but Betty finally concluded that I was too prone to stress and needed to retire. I never agreed to complete retirement. I was only 50 years old at that point, but scaling back seemed wise. So, we sold the house in Texas and moved all of our stuff into the condo in Wisconsin. This was a major exercise in downsizing and not without stresses of its own. Not for me because I didn't cart around as much childhood memorabilia as Betty did. She seemed to have kept every childhood toy she ever owned.

Betty is a very sharp cookie. She is a physician who went through the Washington University Medical School in St. Louis on a scholarship. She had her quirks, but who didn't? And she puts up with me which I sincerely appreciate.

Betty and I live with a little cat we call Fritter. Fritter is our second cat. The first one died the previous summer while we were in Wisconsin. When we were driving back to Texas, we stopped at a restaurant in Solon, Iowa, that claimed to have the best pork fritters around. They were right about that. Anyway, when we came out of the restaurant

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into a light rain, we saw a little kitten dashing around the parking lot. The kitty ran from car to car, hiding under them and whining pitifully. This behavior was going to get the kitty killed, so we felt obligated to rescue it. Betty banged on several nearby doors to try to find the owners, but everyone said it had probably been dumped. It was a cute little thing, so we kidnapped it. Or should I say catnapped? Kitnapped?

During a good portion of the next two days, which was how long it took us to drive home, the cat continued to cry. Betty was ready to throw it out the window of the car, but I persuaded her that the little thing would calm down eventually. I suspected Betty was mourning the cat we had recently lost and felt that liking the new one would somehow be disloyal. Betty is a very loyal person.

Sensing who its protector was, the kitten spent most of its time nestled between my legs while I drove. It must have bonded to me during that period because it has exhibited a strong attachment to me ever since.

Fort Atkinson is a nice little city. I like to call it a village, but it is really a bit large for that. Like many similar towns in Wisconsin,

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Fort was trying to attract the tourist trade. Madison was thirty miles in one direction and Milwaukee was just over an hour in the other direction. And, of course, you could always aim for attracting tourists from Chicago.

Small places like Fort had an ambivalent attitude toward tourists. On the one hand, tourists brought a lot of spending money with them, which could be used to fuel the local economy, thus increasing tax revenues to support the school system and other essentials. On the other hand, some tourists were a pain in the neck, especially those from Chicago. And, of course, Chicagoans believed Wisconsin was their playground. Wisconsin was a great place to visit, cut loose, drive too fast, act pushy, and generally make a mess. The locals were very polite and would never tell the folks from Chicago what they really thought. Maybe it would do them good, but delivering that kind of criticism would be out of character. Well, I could tell the folks from Chicago what people in Wisconsin really thought. Should I? Would that be disloyal to Fort? Being the kind of guy I am, I have to believe that the truth, although painful, is constructive.

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So, here goes. Listen up people from Chicago and learn. If you pay attention on your next trip to Wisconsin, you will hear the locals use the term 'FIBs' among themselves while they are preparing your ice cream. Do you know what a FIB is? Everybody in rural Wisconsin knows what it means and they all agree on the accuracy of the term. The second two words are Illinois and Bastard. You can guess what the first word is pretty easily.

Were you shocked that the nice people in Wisconsin would have this attitude? If so, then maybe you should think about how your crowd earned the name. Next time you visit, try to behave yourself.

Fort was making a serious effort to attract tourists. A river ran through downtown, so they built a river walk that was nice, if small, and made for a pleasant ten minute stroll. Unfortunately, the year after they finished it, high water covered it most of the summer. This year, the water was gone and the river walk was in great shape. However, some of the storefronts downtown were vacant and others were clearly on their last legs. As it had for the last one hundred years, the economy continued to suck resources away from the small towns

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into the cities. Local businesses could not seem to compete with malls in the larger cities. Even locally, the chain stores were healthier than those that were locally owned and operated.

The mom and pop store, which exemplified the entrepreneurial spirit in my mind, was dying out. There were two good reasons for this: quality and cost. Frankly, I liked the Pizza Hut Bistro better than some locally owned restaurants. And if McDonald's ever turned itself into a coffee shop and cafe similar to Starbucks (but with lower prices), I would be a regular patron. And yes, I shopped at Wal-Mart. The big chains could buy supplies in volume and they have developed standardized systems to maintain efficiency and quality. How could a locally owned store hope to compete?

Where was all this headed and what did the future hold for towns like Fort? Was tourism the only option? Let's hope not. Tourism was a zero-sum game. If Fort succeeded in attracting tourists, then some other small town in Wisconsin would get fewer of them. If all the small towns had to compete against each other for a limited supply of the tourist business, then some would lose and die out.

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This process of fighting over the crumbs from tourists seemed demeaning to me. And competing against each other seemed almost like cannibalism; the survivors eating the weaker of their fellows.

I hoped there would be another way. If the internet reached it's potential, then anyone would be able to live in rural Wisconsin and still compete in the global market place. Maybe I was dreaming, but I sure hoped it worked out that way. Then, maybe, we would see a reversal of the flow of resources into the cities. Our main problem would be keeping out the FIBs. After all, we didn't want them to actually move to places like Fort. Short visits were bad enough.

Anyway, there we were in Fort in our condo, the day after finding a friend's corpse in the middle of Main Street. It must have been a Thursday morning because I had run across the body (correction: discovered the body) when driving back from my support group, which always met on Wednesday evenings. We were doing the usual thing that morning - reading the paper and drinking coffee. I always made the coffee since I was up first. Usually, I brought it to Betty in the

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bedroom, who was sure to be both prone and groggy, along with a donut from the local convenience store and part of the newspaper. I claimed the front page for myself since I was doing all of the work.

That morning, about nine, the doorbell rang. Opening the door to our deck (our condo was on the second floor), I walked out and looked over the rail to see who was there. It was Schmidt and Broder. Great. I trotted down the stairs and opened the door.

"We need to talk to you down at the station," Broder said. Schmidt looked unusually happy this morning. That was a bad sign.

I sighed. "Let me tell Betty where I'm going. I'll be right with you."

They put me in the back seat of their unmarked Ford Taurus. None of us said anything during the five minute ride to the station. I just watched the town unfold outside my window. Quiet, middle-class neighborhoods, the homes were tidy without being obsessive about it. We lived in Lubbock for a couple of years in an upscale neighborhood. Folks were nuts about their yards. Green grass was unnatural to the area,

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but they poured gallons of water on their yards every day. I suspected they had Midwest envy, though they would never admit it. And green grass was not enough; they wanted their yards to look like putting greens. Frankly, I never liked that place, not after receiving the anonymous note about how the condition of my yard was bringing down property values.

Fort Atkinson was different. People had green yards because it rained a lot and the sun did not scorch the grass. But if they lived in an arid climate, they would not have spent time and money trying to make it green. They had too much common sense for that. And they just weren't pretentious enough to bother with trying to reach superior standards of appearance. Maybe the real difference was the natural egalitarianism of the Midwesterner; we didn't aspire to be better than our fellow man. In fact, those who had money were careful not to flaunt it. In Texas, it was a different story. The extremes between rich and poor were right out in front of everybody. There was no shame about wealth and precious little resentment from those who didn't have it because the poor were hoping for the day when they could be filthy rich, also.

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The detectives led me into an interrogation room after we arrived at the station and climbed out of the car. Broder directed me where to sit with a gesture. I was on one side of a small table, they were on the other. Broder's face was blank. "Mr. Schumacher, we have to go over a few more things with you."

"I thought we had all this taken care of last night."

"Some new evidence has turned up."

"Really? Like what?" I was trying to be chipper.

Schmidt leaned over the table and, with a malicious grin, said "one of the swabs we took from your tire tread had the victim's blood on it." Then she actually chuckled. "Based on the posture of the body and its condition, forensics tells us that your car could have killed the victim without damage to the front bumper, grill, or fenders."

"How the hell could I have done that?" This was pretty farfetched. But it got worse.

"By driving over his head while he lay in the street, Mr. Schumacher, by driving over his head." She leaned back and crossed her arms with a satisfied smile. "You see, the victim was drunk and probably had just passed out in the

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street." She was enjoying this immensely. "It's perfectly understandable. It had been raining. It was dark. Your vision is not as good as it used to be." She was right about that. "You just did not see him down there on the road, so you drove over him. When you heard the crunch, you backed up. Since you had not been drinking, we can probably get you off with manslaughter if there is not something else going on."

"What are you talking about?" I was really mystified.

"We look for three things when we investigate a case." She held up two fingers and a thumb. "Motive, means, opportunity. We have taken care of means and opportunity. We just need to find out your motive."

Broder stepped in at this point. "Let's take this one step at a time. Tell us a little more about your relationship with Mr. MacFarlane."

"Well, we have this support group that meets in the church basement. We have been meeting for about a month. Tom was a member along with me and three other guys."

Now it was my turn to lean across the table. "Look, you guys, Tom was a good guy. Everybody liked him. He had been through a

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heart attack and a divorce and his life was a mess, but he was never a jerk. He was always considerate of other people. Nobody would want to murder him, unless it was his ex." The last comment just slipped out. I really did not mean it seriously. But, it lay on the table in front of us, taking on a life of its own.

While they were off-balance, I tried to take the initiative. "Hey, there was a puddle of blood leaking out of the body. Water was all over the road. You had me waiting so long the puddle probably spread to my tire." Surprisingly, that actually made some sense. "See, you guys, there is a simple explanation."

Broder did not seem surprised at my stroke of brilliance. "We thought of that. That theory also fits the facts. But you can see why we needed to talk to you about it." He offered no apology for Schmidt's belligerent approach.

Broder stood up and motioned me toward the door. "Thanks for coming in. We appreciate your help."

I bolted for the door, but he stopped me with a glance. "Mr. Schumacher, we may have more questions for you about the ex-wife's relationship with her husband. A men's support group might have discussed some

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pretty intimate issues that would have a bearing on the case. Mr. MacFarlane's fears and feelings may have been revealed to a large degree."

Well, no kidding, especially after a couple of beers.

CHAPTER 3. THE DOWNSIZED BOOMER'S SUPPORT GROUP

Back at the condo, Betty was outraged at the way the detectives treated me.

"They knew all along that there was a simple explanation for the blood on your tire," she insisted. "They were just giving you a hard time to see what they could learn."

"You're right. And that Schmidt enjoys giving people a hard time. She's a very angry person."

Betty hesitated. "Well, you do tend to bring that out in some people."

It was time to change the subject. "I am calling the group together for a wake."

"When will it be?"

"Sometime in the next couple of days. I hope all the guys can come."

"You can't do that at the church, you know."

"Oh. I guess you're right. We can meet at Sal's. It does not have to be a big thing. I don't

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want to reserve a room somewhere, just hoist a few in memory of Tom."

"Can I come?"

"Of course. You can be the designated driver."

"The other guys can get their own designated drivers. I'm going to take care of my man." She put her arms around me. Sometimes, she acted like I needed protecting. That was ridiculous, of course. After all, I was the man, wasn't I? I was supposed to protect her, not the other way around.

She was like this even before my heart attack. Betty is just an anxious person. She worries about nothing, or everything, depending on how you want to put it. If there ever was anything really serious to worry about, she would be great to have in your corner because she is a champion worrier. Unfortunately, when there is nothing to worry about, she keeps doing it. I guess when you are a world-class worrier you have to keep practicing to stay in training, so to speak.

After my heart attack, Betty and my doctors insisted that I be in group therapy. They seemed to think I was a little loopy. Then, after we moved up here, I asked my new

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cardiologist if there was a support group for his patients. He said 'no,' but it sounded like a good idea. Before you knew it, five middle-aged guys who had survived heart attacks were meeting in the basement of the Irish Lutheran Church. This was a support group, not group therapy. We were all too cheap to want to pay for therapy. And this was better than therapy, anyway.

By the end of our second meeting, we knew we were going to keep doing it. We kicked around different names and finally settled on the Downsized Boomer's Support Group, DBSG for short. All of us were in the Baby Boomer demographic, all of us had experienced stressful career transitions, and all of us were living on less money than we had earned earlier in our lives. Technically, not all of us had been 'downsized', meaning laid off. But the net result was pretty much the same no matter how you got into the predicament. The truth is a middle-aged guy did not have much market value in the first decade of the twenty-first century, especially if there was a heart attack in his medical history.

You have heard about the founding member of the DBSG. A heart attack and a bit

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of eccentricity resulted in a voluntary surrender of a six-figure income. Now, I was planning to sell battery powered bicycle motors out of my garage which was okay with me. After all, I was a humble guy. I thought I could adjust to not being a big shot. I had enough invested in my retirement plan that I would be okay as long as I didn't start drawing from it too soon.

Tom MacFarlane was the second guy to sign up for the group. Tom was a mess. He was an insurance salesman and a very likeable guy, but somehow he managed to mess up his life pretty badly. His heart attack was worse than mine; he nearly died on the table. His recovery was slow. Whereas I lost my excess weight before the heart attack, Tom was still fifty pounds too heavy during the recovery period. He may have been a bit too fond of beer, not that I would ever criticize an appreciation for such a fine and wholesome beverage. Tom's divorce had become final two years before the heart attack. He was struggling with child support payments. His son, a senior in high school at the time of Tom's death, was reputedly a juvenile delinquent. And to top it all off, Tom was convinced his employer was going to downsize him. His income had been

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dropping for years due to low sales. It was only a matter of time before they cut him loose altogether. Let's face it, Tom was over the hill and he knew it. He was renting a mobile home and still owed money on a seven-year-old Chevy Cavalier. No wonder the guy needed a support group. The only bright spot in his life was his girlfriend whose heart was apparently much bigger than her brain.

Robert Navis was another member of the DBSG. A former VP for strategic planning for one of the largest accounting firms, Robert had a very high opinion of himself. I didn't know what his salary had been before his company was brought down by the backwash from the Enron scandal, but it had to be a lot. He was pretty smug about being a Six Sigma black belt. That did not mean he knew karate. In big business, it meant you had been trained to analyze and control operations to a high level of efficiency and quality. Personally, I thought it was just another fad, but what did I know.

At the time of Tom's death, Robert was an independent consultant. Cynics liked to say that whenever a manager said he was becoming an independent consultant, it meant he got fired. Whatever the real story was,

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Robert still had some resources left. While I had to wonder how much consulting business was coming his way, he drove a Volvo and obviously did not buy his clothes at Wal-Mart.

Maybe this description did not do justice to Robert. Sure, his preference for 'Robert' over 'Bob', his expensive clothes, and his smug confidence that prosperity was just around the corner could be irritating. But, underneath it all, he was just as scared as the rest of us. He was okay.

George Schilling was an interesting character. When he wanted to, he talked like an announcer for National Public Radio. When he was being natural, he sounded like he was back in the streets of Milwaukee where he grew up. George was trained as a technical writer and apparently had enjoyed some good jobs writing documentation for manufacturing firms. Now he sold snowmobiles. He said he enjoyed it. He also said once he showed the world he could sell products, he would move back up the income ladder. He might even have believed it.

Louis Smurfit was the last person to join the support group. Louis was a nursing home administrator who had been unemployed for

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two years. A secretive little guy, Louis was older than the rest of us by a few years. He said he was being passed over for jobs because during his career he had been bold enough to take on 'turn-around' situations, nursing homes that were in trouble. He had brought them back from the brink. But on paper, it looked like he was associated with poorly performing facilities. Some of the blame was rubbing off on him. The fact that he was 60 years old had nothing to do with his inability to get a job, he said. And he would not accept anything that paid less than six figures.

Louis was a quiet, closed-in kind of guy, but you could sense the rigidity inside him, an intense anger toward an unjust world. Maybe we all felt that way. After all, we all carried around a lot of hard-earned experience that should have had value in the business world. But, for some reason, wet-behind-the-ears MBAs were being chosen for the good jobs. Sure, the Boomers were slower, had health problems, and got a little forgetful now and then. But maybe the real problem was that older guys were more likely to call a spade a spade. If a business move made no sense to them, they were likely to say so. Younger guys

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were more ambitious and more compliant. Okay, it was just a theory, but there might be some truth in it.

The ironic side of all this was that the senior managers who hired the brash young MBAs were pretty much the same as the guys in the DBSG. They just had not been downsized yet. Like all successful businessmen, they attributed their success to their own superior abilities. They didn't seriously consider the possibility that someday it could happen to them. In a dog-eat-dog world, the dog doing the eating was shortsighted; he did not realize that sooner or later he would be the main course for someone else, someone who might be sniffing around his rear right this minute.

In a nutshell, this was why downsized boomers needed a support group. When it finally happened to them, the hotshot business guy was truly in shock. Being unemployed and short of money was simply unbelievable. His self-esteem was shaken to the core. How could this be? It took a long time to readjust your self image from hot shot to ordinary guy. You came out a better person in the end, but it was a painful process.

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Our group liked to call this dynamic the Boomer Lament. “I’m really a big shot, it’s just that nobody recognizes it right now.” Yeah, right. Get over it. Get over yourself.

CHAPTER 4. THE WAKE

The wake was on Friday evening. We were seated around the table in one of the large booths at Sal's. Betty was on my left. Louis, Robert, George, and I were sharing a pitcher of beer while Betty sipped a glass of white wine. Betty did not hold her liquor very well and she knew it. It was one of her more endearing qualities. I didn't mean that knowing she shouldn't drink much was endearing. I meant that when she had a couple, she got loose, which could be a lot of fun. Strike while the iron is hot, I always say.

We toasted our fallen comrade and told little stories about him. We had a few laughs at his foibles. All in all, it was a nice event for the first hour. Then a serious-looking man in a suit came up to us.

"My name is Steven Winters. I was Tom's boss. The people at the office heard about the wake you were holding for Tom, so I thought I should come over and pay my respects."

The rest of us shifted in our seats uneasily.

DEAD MAN TO STARBOARD

We all remembered that Tom thought his boss was planning to oust him at the first opportunity. It was probably true.

On the other hand, the guy was trying to be nice. "Let's put a couple of tables together so we have more room," Betty suggested. She was right. We had to give Winters a break.

We slid out from behind the booth and rearranged the furniture in the bar. One of the waitresses came over and helped us push the tables together. After a short period of confusion, we were resettled and pouring another round. Winters ordered another pitcher. His stock went up a bit at that point. He probably knew, or suspected, that we had our doubts about him and was trying to pour oil on the waters.

We were all quiet for a few moments, then Winters raised his glass. "To Tom MacFarlane," he said simply. We all drank soberly.

"I only knew Tom for a couple of years," Winters said, "but folks tell me he was a great salesman at one time. Ten years ago, he was bringing in more business than all the other guys combined."

Nobody responded to that. The use of the

THE WAKE

past tense was obvious.

Betty changed the subject by asking the guys what they had been up to lately. The conversation drifted along lazily for another half hour, then suddenly stopped. A woman was standing beside the table, waiting to be noticed. When we were all looking at her she said, "I'm Wanda, Tom's ex-wife. May I join you?" Betty leaped up and grabbed a chair for her while the guys sat frozen in fear.

After she was seated and had ordered a mixed drink she said, "I heard about the wake through the grapevine, so I thought I would drop by." Gossip got around quickly in a small town, since it had a shorter distance to travel.

Nobody knew whether we should toast Tom again with Wanda present, so the men were quiet while the women complimented each other on their purses and chatted about the woeful shopping situation in Fort. We slowly started to relax which was a mistake.

The door to the bar swung open with a bang and a buxom blonde rushed in. She looked around wildly, saw our table, and strode over to us. She was a sexy woman, with heavy makeup, tight jeans, and plenty of cleavage showing. A cloud of perfume surrounded her.

DEAD MAN TO STARBOARD

"Everybody's talking about the wake," she said, "so I just had to come over." She dabbed a tissue to her eye. "I will miss Tom so much. He was such a dear man."

She turned to me and said, "My name is Brenda Stone. Tom was my steady boyfriend."

Now I knew who she was. Tom mentioned having a girlfriend who was a real bombshell. He was not exaggerating. But with Wanda there, things might get tense.

My guess was that we now knew the real reason Wanda had joined the wake. She was hoping to run into Tom's girlfriend. This could get ugly.

But introductions were in order and I knew of no way to stave off disaster. "Ed Schumacher," I said. "This is my wife Betty." I did not mention Wanda. Louis, Robert, and George introduced themselves as well. Then Wanda said, "My name is Wanda. Wanda MacFarlane."

Brenda hesitated, then said brightly, "I didn't know Tom had a sister."

Wanda was gritting her teeth. "I'm Tom's ex-wife."

Brenda seemed to shrink a little. "Oh. Nice to meet you."

THE WAKE

Wanda stared at Brenda coldly for a second. Then she asked in a low voice, "Just how long did you know Tom?"

Brenda paled. "Oh, just a year or so."

Wanda spat out the next words, "Like hell!" She was out of her chair, grabbing Brenda by the hair.

The next few minutes went by in a blur. The two women were rolling around on the floor, kicking and screaming. The waitresses were screaming. The glasses and the pitcher fell to the floor. Wanda kneed Brenda in the groin. Brenda bit Wanda's ear. Wanda gouged her nails into Brenda's cleavage. Wanda ended up on top of Brenda and drew back her fist for what looked like it could be a knock-out punch. At this point, Louis and George managed to pull Wanda off of Brenda, no doubt saving the poor girl's life.

Wanda was a mess, with her hair in disarray, stockings torn, and lipstick smeared across her face. Brenda looked a lot better, though she had one breast hanging out of her low-cut top. The guys all had their faces directed toward the ceiling with involuntary eye twitches toward Brenda's heaving chest. All in all, it was a wake to remember.

CHAPTER 5. BETTY ANALYZES THE WAKE

The next morning, Saturday, was fairly typical for Betty and I, at least at first. I made the coffee, then picked up a newspaper and some donuts at the convenience store. After spending some time glancing over the news, Betty cranked up the laptop and began browsing for medical jobs in the area. She was in no hurry to go back to work, but also hated the idea of digging into her savings. On the other hand, she liked to go to the outlet mall and was realistic enough to know that sooner or later she would want to have an income. She was hoping for a part-time position with no call schedule.

At about nine o'clock, Betty emerged from the bedroom and stood in the doorway waiting for me to look up from my reading. "That was some party you guys had last night," she said.

"Sure was," I replied with a grin.

"The waitresses didn't think it was very

BETTY ANALYZES THE WAKE

funny."

"But the cops did."

Betty pointed her finger at me. "By the way, I saw you looking."

"Looking at what?"

"Don't play innocent with me!"

"Oh, that. A guy would have to be blind not to see that."

"You are not allowed to look at stuff like that."

All this raised an issue that had always bothered me. "Hey, explain something to me. If a woman wears a low-cut top, why do men get in trouble for looking at her breasts? That seems like entrapment to me."

"Entrapment only catches people who are doing something wrong."

"But why do women expose their breasts if men are not supposed to look?"

"Men are supposed to notice, but not look." She could tell this made no sense to me. "Men are slime," she announced. "Looking is when your eyes bug out and your tongue flaps down to your chin, which is what you guys were doing last night. Admit it, that floozy got you hot."

"So, she was attractive. That does not

DEAD MAN TO STARBOARD

mean I got hot."

"She was not attractive. She was a bimbo."

"At least she was not a homicidal maniac like that Wanda."

"Wanda had a good reason to go ballistic. Any woman would have done the same."

This was amazing. "Wait a minute. You're on Wanda's side? She assaulted Brenda. She should be in jail."

Betty just sniffed. "Brenda is trouble. That's obvious. You men can't see the noses in front of your faces."

"But she seemed very nice."

"Nice? How many times do I have to tell you? Women can't be trusted, especially when they're being nice."

Sometimes, I thought Betty was a little hard on her own gender. This time, though, she went on to make an interesting point. "Let me ask you this, smart guy. How did Brenda know our table was the one doing the wake? The bar had four tables full of people. She walked right up to us. Then she pretended she didn't know any of us."

"She tricked us?"

"Of course, she tricked you! Men are easy to trick."

BETTY ANALYZES THE WAKE

"But you would never do that to me, would you?"

"Of course not. Tricking you is no fun because it's too easy." With that she went back to her computer.

Betty could have been wrong about Brenda. The facts on which she was basing her conclusion seemed to be pretty thin. On the other hand, Betty was almost never wrong. I have never figured out how she does that. Her accuracy was uncanny.

When faced with a puzzle, I always started by making a list. The first question on the list was "Who killed Tom." Now why was I assuming a murder had taken place? Most likely, it was a hit and run. But the police were interviewing people as if a motive was involved. Your garden variety hit and run had no motive. Maybe they knew something about the case that I didn't know.

I decided to run with the theory that Tom was murdered. Somebody had deliberately crushed Tom MacFarlane's head.

This led to the next question on my list. "Who would want Tom dead?" Naturally, the first person I thought of was Wanda, who was obviously prone to violence. A distant second

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choice was Winters, who might want to replace Tom with a more productive salesman. That seemed unlikely. Winters did not seem like a bad sort. And why crush somebody's head when you could just fire him?

My theory was shaping up. Wanda had run Tom down in the street. But how did she know he would be in the street? Was it blind luck? Did he just happen to be crossing when she was driving by? Did she recognize him and grasp the opportunity in a fit of rage? A lot of coincidences were involved, but then I guessed everything that happened in life resulted from a lot of coincidences.

Still, something did not fit properly. The police would have developed this theory long before I got around to it. They would have checked her car as they did mine. If they had found any evidence that she had run into anything, she would be in the slammer.

How, then, did she do it?

Betty came out of the bedroom. "Where's Fritter?" she asked. Betty did that a lot. I mean, she looked for the cat to make sure it was okay. She did this about ten times a day. A little odd, I know, but who was I to talk about oddness?

BETTY ANALYZES THE WAKE

Glancing around, I saw the cat on top of the kitchen cabinets. "She's up there," I said.

"Oh, you are a bad little cat. Get down from there before you hurt yourself." The cat ignored her.

Have you noticed how when people are looking for something they generally look down? Seldom do they look up to find what is missing.

Up? Was it possible that Tom had died from a fall instead of being run down by a car? It was time to revisit the scene of the crime.

"Betty," I called. "I'm taking my walk now."

Thirty minutes later, I was standing on the sidewalk near the spot where I found Tom's body, my neck bent back and my eyes scanning the rooftops. First, I should clarify something: Fort Atkinson had no skyscrapers. Anybody who died from a fall off a short building would have to land on his head. That could explain Tom's head injury.

Tom's body had landed in the street next to a rather innocuous building that looked like a vacant warehouse. On the night I found the body, I noticed the McDonald's which was next door. The McDonald's had its lights on

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whereas the warehouse had been dark.

Some kind of repairs or construction work was taking place on top of the warehouse. Workmen were banging around up there, yelling at each other. At the very top, they had placed a derrick for lifting supplies from the ground. Yes, it was the kind that swivels. Was that derrick swiveled out over the street the night Tom died? Who could say? It was dark and nobody ever looked up.

CHAPTER 6. THE EX-WIFE

My theory was speedily revised. Wanda had killed Tom with a blow to the head, swung his body out over the street with the derrick, then dropped him so that the next person to drive by would get the blame. She must have lured him up there before killing him since Tom was a hefty guy. Fiendish, of course, but she seemed capable of that sort of thing to me.

In our society, we tended to assume that the perpetrators of violent crimes were men. And most often this was the case. However, well-known exceptions exist. In Texas, a woman ran over her estranged husband several times, then claimed it was an accident. In Iowa, a woman killed her estranged husband by stabbing him in the heart, then claimed she did not mean to kill him. And everybody knows about the famous case in which an unhappy wife took a kitchen knife to her husband's manhood while he was sleeping. In each of the cases just mentioned, similar ingredients could be found. These ingredients were A - a man, B

DEAD MAN TO STARBOARD

- a woman, C - anger, D - a convenient weapon, and E - the guy was bested by the woman. Damn, it was a good thing women didn't get violent very often; all the men would be exterminated. Then who would women blame for everything that went wrong?

At this point, there was little doubt in my mind that Wanda, the ex-wife, was the killer. But I did not have any proof whatsoever, so there was no point in taking my theory to the police. My experience with that crowd made it clear that my theories would not interest them. Still, I could not let it rest. Were women allowed to kill off men just because they were angry with them? Was this what our society had descended to? On behalf of my gender, I could not let the matter rest.

Walking back to get my car took half an hour. Ten minutes later, I pulled up in front of Wanda MacFarlane's house. Her name had been in the telephone book and a quick telephone call secured an appointment. Ordinarily, I avoided angry women for obvious reasons: they scared the crap out of me. When I was an enlisted man in the army, an angry general did not scare me. Later in life, angry deans and university presidents did not

THE EX-WIFE

scare me. But angry women? You would have to be stupid not to be scared of them.

Steeling my nerve, I climbed out of the Focus and strode to her front door, lifting my hand toward the doorbell. The ranch-style house was in a nice, well-kept neighborhood. A late-model minivan stood in the driveway. The door swung open before I could ring the bell. She invited me in. Taking a deep breath, I followed her through the door into the living room. The carpeting was plush and the furniture looked both new and expensive.

"Nice place," I offered.

"Thank you," she said. "Please sit down."

We sat, then she asked, "Exactly what do you want to talk about, Mr. Schumacher?"

I cleared my throat. How was I going to approach this? What exactly did I hope to accomplish? She wasn't going to confess for Pete's sake. Suddenly, I wished I had not embarked on this little investigation.

"Please, call me 'Ed.' I'm just trying to understand what happened to Tom. He was a friend of mine, after all. That little scene at the wake suggests there might be more going on here than meets the eye." I smiled weakly at that point to soften the words.

DEAD MAN TO STARBOARD

She stared at me for a moment, then said, "Yes, I see what you mean. Obviously, there is more than meets the eye regarding Tom MacFarlane. His friends probably never heard the real story since he was so good at slanting the facts to make himself look good."

Getting this woman to speak her mind was not going to be difficult. "Can you elaborate a little?"

"Tom MacFarlane was a loser. He sold a lot of insurance when he first started out, but he has been going downhill for years. He drank too much, flirted with everything in skirts, and goofed off at work. He was a lousy father and a lousy husband. He ripped off little old ladies. He was a deadbeat dad, and he was bad in bed."

By my count, that was ten bad things about Tom in one brief speech. She must have been practicing its delivery because venom dripped from every word.

"Deadbeat dad? You mean he defaulted on his child support payments?" This did not sound like the guy I knew and liked.

Wanda hesitated. "No, he never actually defaulted. He would 'forget' and then the payment would be late. Tell me this, Ed, why

THE EX-WIFE

do ex-husbands hate making child support payments? It's their duty. Don't the selfish bastards care about their own kids?"

"Wait a minute. Maybe I can see it from the point of view of the guy a little better than you can. Should I try to explain?"

She sat back. "Yes. Please do. I would really like to understand this."

"First, it's obvious that you live in a nicer house and drive a more expensive car than Tom did. So, he was not living high on the hog while his kid went without essentials."

"He was drinking up his money. That's why he didn't have a better house or car. Besides, he didn't care about nice things."

"You may be right. But you can see how he might dislike making payments that don't directly benefit his kid."

"All the payments benefited Tom Junior. What are you talking about?"

"Well, you got half of the family assets in the divorce. You got a few years of alimony. That's fair. But what portion of the child support payment is being invested in this house? This house is an investment that benefits you, not Tom Junior. From Tom senior's point of view, the money that should

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have gone to meet Junior's needs was actually funding your investments, not to mention paying for a new car."

"You men all stick together!" She was pretty angry at this point. "Well, let me just tell you something about your great, self-sacrificing, noble buddy Tom. He ripped off little old ladies. Yes, he did. He talked them into spending all their money on nursing home insurance, insurance that they never got to use because they died too soon. He tricked them out of their life savings."

"I don't believe it."

"I can prove it. There's a man I know whose grandmother was ripped off by Tom. You can ask him if I'm right or not. His name is Willy Bundt. He lives here in Fort Atkinson. Maybe you should talk to him, Mr. Schumacher. Now, you can get out of my house."

At this point, a young man with bad posture entered the room. He was wearing a snazzy bicycling outfit, spandex pants included. Even so, with his greasy hair, nose ring, and sneering expression, he looked like a punk to me. "Mom, what's going on?" he asked.

THE EX-WIFE

She turned to him and said firmly, "Everything is under control. This man is just leaving." She stood up to emphasize the point.

As I walked out the door, Tom Junior was right behind me. He followed me to the front step. Turning halfway toward him, I asked if we could talk later. Naturally, I did it in a low voice. He hesitated, then said okay. We made a date for McDonald's that afternoon.

CHAPTER 7. THE JD

The lunch crowd was leaving when I walked into McDonald's. I deliberately got there early so I could think about what I had learned over a leisurely cup of coffee. Wanda was still the number one suspect, but she had mentioned someone named Willy Bundt who was worth thinking about. He was displeased about the long-term care insurance that Tom had sold his grandmother. If she really had blown the family nest egg, then Bundt had a serious reason for hating Tom. Maybe Bundt hated Tom enough to kill him.

Reflecting on my conversation with Wanda, it occurred to me that perhaps I had not carried it off with sufficient finesse. After all, she had blown her stack. True, her angry outburst had resulted in my receiving some interesting information. Even so, when the person you were interviewing threw you out of her house, you probably failed some kind of important test on how to interview a suspect.

THE JD

Having people blow their stacks at me was not that unusual. In fact, it seemed to happen with some regularity. Apparently, I just naturally seemed to hit a nerve with some people. Betty said I should just learn to keep my mouth shut, but I really didn't know when I was crossing the line.

For example, when we went to the Fort Atkinson town meeting a couple of weeks ago, I innocently set off a few folks. The meeting was to discuss the Wal-Mart proposal to open a super center in Fort. Public opinion was strongly against it. The city fathers held the meeting to ratify what everybody knew was going to happen to the proposal – it was going down for the third time.

Betty and I went to the meeting with her cousin Andrew. Andrew was some kind of investigator for the state of Wisconsin. We sat together on folding chairs and listened while person after person stood up and argued against the proposal. Maybe the fact that the meeting was taking too long partly explained what I did. Maybe the hardness of the chairs was another part of it. After all, my tail-end had gone to sleep and I simply had to stand up or I might have ended up completely

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paralyzed. So, when the moderator asked if anyone else wanted to express an opinion, I just had to stand up.

Betty looked at me with alarm. Andrew was a little surprised, but he didn't seem concerned. Of course, Andrew did not know me as well as Betty did.

"Madam Moderator," I began, "all of these good people are obviously very sincere. And we can all see why they are worried about the proposal. Local businesses will be hurt if Wal-Mart opens a super center. And the nice, attractive appearance you are trying to create for the tourist trade will not be helped at all." Appreciative murmurs could be heard around the room.

"On the other hand," I went on, "is this tourist trade strategy a sure thing? After all, any tourists you attract will have to be diverted from some other cutesy small town in Wisconsin. It is impossible for every town in Wisconsin to be a tourist attraction." The murmurs had turned to grumbles by this time.

"Besides, is it neighborly to steal business from your neighbors in the next town?" The moderator was frowning and making gestures like she wanted me to stop. But I wasn't

THE JD

finished.

"The most important concern, though, is our dignity: how dignified is it to suck up to tourists to make a buck? Most of them are FIBs, aren't they?" Betty was tugging on my sleeve, trying to interrupt the flow. The moderator was banging her gavel.

"So, if tourism is not the answer, then what is the alternative to Wal-Mart? I think we need to arrive at a third alternative." The grumbles had turned to heckling, the gaveling was manic, and the sergeant-at-arms had his hand on my shoulder. I didn't think anybody heard my final point. That was unfortunate because it was brilliant.

Later, back at the condo, Andrew told me he thought I was out of line. Letting Wal-Mart in was a bad idea.

"I didn't recommend letting Wal-Mart in," I protested.

"It sounded that way to me. It sounded that way to everybody."

That was one of the crosses I had to bear - being frequently misunderstood.

Betty had a different take on it. "You embarrassed me. If you ever say you are going to a town meeting again, I will hide your car

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keys."

I couldn't help chuckling at that. You could walk anywhere you wanted to go in Fort Atkinson. Who needed car keys?

As the reader may or may not remember, I was about to tell you about my meeting with Tom Junior at McDonald's. Junior arrived just a few minutes after two, bought a milk shake at the counter, then sat across from me in the booth I had chosen near the back of the restaurant.

"Hey," he said. He was obviously uncomfortable.

"Hey," I replied. "Thanks for taking the time to talk to me. I'm just trying to get a handle on what happened to your dad."

"Who cares? He was a shit." This kid was carrying around some 'baggage' as the psychologists liked to say.

"Besides, it's pretty obvious. He was standing in the middle of the street like a dork and somebody ran over him. He was probably drunk." He concentrated on sucking his milkshake through the straw.

"Well, sure, that's the way it looks." Suggesting foul play seemed cruel, so I changed directions. "Hey, that's a pretty snazzy

THE JD

biking outfit you've got on."

This change of subject seemed to appeal to him. "Thanks. Gotta nice racer, too. It's chained up outside."

"Wow. Those things are expensive."

"No shit. I got a couple thou wrapped up in gear."

"Now that's impressive. You must have a pretty good part-time job."

"I do okay." His eyes became hooded and his face took on a furtive look. "Why did you ask that?"

"I only meant that the support your Dad paid your mother probably wasn't enough to cover all your biking gear."

"He didn't pay shit. Worse than that, he tried to mess up my job."

"That's a shame. Why would he do that?"

Junior looked me full in the eye with a defiant smirk. "It don't matter why he did it. He poked his nose where it wasn't wanted. People I work with didn't appreciate it." He tossed his empty cup toward the trash can, missing it by a mile. "And they wouldn't appreciate you sticking your nose into our business, either. Get it?"

With that parting remark, he left.

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Naturally, I was too stunned to move for a while. Had he just threatened me? In a couple of minutes, I refilled my coffee cup and sat down to think the situation through a little more fully.

Was I wrong or did we now have another party with a motive for killing Tom? Junior obviously was dealing drugs. Tom didn't like it, interfered, and may have been killed for his efforts. I couldn't see Junior killing his own father, but the crowd he was working with would not have hesitated.

Darn. Now there were three suspects: the ex-wife, Willy Bundt, and a drug kingpin. This situation was getting messier and scarier.

CHAPTER 8. THE WARNING

Andrew and I met at Sal's that evening. Andrew was a sensible guy and bouncing some ideas off of him seemed like a good idea. I filled him in on how my investigation was progressing.

"What do you think you are doing? The police are there to handle this sort of thing." He looked genuinely alarmed.

"Now wait a minute. I don't have any proof about anything, just hearsay and speculation. They wouldn't appreciate my opinions. They would tell me to butt out."

"That is exactly what they should do. And it's what you should do." The sentence structure was confusing, but I knew what he meant.

"You know how police detectives are. They might figure it out and they might not. They might have to work on more urgent cases. It can't hurt for me to nose around a little."

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"It could hurt you. Terminally."

He didn't get a response to that one. I just sipped my Miller High Life.

Andrew sighed. "This kid sounds like bad news. He's a drug dealer. That makes him dangerous."

"Maybe not." My response startled him. "Did you know that the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics did a study on people who had been drug dealers when they were kids to see how they turned out?"

"You're kidding me."

"Nope. It's true. You can find it on the web. Anyway, former drug dealers are significantly more likely to be self-employed, independent business people when they are adults. Legitimate business people. Entrepreneurs. The backbone of the economy. The American way."

Andrew pushed his chair back in disgust. "You have the most backward way of looking at things of anybody I ever met. You can't be saying that kids should deal drugs!"

"Nope. That's not what I said. I just pointed out that not all teenage drug dealers spend their lives in jail. The facts show otherwise." I paused. "On the other hand, a lot

THE WARNING

of teenage drug dealers are incarcerated before they become legitimate, independent businessmen. And it is possible that they become self-employed because no one wants to hire them." The truth is I did not really know how to interpret the report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. But it had to be relevant, somehow. "Anyway, just because Junior is dealing drugs now doesn't mean he is beyond redemption."

Andrew's response was direct and to the point. "Yeah, but you could still get killed." At that point, he said he had to go and left.

I sat there for another couple of minutes to finish my beer. Andrew was right that I always looked at things from a different perspective than most people, leading me to different conclusions. Take, for example, the food poisoning outbreak back in the panhandle. I can't tell which state this happened in since it might get me into trouble. Let me just point out that the panhandle of Oklahoma was near where I lived and worked, as was eastern New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas. Let the actual location remain nameless.

At the time, I was working with the health

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department of the city in question on some other projects. Since I knew something about statistical analysis, they invited me in on the food poisoning situation.

The basic facts were these: some people became ill after eating at a certain Mexican restaurant. They complained to the health department. The inspector found some procedures that were not optimal. You have heard of that sort of thing – temperature not right in the beans or something like that. Lab results came back on the sick folks and it was definitely food poisoning. The Mexican restaurant got its wrists slapped.

All cut and dried, right? No, not from a researcher's point of view. A researcher needed to rule out alternative explanations before he accepted a hypothesis. You couldn't prove a particular restaurant was guilty of spreading food poisoning germs unless you considered other possible sources of the infection.

A lot of people had food poisoning germs in their bodies on any given week. They were carrying them around from somewhere they ate or maybe they picked them up in their own kitchens. The only way to be sure this particular restaurant was at fault was to survey

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some people who did not eat at the restaurant and compare their rates of food poisoning to the rates for people who did eat at the restaurant.

Believe it or not, health departments never did it this way. They inspected the kitchen of the accused restaurant, found something that was not perfectly clean, and concluded that the accused party was guilty. They usually were guilty, but nobody actually proved it.

In this particular case, my arguments raised questions that the health department tried to answer. Investigators from the state health department and the Centers for Disease Control came to help. The comparison of the restaurant's patrons to people who ate elsewhere showed that eating at the Mexican restaurant increased the risk of food poisoning, but not as much as a few other things did, like being poor.

We also found that most of the victims were employees of an upscale health food restaurant who were having a party at the Mexican restaurant. Did we check out the health food restaurant? The answer was 'no'. Turned out some places have to consent to an inspection and others do not.

DEAD MAN TO STARBOARD

We discovered that the first person to become ill was the owner of the health food restaurant. This person called a friend at city hall who called the health department and told them to nail the Mexican restaurant.

Naturally, I said that the entire process had to be changed to eliminate political influence and racism. After that, people in the state capital stopped communicating with me. That's what came from thinking about things backwards.

Sighing, I put down my beer glass and called for the check. If people thought being an oddball was easy, they were wrong. It was lonely being an oddball, not that I didn't enjoy it at times.

Out in the parking lot as I was fishing the keys out of my jacket pocket, two men in biking outfits sauntered over to me. "Hey," I said.

"Hey, yourself," said the one on my left, then he shoved me hard against my car. My keys dropped to the pavement with a jingle. The one on my right gave me another shove from his side when I tried to turn toward my first assailant. They took turns after that, bouncing me back and forth between them.

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Finally, I completely lost my balance and fell onto the parking lot. One of them pushed my face into the gravel that was scattered over the pavement and said, "Smart guys mind their own business. You're smart, aren't you?" He laughed. "Take this as a warning. We can get rougher if we have to."

I stayed down until I heard them walk away. After a few minutes, I got up and looked around. They were nowhere in sight. It was time to go home, so I picked up my keys and left.

CHAPTER 9. DITTO

The cat and I were having our usual lovefest the next morning when Betty came in to observe us. In the mornings, Fritter usually jumped in my lap and demanded to be petted. She never did that with Betty. She tried to get away when Betty picked her up. I tried to explain to Betty that being held has to be the cat's idea, or they won't go along with it. Betty was still hurt. She knew a lot more about cats than I did. She grew up on a dairy farm where the barn was always full of cats.

On this particular morning, which was a Sunday, the cat had turned onto her back to let me scratch her tummy. Her head was lolling to one side and she was completely relaxed. Betty said, with heavy irony, "Perhaps I should leave you two alone."

I just grinned. Was it my fault the cat liked me better? On the other hand, Betty deserved some sympathy. She had always liked cats. Playing second fiddle to me with this one was

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hard for her.

"Maybe we should get another cat," I suggested. "I could leave town for a couple of days to make sure it bonds with you."

"Do you really think we should get another cat?"

"Sure. Besides, Fritter needs someone to play with."

"I don't know. She might not like having another cat around the house."

Then Betty changed the subject. "Speaking of being around the house, are you thinking about getting a job?"

"I have a job. I sell electric bicycle motors."

"I'm talking about a real job. Working for somebody else."

"I'm self-employed. That is a real job."

"No it isn't. Nobody sees it that way. Remember when we went to dinner with the pastor and his wife before we left Texas?"

Yes, I certainly did remember. After we explained that Betty would eventually be finding a medical position after our move to Wisconsin and I would be self-employed, the pastor's wife turned to me and asked with a sweet smile, "Does that mean you will have

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dinner on the table when Betty gets home?"

Please don't get the wrong impression. The pastor's wife was a very nice person and I liked her a lot. However, in this case, she was completely out of line. I blew my stack. "Of course not. I will be working, too." The pastor and his wife were stunned to silence by the vehemence of my outburst. I tried again. "Self-employed people work just as hard as anyone else." No response. "I have always worked hard and don't intend to stop working." Silence.

On our last Sunday in church, the Pastor announced from the pulpit that we were leaving. He said Betty would be practicing medicine in Wisconsin. He said nothing about me.

"Yes, I remember that the pastor and his wife thought I was going to loaf around doing nothing."

"Well, that is what self-employed sounds like when people hear it. It sounds like it means unemployed."

"Is this what our country has come to? Self-employment, small business, independence, entrepreneurship, all these things were virtues at one time. Now being

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self-employed means you're a bum." I was steamed.

Betty put her hand on my arm. "It's not just me and everyone else. It's you, too. Otherwise, you wouldn't be so defensive about it."

"I'm not defensive!" I yelled. "You always say I should express myself when I don't like something you do instead of suppressing it and building up resentment. You say resentment makes me passive-aggressive. So, I'm not being passive-aggressive. I'm just being aggressive! Stop saying I'm unemployed!" Then I stomped down the stairs and went out the door.

Betty was out on the deck. "Where are you going?" she called down to me.

"I'm taking my walk now."

"What about going to church?"

"Don't feel like going."

"Do you have your cell phone with you?" Betty liked me to have my cell phone with me. I guess she figured that I would call her if I died. That seemed improbable to me, but maybe there was a logical process there that escaped me.

"Yes. Got it. Bye." And off I went.

There is nothing like a good walk to burn

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off negative emotions. Within thirty minutes, I was feeling better. As I emerged from the residential streets and approached Fort's downtown area, the traffic picked up. In search of less noise, I crossed the main street bridge then turned right so I could cut over to the other bridge. There was less traffic that way.

There was an open spot by the river where no businesses had been built yet. I wandered over to listen to the sound the water made as it rushed along the bank. I stood there for a few minutes, gradually shifting into a state of tranquility. We all seek tranquility, don't we? It was a lifelong quest and a daily challenge.

The sound of a car pulling up behind me brought me out of my trance. Turning, I saw a hefty guy get out of his black Ford Bronco. The man's belly hung over his belt and his pants were bagging very low in back. He wore a denim vest and had chains dangling in various places. He reached back into the truck and pulled out a baseball bat.

"You Schumacher?" he asked.

"Maybe." I didn't like to lie, but on the other hand confirming my identity appeared to be unwise at this juncture.

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"Yeah. You're Schumacher." He started smacking the palm of his hand with his bat.

"You been asking questions about Tom MacFarlane. How he got killed." The fat guy was speaking in a low tone, continuing to smack the bat into his palm to punctuate each sentence.

I did not respond. Silence seemed like the best policy.

"You cut it out. Now. Or you will be the next dirt bag to end up dead. Get it?"

"I understand you."

Then Fatso got back in his Bronco and drove slowly away. He took my tranquility with him.

Betty was messing around in the kitchen when I got back to the condo. She said 'hi' guardedly when I came in, then asked how my walk went.

"Fine. Walking is good for me."

The cat jumped on my leg and climbed up, wanting to be picked up. Sometimes, she liked me to walk around holding her. She liked the view, I guess.

"We spoil that cat, you know," Betty said.

"I know," I responded with a grin.

"I'm sorry I'm jealous of the cat."

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"It's okay. I understand. When you're ready, we can get another one that will like you better."

"Okay. But I'm not ready yet."

"Hey, would you like to go over to Culver's and get an ice cream?"

Betty's face brightened. She loved ice cream. And Culver's had great ice cream.

"Right now?"

"Why not?"

So, off we went. The flavor of the day was Apple Pie, so I tried it. Betty had a malt. As we were walking out, she asked me how I liked the Apple Pie flavor.

"It was good. Sweet."

"Sweet as apple pie?"

"Yup. Sweeter than apple pie."

"Sweeter than me?"

"Nothing is sweeter than you."

She smiled and we went back home.

That evening Fritter the cat entertained us by doing hops and flips. She was a very talented cat. When the mood struck her, she would spring straight up in the air to about chest height.

Other times, she would do back flips in the air, one after another. Then she threw her

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favorite toy, a green mouse, up in the air and did a back flip as it fell to the ground. Fritter, the acrobatic cat. Truth is we both loved that cat. A couple of middle-aged folks, dotty over a cat. Well at least it was cheap entertainment. And it didn't require that I stay up past ten o'clock.

CHAPTER 10. THE GIRLFRIEND

Monday morning came around on schedule and that meant I should get to work. It was time to work on my list. The sun had been up for an hour. The paper was read, half a pot of coffee was in my stomach, and I was bursting with energy. I cranked up the computer. The cat climbed up my back and sat on my shoulder, eager to help. She leaped onto the desk and sat in her favorite spot for computer work: the modem. The modem was warm, so she liked to sit there in comfort and watch me while I worked.

Writing things down always helped me to make sense out of them. I decided to start with what I knew for sure and then move on to hypotheses about things I was less certain about. Where to start? Cause of death. After some thought, I realized this had to be considered unknown. Was it a hit and run or a blow to the head or a fall from a building?

That was all I knew. Apparently, I knew

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almost nothing. Time to move on to speculation about who killed Tom and why.

Point number one: who did it? My suspects were Wanda MacFarlane, Winters, Willy Bundt, and the local association of drug dealers. Wanda because she was angry with Tom. Winters because Tom was holding back the insurance business. Willy because he inherited less money than he had hoped. And the drug dealers because Tom was a threat to their business.

Point number two: how was it done? Any of the suspects could have run Tom down in the street, but that would have required that they knew when he would be in that particular location. Wanda's car must have been cleared by the police, so it seemed unlikely that she had done the dirty deed. Knocking Tom on the noggin and throwing him off a building would have been easier for Winters, Bundt, or the drug dealers than for Wanda, which was another argument against Wanda being the killer.

But why would any of them want to choose such a dramatic way of committing murder? Bundt would have wanted to keep the murder as discrete as possible, unless he was

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so angry that he wanted the world to see the punishment Tom had received. On the other hand, perhaps the drug dealers wanted a public display to discourage anyone else from bothering them. Taken all together, it was starting to appear that Wanda was the least likely suspect after all. And, to be honest, the Winters' motive seemed far too weak to take seriously. That narrowed down the list of primary suspects to Bundt and the drug dealers.

It was time for a break from all that thinking. When I went into the kitchen to refill my coffee mug, the cat rushed over to the couch and raised a paw toward it. This signaled a clear intention to claw the fabric. I pointed my forefinger at her and said "EH!" This sound was not easy to spell; Betty said I sounded like a seal when I admonished the cat in this way.

Fritter and I had arrived at this pattern over a period of months. Being a cat, she liked clawing the furniture. Being a person, I did not approve. By accident, Fritter discovered that she could train me to react in a way she enjoyed by threatening to claw the furniture. Initially, I would shout "stop that!" or "no!" at

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her, but that did not stop her. After awhile, I started throwing things at her to distract her - cat toys, balls made from wadded up paper, and little pieces of wood. Of course, she never brought any of these items back. Instead, she would jump at them while they were airborne, then return to the couch and raise her paw again. Eventually, I was keeping a box full of ammunition ready to throw at her. Picking up all that junk was a pain in the neck. So, we compromised; she would start to claw and I would bark like a seal. This was how my cat trained me to bark like a seal on command. Sometimes I wondered if I really was the king of my castle.

After we tired of the game, I returned to my list, but I could not expand it any further. More information was needed. Then a burst of inspiration rattled my brain: why not talk to Tom's girlfriend Brenda and see if she had any information that would help me solve the problem?

Brenda and I agreed to meet at McDonald's, which seemed to have become my second office. She arrived almost as soon as I did, so I offered to buy her a cup of coffee, which she accepted. When I brought

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the two cups, hers and mine, back to our table, she had made herself comfortable. Her legs were crossed, and she was leaning languidly to one side with her arm draped over the adjacent chair. Her low cut tank top fit nicely and her skirt was slit up the middle, exposing plenty of thigh. Bright red lip stick and matching sandals completed her outfit.

When I handed over her coffee, I unfocused my eyes in a vain attempt to avoid seeing down her front. After seating myself I looked at her more directly. She was clearly amused. Brenda knew what kind of effect she had on me, despite my efforts to conceal any reaction.

"How's your day going?" I asked.

"Just fine," she answered. "I have the rest of the day off and now I can enjoy myself. I'm sooo happy that you called me. I would love to talk about poor Tom. I just can't get used to him being gone." Her eyes filled with tears.

"I don't want to upset you."

"No, that's all right. It's good to talk about it, don't you think?" She opened her eyes wide with this query. She had very expressive eyes.

"I hope so. When I talked to Wanda, it didn't turn out so well."

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Brenda scowled. "I believe that, for sure. What did she do? Go after you with a cleaver?" Brenda did not like Wanda very much.

"She threw me out of her house."

"Oh, my! What did you say to her?"

"Just asked her some innocent questions."

"Like you're going to ask me? I promise not to throw you out." She smiled sweetly.

"What I am trying to do is understand Tom's situation a little better. He was a friend of mine and now I find out that there was a lot about him that we never talked about. Maybe we should have. Maybe things would have turned out differently."

"There, there," she said, patting my hand and giving it a squeeze. "None of us should feel guilty. It was just one of those things."

"Heck," she said. "If anyone should feel guilty, it should be me."

"Why should you feel guilty?"

"Well, he was such a wonderful guy. I just didn't appreciate him enough."

"I'm sure you did a lot to make him feel better."

She chuckled. "Yes, you betcha. And it was worth it. That man was great in bed, let me tell

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you." She laughed outright at the expression on my face.

"So why should you feel guilty?"

"Well, it's like this. I kind of hate to mention it, but you look like an understanding man. Tom and I did not have an exclusive relationship if you know what I mean."

This called for a moment of silence. "You mean....?"

"Yes. I was seeing another man. An older man. Oh, he's not as nice as Tom, but he is so needy if you know what I mean."

"That kind of thing can be awkward. Did this other guy know about Tom?"

"Oh, yes. And he was jealous."

"Wow. It's a good thing they never met each other."

"Oh, but they did. They knew each other very well. After all, they were both in that cute support group you guys have."

The hinge of my jaw failed at this point, causing my chin to strike somewhere near the center of my chest. "No kidding!"

"Oh, yes. Of course, I can't tell you who it is."

"No, of course not." Darn!

We chatted a bit longer, then I said I had

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to get on with my day. Brenda walked out of the restaurant with me.

"I'm so glad you suggested this. You're a nice person." She put her hand behind my head and pulled me down for a kiss on the mouth. It was not what I would call a sisterly kiss. Having put me into shock, she went on her way with a cheery goodbye.

Stunned, I tried to get my legs moving to take me the rest of the way home. They carried me about ten steps. At that point, I saw Betty's car. She had the window rolled down and was glaring at me.

"And just what was that all about?" she demanded.

Naturally, I was incapable of speech.

"Get in," she said. "We're going home."

You can imagine that the next hour was not very pleasant. It went like this:

Betty: "Why were you kissing that woman?"

Ed: "I didn't kiss her!"

Betty: "I saw you kissing her!"

Ed: "That was her kissing me."

Betty: "Same thing."

Ed: "Not the same thing at all. I didn't want her to kiss me!"

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Betty: "Then why did you let her do it?"

Ed: "She caught me by surprise."

At this point Betty relented. She admitted to having seen the whole thing. "In fact," she said, "that bimbo did not decide to kiss you until she saw me waiting in the car. Then she turned back and let you have it."

"Why did she do that?"

"She's trouble. I told you that. Women can't be trusted."

This gave me another thought. "Hey, if you knew I was innocent, why did you give me such a hard time?"

"Consider it an inoculation. Against temptation." She gave me a steely glare, just in case I was feeling the pull of temptation.

"You need to get a job to keep you out of trouble," she said.

"I have a job."

"Electric bike motors. I haven't seen any bike motors. Where are these bike motors?"

"They will be here soon. I can't start selling them till I have them."

"You better get busy. We can't have you running around town talking to floozies."

As you can imagine, this entire episode was exhausting. Afterwards, I needed a break and

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some beer, not necessarily in that order, so I walked over to the grocery store. A burly guy in uniform was wheeling a rack full of fresh bread in the front door when I arrived. I mumbled a greeting and wandered toward the beer section. After a moment, I realized that the bread man was startled to see me. Did I know him from somewhere? I hate it when I meet people I am supposed to know, but because they are in the wrong place I don't recognize them. Who did I know that was big and fat and mean looking?

Then it hit me: the guy who threatened me with a baseball bat was the bread delivery man.

CHAPTER 11. THE DBSG MEETING GETS CARRIED AWAY

The next morning, a Tuesday, was fairly typical. After collecting the newspaper and a small bunch of bananas from the convenience store, we quietly sipped our coffee as time slowly drifted by.

Betty was remorseful about how hard she had been on me the previous day. She said she was sorry. I assured her that she was forgiven. I said I was sorry for not dodging Brenda's lips. Next time I would be more alert. Betty reminded me that since I was to avoid women like Brenda, there would be no 'next time.' Naturally, I agreed wholeheartedly. I had learned my lesson: floozies are bad. Stay away from floozies.

While we were having this conversation, sharp claws were digging into my leg, then my back and shoulder. At first I thought Fritter was reinforcing Betty's points. But then I realized the cat, though very intelligent, was

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not that brilliant. Besides, if Fritter was a person she would have been a floozy. It turned out that she was just trying to reach a point high enough for her to transfer to the top of a door. When she did so, the door moved back and forth slightly under her. She balanced precariously on the swaying portal. Did she have a reason for going up there, besides the thrill of possibly falling? Who could tell what went on in the mind of a cat? That was one of the reasons I liked them; they were inscrutable.

The time to update my list was overdue. Taking paper, coffee mug, and a mechanical pencil into the fresh morning air out on the deck, I went to work. The list of suspects now looked like this:

Wanda.

Willy.

Winters.

Brenda's boyfriend.

Drug dealers on bikes.

Drug dealer driving a Ford Bronco.

At this point, a pause was in order. Why had I scribbled drug dealers twice on my list of suspects? While logically I had to believe that only one drug dealership was involved, my two threatening experiences with drug dealers had

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been dramatically different from each other. The first experience had involved two men, clearly serious bicyclists, and actual physical assault against my person. The second had involved a ruffian who looked more like a drug dealer should look. He was dressed like a gangster and looked like a biker. But he looked like a Hell's Angel biker, not a bicyclist. He had threatened me with a bat, instead of whacking me with it. The other two would have tapped me at least once or twice for practice. All things taken into account, I had to leave open the possibility that these two threats were not from the same set of drug dealers. Unfortunately, my list of suspects was getting longer.

The door bell rang. A fellow with a clip board was standing by our front door. I trotted down the stairs and swung open the door with a cheery, "May I help you?" My friend with the clip board spoke the words I had been yearning to hear for three weeks: "Gotta a load a boxes for yah. Wherdya wantum?" My bike motors had arrived.

It was truly an exciting moment. I raised the garage door and moved my car to the street. The driver backed his truck up to the

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garage and offloaded three pallets stacked with boxes. I signed the clip board and our business was done. All I could do at that point was gaze with rapture at my inventory. My new life was about to begin. In order to better savor the moment, I returned to my spot on the deck to smoke my pipe and appreciate my place in the universe. As I went through the living room, Betty asked: "Was someone at the door?"

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it," I called back to her. I should have known that response would pique her curiosity. Still, it was a couple of hours before she wandered down to the garage. For some unfathomable reason, she was not delighted about having the garage serve as a warehouse for my electric bike motors.

"Where are you going to park your car?"

"Outside."

"In the winter?"

"These will be sold before the snow flies."

Betty looked at me like there was something wrong with my mental processes. "You are not going to be able to sell all of these things by Thanksgiving. That's if you can ever sell any of them at all."

That seemed a bit cruel to me. She was

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entitled to her opinion and I wanted her to be honest with me about her opinions, but her lack of faith in me was demoralizing. It was a good thing that our support group was meeting that evening because this was exactly the kind of situation we needed to talk about. By that I mean wives who did not have faith in their men's abilities to bring home the proverbial bacon.

We convened at a coffee shop in Cambridge, which was only a few miles down Highway 12 from Fort Atkinson. After we had assembled and each of us had purchased a large coffee, we called the meeting to order. All of us bought the robust coffee of the day; none lowered himself to buying a foofy drink with froth and a load of calories. As usual we went around the table to review what had been going on in each of our lives that week. As moderator, I saved my story until last.

George went first. George was a technical writer and probably the most verbal guy in the group. He announced proudly that his wife was close to finishing her doctorate in mathematics, which he believed would make her highly marketable for a university position, since women were still in short supply in the

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math field.

"Does that bother you any?" asked Robert. Robert considered himself a big-time corporate executive. He was intelligent, smooth, and aggressive.

"Why should it bother me? It's great."

Robert just smiled and shook his head.

"What's your point?" George demanded.

Robert did not answer this sally. We all shifted in our chairs uneasily. Finally, I said, "Well, some guys might find it demoralizing for their wives to be highly marketable when they are not doing as well."

"I'm doing fine. It's true that I haven't found a writing job, but selling snowmobiles is good training for re-inventing myself as a salesman. I will move right up the ladder after I prove I'm a good salesman." Now it was Louis's turn to shake his head. Louis had been unemployed for two years. He was holding firmly to his plan to wait for a job that was at an appropriate level for his talents. No low-level sales jobs for Louis, no sirree.

"How are the snowmobile sales going?" I asked. "Are they hard to sell in the summer?"

"I'm turning out to be darn good at it," George said.

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Robert stepped back into the conversation. "Does your store sell all-terrain vehicles?"

"Yes, we do. Why do you ask?"

"According to a story I saw in the paper this week, sales of all-terrain vehicles have surpassed sales of snowmobiles for the first time."

"Geez," I said. "That means the hooligans can tear up the landscape in the summer even more than they do with snowmobiles in the winter."

George could not let that pass. "That sounds like more Green Party propaganda, Ed. Sometimes I think you're a tree-hugger."

"I'm not a tree-hugger. Maybe I don't like snowmobiles and ATVs just because they are so blasted noisy." This wasn't sounding very supportive, so I changed my tune. "But don't get me wrong, George. I think it's great that you are breaking into sales. If people want to buy snowmobiles, then they should be able to buy snowmobiles. It's a free country."

Louis smirked when I said that. He was a died-in-the-wool cynic and figured I was lying through my teeth about my true feelings. Maybe he was right.

"Selling is a legitimate way to make a

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living. Tom MacFarlane was in sales." After I said that, I wondered if it was a good argument. Surprisingly, Louis broke in at this point. "Sure. There is nothing wrong with selling nursing home insurance." Then he spoiled it by speaking ill of the dead. "Not that Tom was very good at it."

The conversation veered into reminiscence about the wake. We all agreed that it had been one for the record books.

"That Wanda was a real shrew," George said. "No wonder Tom couldn't live with her."

Robert laughed. "No kidding. But look at who he ended up with."

"What do you mean?" Louis asked.

"Well, that Brenda was quite a character. She fits a stereotype, don't you think?"

Louis frowned, "She seemed okay to me." George agreed with Louis and I kept my opinions about Brenda to myself.

Changing the subject slightly, I took the opportunity to tell the group about how my own sales efforts were progressing. I also recounted Betty's lack of confidence in my ability to market the electric bike motors and how it made me feel.

"She wants me to be the breadwinner. She

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wants me to have a big paycheck rolling in so she won't have to worry about money. Being self-employed makes her nervous, which I can understand. But it's her lack of confidence in me that I find demoralizing."

The other guys all stared moodily into their mugs. At various times, most of us had admitted that our wives had lost faith in us and it was hard for all of us to take. We were the heads of our households. Sure, our wives considered themselves liberated and deserving of perfect social and economic equality. But when it came to protecting home and hearth, each of them expected their men to be out in front, especially when the going got rough. It was hardly fair, but at the same time it made us feel good that our women wanted to rely on us so much. At the same time, it made us feel bad that they were starting to doubt our abilities to successfully play that role. What would happen if they completely lost faith in us? Would they decide we were not the men they thought we were when they married us? Would they decide we were losers and ditch us?

Robert was the first to speak. He cleared his throat hesitantly, then said, "You know, Ed, she may have a point."

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"What do you mean?"

"Maybe those motors won't sell. What makes you think there's a market for electric bike motors?"

"They're Green. Lots of people have sympathies for environmental issues, living simply, keeping the cost of living down. My motors don't use gasoline, which is in scarce supply. Heck, if we had more electric-powered vehicles, maybe we would not be caught up in a war in the Middle East."

"The Greens are a bunch of goofballs," Louis said. "And there aren't that many people who will alter their lifestyles on the basis of Green principles. Lots of people talk like they're Greens, but they drive SUVs." Trust Louis to have a cynical point of view.

"Come on, Louis. Look around you. The city of Cambridge proves my point. They are a giant advertisement for a 'small is beautiful' philosophy. They have given the town a facelift so that it looks quaint, choosing to support small locally-owned businesses. They won't let the farms be subdivided, so the county won't become one big suburb. You could use an electric powered bike to go anywhere in Cambridge. You sure don't need

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an SUV."

But Robert agreed with Louis. "You can't really think Cambridge restricts land use the way they do because the local politicians are idealistic. Business is business."

I did not understand his point and told him so.

"Who do you think benefits from restricting land use they way they do? I'll tell you who: the local businesses. The restrictions on development keep other businesses from coming into town. That means more profit for the businesses that were here first."

Robert pounded on the table to emphasize his point. "And I'll tell you something else: somebody in this town has a lot of clout and they are using it to promote local profiteering."

"Do you have any proof of that or are you just sounding off?" George asked.

"The proof is right in front of this coffee shop: Highway 12. They just finished a major road construction project that routed the highway right down the main drag, right past the local retail establishments. All over the rest of the state, the improvements being made to Highway 12 are in the form of bypasses that take traffic around the downtown areas of

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small towns so the people on the highway can get where they are going faster. In Cambridge, they did just the opposite. Can you offer another theory as to why they would do that, except that some people plan to make a lot of money by slowing down highway traffic right in front of a bunch of quaint retail establishments. The decision they made about the highway has paved this street with gold."

Our voices had risen during this argument. The proprietor of the coffee shop came over to our table to calm us down. "You gentlemen are disturbing our other patrons," she said.

We all apologized. Then curiosity got the better of me. "Ma'am, you're a local business person. Maybe you can settle this argument for us. Is it true that the decision to route Highway 12 through downtown Cambridge instead of onto a bypass was politically influenced by local business people who saw a way to enhance their profits?"

In retrospect, what kind of answer could I have expected from a question like that? The local business person gave me what I deserved: she threw me out. She threw the entire group out and said we were not welcome to have our meetings in her shop in the future. She

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suggested that we take our business to other towns in the future. We were not likely to be welcome anywhere in Cambridge.

Driving home, down Highway 12, it occurred to me that one of the disadvantages of living in rural Wisconsin was the flip side of what I liked about it: it was not urbanized, so not many people lived there, which meant that fewer coffee shops were available. I was in real danger of running out of coffee shops that would serve me if I did not learn to be careful about what I said in public.

It was about eight p.m. and the light was starting to fade. Turning on my headlights helped a lot, since I was out of Cambridge and virtually alone on the road. My night vision left me about 1985, so I avoided driving on unlighted roads when possible. Interstates were okay at night because they were wide and you could usually avoid running into things with, of course, one major exception: deer. It was just a matter of time before my car tangled with a deer. It seemed to happen to everyone eventually. The car would be totaled when that happened. Since I liked my little Ford Focus, it was going to be a sad day. But did I really think I could dodge a deer with the car? No. So, like

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death and taxes, hitting a deer was something you knew you would have to suffer through when your turn came along.

While I was mulling over the unavoidable tragedies of life, like being thrown out of coffee shops and hitting a deer, somebody ran into the back of my car. It was just a gentle nudge, but the shock nearly caused me to lose control of the vehicle. After a little swerving, it came back under control and I looked into the rear view mirror. The vehicle behind me had no lights on, so I could not see it clearly. As it inched closer to nudge me again, I got the distinct impression that it might be a black SUV. Stomping on the gas pedal caused my trusty little car to shoot forward. I kept the pedal all the way to the floor, trying to get away.

Our speed climbed quickly to 75, then 85, with my follower only inches from my rear bumper. The road was fairly straight between Cambridge and Fort Atkinson, but there was at least one curve. I knew because my car didn't make it. The engine was roaring when the road started to curve to the left. Directly in front of me was a long driveway that ran up a hill. I chose the driveway, which turned out to be

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gravel. Having learned to drive on country roads, I knew better than to hit my brakes on gravel. Instead, I let off the gas and fought the steering wheel. The steep slope of the driveway slowed the car just as I pulled up in front of the farmhouse at the top. The house was well lit. I could see the flicker of the television through the panes of the living room window. No one came to the door. I supposed the location of that driveway had led a few other crazy drivers up to the front door in the past. As I reversed the car, I looked around carefully, but the black SUV was gone. I didn't see it anywhere on the remainder of the drive home.

CHAPTER 12. BULLETS FLY

When I arrived, Betty gave me a hug. "You're shaking! And dripping with sweat. You must have the flu. Are you feeling sick?"

"I'm fine. Just tired." I opened the fridge and fished out a Miller. Then I parked myself in my Morris chair and put my feet up. I loved that chair. It was very comfortable.

"You are not fine. You better go to bed early."

"That might be a good idea."

"Can I bring you anything? You look awful. Like death warmed over."

"I'm fine. Just let me rest for a minute."

She sat down in her recliner. She had been reading when I arrived and her book was by her side.

"Let's just read for a while, okay?"

"Okay," she said. I knew she wanted to get back to her book.

We sat there a few minutes and I started to

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doze off. Then the window cracked. It was loud and both of us jumped. We sat there in surprise for a moment, then we walked over to look at the damage. The crack was a bad one. "Darn it," I said. "Just what we need." Getting this fixed was going to be a hassle.

"What could have done that?" she asked.

"A bird probably flew into it."

"What do think caused that hole? It's beak?"

There was a round hole about the size of a quarter at one end of the crack.

"That must have hurt."

"What kind of bird would do that?"

"It shouldn't be too hard to find out. We just look for a pug-beaked woodpecker. It's probably laying dead down there on the ground."

"Look at that," Betty said, pointing at the ceiling in the middle of the living room. A long stream of plaster dust was falling from a small hole in the ceiling. "What a mess. I better get the vacuum out."

"Get down," I said.

She looked at me blankly.

I sank to me knees, pulling her down with me..

BULLETS FLY

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Somebody's shooting at us."

Betty started screaming. I wrapped my arms around her as I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and called 911.

A couple of hours later we were back in our respective chairs. The police had been very efficient. They measured angles and brought in a tall ladder so they could dig the bullet out of our cathedral ceiling. They had done a lot to reassure Betty. They promised that the patrols would drive by frequently throughout the night. She was calm now and starting to get angry.

"Drive-by shootings? This sort of thing isn't supposed to happen in Fort Atkinson. Milwaukee is where they do that sort of thing. Not here. And why should they pick us out to shoot at?"

At that moment, the door bell rang. It was my favorite pair of detectives, Broder and Schmidt. They accepted our invitation to sit on the couch, then pulled their notebooks out.

"It seems there was a little excitement here tonight," Broder said. "You two must be pretty shaken up."

"Are you going to catch whoever did this?"

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Betty demanded.

"We'll do what we can. It was probably random, which makes it more difficult.

But maybe somebody saw something. We will canvas the neighborhood."

That mollified Betty somewhat.

"First, though, we need to ask you some routine questions. Can you folks give me a rundown on your activities lately? Do you have any idea who might have wanted to do this?"

"We are just normal people with normal lives," Betty said. "No one hates us enough to want to shoot at us."

Schmidt looked at me thoughtfully. I suspected that she didn't quite agree with Betty's assessment.

"Even so, let's run through where you have been and who you have talked to," Broder said. "Maybe something will turn up." He turned toward me. "What have you been doing the last few days, Mr. Schumacher?"

I stared at my shoes for a moment. Without looking at Betty I said, "Somebody ran me off the road on the way back from Cambridge tonight."

Betty's face went blank with surprise. Broder asked, "How do you know they were

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trying to run you off the road?"

"Whoever it was banged my rear bumper while I was driving at highway speed. He chased me for a few miles with his lights off. It sure seemed like he was trying to run me off the road. I ended up on a gravel driveway about halfway between Cambridge and Fort."

"What were you doing in Cambridge?"

"My support group was having a meeting at a coffee shop there."

"Was there some kind of incident that made someone angry?"

I considered that question carefully, then answered, "Not enough to try to kill me."

Betty, Broder, and Schmidt exchanged glances. "We know the place," Broder said. "We will pay them a visit and see what they have to say about it."

Broder sighed. "What else have you been doing this week, Mr. Schumacher?"

"Not too much. A guy delivered some boxes today. I talked to him."

Betty broke in. "You talked to that Brenda woman." She turned to Broder. "You know the woman that was in the fight at Sal's the other night? Ed talked to her at McDonald's."

"What was that conversation about?"

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Broder asked.

"Trying to find out more about Tom MacFarlane." It wasn't necessary to remind them who Tom was.

Broder sighed again. "Did you talk to anyone else?"

"Hmmm. There was Wanda MacFarlane."

Betty was startled. "I didn't know about that."

"And her son, Tom Junior. And a few drug dealers."

The room fell silent. "Drug dealers?" Schmidt asked with an evil grin. "Maybe you could elaborate on that for us. Just a little bit." Have I mentioned that she didn't like me?

"Well, it seems that Tom Junior is running errands for drug dealers. His dad found out and tried to interfere. They warned him to stay out of it. When I asked Tom Junior questions, they did the same thing to me."

"Oh my God," Betty gasped.

"They just told you to lay off?"

"They pushed me around a little. They were both dressed like serious bicyclists. I know there is a gang of drug dealers in this town that distribute drugs via bicycle. Anyway, they shoved me around some."

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"I imagine they did, Mr. Schumacher. They tend to get physical." Broder sighed. I heard him mumble something about bicyclists under his breath. Then he asked, "What else?"

"Well, there was another drug dealer. He caught up with me while I was taking my walk. He was driving a black Bronco. Big guy with a baseball bat. He threatened me. But he didn't hit me with the bat," I said brightly, shooting Betty a reassuring smile. She did not smile back at me.

"By the way, detectives, I know how you can find that guy. He is a big, heavysset fellow who delivers bread to the grocery store over by Culver's ice cream shop. He must be distributing drugs along with the bread. It's a perfect set up, don't you think?"

Schmidt and Broder just stared at me for a moment. "When he threatened you, was he wearing his bread delivery uniform or his spandex biking suit?" Schmidt asked, dead pan.

"Neither. He was wearing a lot of chains."

Betty was holding her head in her hands, her face covered. "Okay, so you don't believe me." I stood up in anger. "But why would I make all that up? It's the truth. And somebody did

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take a shot at us tonight, didn't they?

Who would want to do that?"

"Most anybody," Schmidt said.

CHAPTER 13. ANOTHER DEATH

Wednesday morning was a little tense. Betty started in on me before I finished my second cup of coffee.

"Why didn't you tell me about all this?" she demanded. "You were keeping everything to yourself. And we could have gotten killed because of it."

"Tell you about it? Last summer when wild things were happening you thought I was imagining it all. Since you thought I was delusional then, why would you believe me now? And besides, I didn't want to scare you. You either would have been scared or you would have thought I was nuts. There was no upside in telling you."

"But I want to know about these things," she said.

"You know, since somebody shot at us that means you have to believe me," I pointed out.

Betty hesitated. "Not necessarily. You could be misinterpreting what you see and hear

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while at the same time irritating people enough to make them want to kill you.”

“So you agree with Schmidt!”

She was saved from answering when my cell phone rang. It was Schmidt. “Speak of the devil,” I told Betty. “She wants to talk to me downtown. They have some new information.” Then I left.

The interrogation room was so familiar to me by this time that I was almost comfortable there. Broder and Schmidt were not accusing me of anything (at the moment), so I just relaxed and sipped the coffee I had picked up at McDonald’s, which was only a block away. Come to think of it, Tom’s body was lying in the street not far from the police offices in the city building. He was within sight of our protectors when he died, most likely. Granted, it was after hours. But even so, it was pretty bold to murder somebody in clear view of the police station.

Broder got right to the point. Picking up one piece of paper from the small pile in front of him, he said, “First, someone saw a black SUV in your neighborhood about the time of the shooting. We don’t know for sure if it was a Bronco. And it is a very common color for

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an SUV, so it might be unrelated. Still, it's progress." He laid down that document and picked up another. "Second, we checked around and Tom Junior is under suspicion concerning drug dealing in the area." That piece of paper went down and a third was lifted up. "Third, about three this morning a gun was heard being fired over on the east side of town. The squad car that answered the call found a body dead of a shotgun blast." Broder paused for effect, then went on. "The victim apparently had been riding an expensive racing bike. He was dressed like a serious bicyclist."

I was delighted. This information appeared to vindicate me in some way, though right at that moment, I was not sure how. "You mean the guy was blown off his bike by a shotgun? What have we got here, a drug war?"

The pencil Schmidt had been playing with broke in half. Broder went pale. "Don't even think that. This is not Milwaukee. We will investigate this matter. We are asking, no insisting, that you refrain from any amateur investigations into drug crimes. We need no wild talk about drug wars. You will only muddy the waters and you might get hurt. Your wife might get hurt."

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He had me convinced. "Okay, okay. No amateur sleuthing into drug dealerships. Got it. No problem. I'm outta that business. You can count on me."

I was feeling pretty darn good. Drug dealers did exist in this town. Tom Junior was tied in with them. And the cops believed me about the dealers being bicyclists. Since I was on a roll, I decided to try for the goal line. "Hey, what you guys need is a bike patrol." Broder, who had been rising from his seat, froze in mid-air. "Some cities have them, you know. Of course, I know some of your guys have been hitting the donuts pretty hard and chasing drug dealers on bikes might be tough on them. But if the cops had electric battery power assisted motors on their bikes, they would have the edge, right?" Broder and Schmidt were staring at me, mesmerized. I had them right where I wanted them. "And I know just where you can get some of those motors. Get back to me. We can help each other on this." I leaned across the table. "Think about it. Fort Atkinson could be the first police department in the country with a bike patrol that uses electric motors. You would be on the national news." Having nailed them with a

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sure-fire sales pitch, I exited.

Trotting down the steps in front of the city building, I was on cloud nine. I was vindicated by the police, somewhat, and I was about to make a big sale. Life was good.

A few loose ends were still floating around, of course. Come to think of it, we actually did not know the truth about anything, including Tom's death. But at the moment, I was willing to assume the drug dealers did it. After all, they were willing to kill each other, so killing a snoop would have been no problem for them. The point was I didn't need to worry about that stuff anymore. The cops were on it now. And I might have helped bring this promising juncture to pass.

The loose ends I was allowed to consider had to do with the minor mysteries, like which of the guys in the support group was chasing after Tom's girlfriend? And was Winters really planning on firing Tom? This was minor stuff. There was really no reason why I couldn't look into it.

The insurance office was just down the street about ten blocks, on the other side of the bridge, so I wandered over there. On the way, I stopped at a print shop and had a

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hundred business cards made up. They had my name, my email address, and the words “electric bicycle motors.”

You will never guess who the receptionist was at the insurance office: Brenda. Tom had been dating someone from his own office. And after meeting Brenda, I was sure that everybody in the building probably knew about their relationship.

“Hey, how’s it going?” was my opening sally.

“Good enough,” she answered. “How’re things with you?” She giggled. “Betty is doing okay, I hope?”

This caused me to gulp and remember why I was there. ‘Hey, Mr. Winters isn’t around, is he? I would like to talk to him for a minute.’

“Still asking people questions?” She smiled at me. “Well. That’s fine. And he’s here. Just go over to that office with the open door. He’s in there. He’ll see you.”

He was and he did. Winters welcomed me with a hearty handshake and offered me a seat. After commenting on the weather (it looked like rain) and the heat (we wished it would rain sooner rather than later), I said, “I don’t know how to ask this, exactly. Tom was my friend

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and I'm trying to find out a little more about his life, things I should have asked him about before he died."

Winters nodded. "I understand. We all need to find closure after a person dies. We are left with things we should have said or done. What can I tell you that will help?"

"Let me just ask it straight out. Tom thought you were going to lay him off. His sales were down. He was worried about it. He was worried about his future. Did he have any reason to be worried?"

Winters stood up and closed the door, then returned to his seat. "Tom was not a productive salesman, hadn't been for years. But under our system, if you sell less, you make less money. It doesn't cost the company to keep you around. And I admit I pressured him to produce more, especially shortly after I was transferred to this office. But after I settled in, I realized that Tom was serving as a mentor to the younger sales reps. Besides he was always cheerful and was good for morale in the office. No, I was not going to fire Tom. I guess I should have reassured him about that."

I was really getting to like this guy.

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Winters snapped his fingers. "You know, you just explained something I have been wondering about. You know Louis Smurfit? He has been coming around here for weeks trying to get me to hire him. He was convinced that I would have a vacant position soon. Louis must have gotten the idea from Tom."

"Geez. Going after your friend's job before he has even been fired is a little opportunistic, don't you think?"

"You're right. It's the kind of aggressive behavior that might actually make for a good salesman, though. What bothered me was the way he was dating Tom's girlfriend. Now that is a bit low." He chuckled. "That woman keeps no secrets, let me tell you."

Louis was dating Brenda? And he wanted Tom's job? Did this mean that Louis had two motives for wanting Tom out of the picture?

Shaking my head to clear it, I stood up and headed for the door. "Thanks for talking so openly with me. I really appreciate it."

"Before you go, can you tell me how Tom's boy is holding up?"

"Tom Junior is having problems. He was in trouble before. Now he acts as if he doesn't care that his dad is dead. He believes Tom was

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worthless, a loser. Wanda put a lot of those ideas in his head, I'm sure. She is carrying around a lot of anger."

"That's too bad." He seemed sincere about the sentiment.

Winters walked me to the front door of the office suite. Hanging on the wall by the door was a large sign that had the word STARBOARD at the top. The white space under the title was empty. To the left of the starboard was a row of eight by ten photographs of each member of the sales team, hanging on hooks. It was clear that the picture of the best sales rep could be moved from its regular hook to the hook on the starboard, so that the star of the month could bask in fame and appreciation.

"What's this?" I asked, purely out of curiosity.

"This is our starboard. We put up the name of our best salesman. We change it every month. This month we left it blank. With Tom being dead, nobody wanted to focus attention on sales. It seemed a bit crass. So we left the name off this month."

"You said it's for the name of the best salesman. But you meant the guy with the

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most sales."

Winters looked at me. "Right."

"But it's possible to be good in other ways than just total sales, right?"

"That's right," he said, looking at me thoughtfully.

After a moment of silence for Tom, I went on my way.

That evening Betty and I had a good time. We went to the restaurant she liked out on Highway 26. That place had a large handsome bar in the front room and a nice dining area in the back. We sat at the bar for a drink before dinner. Betty had one of those fancy martinis she liked and I told her about the events of the day. The news from the police interview was interesting to her. I even told her about my visit to the insurance office, about Brenda being the receptionist, and recounted all that Winters had told me. Betty asked questions as I went through the story.

"You know," she commented, "I kind of enjoy hearing about your little investigations."

"I know you do. But it's nice to hear you say it."

"We can call you the Silly Sleuth."

"How about the Delusional Detective?"

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Betty laughed a little too hard at that one. She had to wipe tears from her eyes.

"It wasn't that funny."

"I'm sorry, dear. I know you enjoy sleuthing. I like to see you happy. You are happy, aren't you?"

"Yes. I'm happy. I'm glad we moved to Wisconsin. I feel a lot better. I used to get pretty compulsive about my work. It wasn't healthy. Now I can work a little, then take a break. I couldn't do that before."

Betty had one more point to make on sleuthing. "On the other hand, that doesn't mean I want you to get involved in anything dangerous. Dangerous is out. No drug stuff." She was giving me her stern look.

"Okay. I don't like having the bejeezus scared out of me, either. No more investigations into drug dealerships."

"Shake on it," she demanded.

So we shook hands across the table, then sealed the deal with a kiss.

When we got back home, Fritter and I played tag for a bit before we went to bed. The way we did it, it was Fritter's task to chase me. I had tried chasing her, but she wouldn't run. She would just stare at me when I ran up to

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her. But she was willing to chase me. In a couple of leaps, she could be ahead of me. To make the game interesting, I changed my route at random, running into different rooms. This game tired me out in about five minutes, so it was not long before I was flopping down on the bed next to Betty.

"I'm glad we have a unit on the second floor," she observed.

"Why is that?"

"If we were on the ground floor, somebody driving by might see you chasing the cat around in your underwear."

"I don't chase the cat. She chases me."

"Do you ever win the game?"

"Hah. That shows what you know. The victory is not always to the swift, nor to the strong. Sometimes it's to the guy in his underwear who makes unexpected turns."

Betty chuckled. One of the things I loved about that woman was the way she laughed at my jokes, even when she had no idea what I was talking about.

CHAPTER 14. ANDREW CONNECTS THE DOTS

The next day, Betty and I took her two teenage nephews to a matinee. It was a remake of the old Willy Wonka movie about a chocolate factory. As we were walking out of the theater, the young men were chatting happily about the movie.

"Do you guys remember the part where all those dudes on motorbikes were delivering candy?" I asked them.

"Yeah. That was cool!"

"Those bikes were pretty quiet. And I didn't see any exhaust coming out of their engines. I think they were electric."

"Awesome. Electric bikes!"

"Do you think kids would like to ride electric bikes?"

"Sure! Anybody would want one!"

"Let's go back to our place. I've got something for you guys." I gave each of them a box with a bike motor with the

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understanding that they would pass out my business cards to any of their friends who might want to buy one. The boys went away happy. It gave me a good feeling to spread a little joy in the world.

That evening, Andrew and I met at Sal's for a beer and to catch him up on events. I began by assuring him that I had learned my lesson and would never again get involved in any dangerous sleuthing. A little harmless sleuthing was still a possibility, though.

Andrew listened carefully to the whole story. "Let me see if I have this straight. Your list of suspects now includes the ex-wife, Louis Smurfit, Winters, drug dealers on bikes, a drug dealer who delivers bread, and this guy Willy Bundt. Is that right?"

"Nah. Winters is out. I like him."

"Don't you think murderers can be likable?"

"It seems un-like-ly. Get it?" That made me laugh. I loved it when I made a pun.

Andrew was not amused. Maybe he didn't get it.

Andrew pulled a sheet of paper out of his jacket pocket. "Betty called me earlier and told me about the black Ford Bronco. Just out of

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curiosity I ran a list of all the black Broncos owned by residents of Fort Atkinson. "I can't show you this list because it's confidential. But I distinctly remember one name on the list because it was a little unusual." He folded the paper so that only one name was visible, then showed it to me. It was "Willy Bundt."

Taking a swig of my beer, I considered this revelation and what it might mean. "Willy Bundt is the drug dealer slash bread delivery man?"

Andrew nodded. "I followed up by calling the store and asking for the names of the bread delivery guys. One of them was Bundt. That clinches it."

"Well, I'll be darned. So that means Bundt had two reasons to kill Tom: his anger over the long term care insurance and Tom's interference in the drug business."

Andrew held up his hand. "Now wait a minute. All this proves is that the guy who threatened you was Willy Bundt. It does not prove Bundt is tied in with the bikers. From what you said, I would guess that he would look pretty silly on a bike."

We discussed the case for quite a while, but could not settle on a provable case against

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any particular suspect. Louis had two motives, but outright violence did not seem to be his style. Wanda was angry enough, but too small in stature to have easily done the dirty deed. Bundt was big enough, but he was a bread delivery man. Could a bread man actually be violent? Maybe the business with the bat was all an act. We had to agree that the biker drug dealers were the most likely suspects.

"Why was the druggie-biker killed, Andrew?" I asked. "How does that fit in?"

"That is the part that is easiest to understand. The regional office for the distribution network probably heard about Tom's murder and concluded that the local boys were out of control. They needed to deliver an object lesson to all their people: 'don't draw attention to yourselves, especially from the police.' I think we can ignore that death. And I suspect that the person who killed Tom has been caught and punished -by his own partners in crime. End of story."

But, for once, Andrew was wrong.

CHAPTER 15. REENACTMENT

Thursday started with the usual routines. After reading the newspaper, I parked on the porch to enjoy the fresh morning air. One of the neighbors emerged from his condo, glanced up at me, and called out, "Good morning!"

"Perfect weather," I called back. "Whadeyahknow?"

Let me briefly digress. The word 'whadeyahknow' in my experience had always been misspelled. The uninitiated may have believed that 'what-do-you-know' was slurred together as 'what'dya know' in common parlance. Even the National Public Radio operated under this misconception. However, a true Midwesterner pronounced the phrase as 'whadeyahknow.' Try saying it slowly.

Wha. De. Yah. Know.

Now say it fast ten times. It definitely came out as 'whadeyaknow.' Perhaps someone at NPR would read this book and correct its

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spelling. And maybe they wouldn't.

"Whadeyahknow?" I asked.

"Not much. You?" This, by the way, was the correct response. Even NPR knew that.

My neighbor wandered around the corner of the building, returning shortly with some mail in his hand. This reminded me that I had not checked the mailbox in several days. Some bills might be resting in there. Since receiving a nasty note from a creditor was one of my least favorite experiences, I trotted down the stairs to check the box.

Two post-it notes were stuck to the inside of the front door. In block letters, the first one read, "DON'T LET THE CAT OUT." The second one elaborated on this point. "THE CAT WILL TRY TO ESCAPE. WATCH OUT!" I shook my head. Betty's anxieties were showing again.

The mail box was empty except for some advertising flyers, so I returned to my place on the deck. The means by which Tom MacFarlane was killed continued to elude me, and it was bothering me. I just could not get the problem out of my head. The only hope I had of forgetting about the problem was to dream up a scenario that explained all the

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known facts.

My favorite scenario went like this. Tom was drinking in one of several bars a few blocks from where he died. At some point, a couple of thugs stuck a gun in his back and forced him to walk down the street to the building that had its top floor under construction. They directed him to walk up the stairs to the top floor, then directed him to walk out on the arm of the crane. Then they moved the arm over the street.

Then what? They didn't shoot him, so how did they make him fall from his perch into the street? And was it really possible to gain entry into a construction site after hours? I couldn't figure it out. But I had an idea about how I might be able to shed some light on the matter.

That evening when it was cool I took my walk, using the opportunity to swing by the construction site. It was dusk and well after quitting time for the workmen. The sidewalk in front of the building was separated from the street by a chain link fence. A sawhorse blocked the sidewalk between the fence and the building. A sign hung from it that said, "Sidewalk Closed." Glancing furtively in all

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directions to make sure no one was in sight, I moved the sawhorse to one side far enough to enter the blocked-off area. Fifteen feet down the sidewalk was a door into the building. Actually, it was a doorway, since the door had been removed. So I walked into the building.

No furniture was in evidence. Heavy dust coated the floor except where the workmen had been walking to and from the other rooms and the stairway. The fire door that led to the stairs was not locked. I climbed up the cement stairs as quietly as possible, even though it seemed unlikely that anyone would hear any noises made inside the building.

By the time I emerged on the top floor, I was breathing heavily. Tools were scattered around in untidy piles. Scaffolds reached up into the darkening sky as if they were the skeletons of those who had died in defiance of the forces of nature, perhaps paralyzed at the moment of death by bolts of lightening.

The crane was sitting at the edge of the roof with the boom slanting out over the street. The arm of the crane was narrower than I had expected. Only an acrobat could have walked out on that boom without losing his balance and falling. A person could have

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crawled out to the end of it by straddling the thing and pulling himself forward with his arms, but how could you be sure that you would be able to force someone to do that, even at gunpoint?

The cool breeze fanned my face as I looked out over the street. Gradually, the spookiness of the place faded and I realized how peaceful it was up there. Peace, how elusive and precious it was. The cares of the world were remote, held at bay by some kind of magic. But I knew that once I went back down those stairs, the responsibilities, fears, and pressures of life would return in full force. Why not just stroll out on the arm of the crane? A person who was relaxed could make it all the way. And he could be very relaxed if he did not care about falling.

CHAPTER 16. DENOUEMENT

It was nearly ten when I pulled up in front of the house occupied by Wanda MacFarlane and Tom Junior. Darkness had set in completely and it was far too late to be calling on people in their homes, especially when those people neither expected you nor liked you. But I was in no mood to wait.

Wanda answered the door. Her face showed several emotions in rapid succession. First surprise. Next anger. Then fear.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I need to talk to you."

"About what?"

"You know about what," I said roughly.

She turned with a sign of resignation and led me into the living room. I should have been surprised that she let me in, but somehow I wasn't.

She sat on the couch without a word. I sat down in a chair without waiting for an invitation. We sat and stared at each in silence for a moment.

DENOUEMENT

Finally, I asked it the only way I knew how, straight out. "Did Tom send a letter to Tom Junior before he died?"

Wanda gasped, then swallowed hard. She hesitated, then said, "How did you know?"

"I didn't. I guessed. I just got to thinking that maybe he committed suicide. And I was sure he would not have done that without trying to explain himself to his son. A letter is the usual way a suicide handles that kind of communication."

I leaned forward. "Once I got that far in the scenario, I realized that you would have seen the letter first. And being the kind of person you are, you would not have given it to Tom Junior without reading it first. Tom Junior would not have liked having his mother open his mail, so it would be easier just to hide the letter or throw it away. Once you did that, you couldn't tell the police about it because then Tom Junior would find out what you did."

Wanda had gone pale and was holding her hand over her mouth.

"Have I got it right?" I demanded.

"Yes, you have it right," she said in a low voice.

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"That's what I thought. And it makes me wonder how many other times you prevented Tom from communicating with his son."

Wanda's eyes shone brightly as her anger flared. "That was my duty as a mother. I had to protect Tom from his father's wild ideas. The man might have said anything."

"You mean he might have said something critical about you."

"Yes!" she shouted. "That is exactly what I mean!"

In the brief silence after her outburst, we both realized we were not alone. Tom Junior stood in the doorway. His face was blank. There was no way to discern how much he had overheard.

I stood up. "You two have some things to talk about, so I'm taking off now. But Wanda, if you don't call the police and tell them about the letter first thing in the morning, you can be sure that I will do it for you." Then I went home, figuring that I had caused enough anguish for one day.

CHAPTER 17. THE TRUTH UNVEILED

Friday morning was bright and sunny. After reading the paper, I sat on the deck and watched the birds dive-bomb the neighbors. This show had been playing for a couple of weeks. When the neighbors came out of their house to play with their dog, the starlings would attack them. The kids loved it and would run around screaming. The woman of the house also ran around screaming, but she didn't seem to enjoy it as much. The previous week she told me the starlings had built a nest in the rain gutter over her garage. She and the kids did not want to disturb the baby birds by moving the nest. So, they were putting up with the daily air raids.

They weren't the only ones. Pedestrians walking by frequently received similar treatment from the starlings. For some reason, the birds left me alone even though I walked to the convenience store every morning. Several of us stood on the sidewalk one morning discussing the mystery. What

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motivated the starlings to attack some people and not others? My theory was that the starlings thought the dog, a Chihuahua, was a cat. They were actually attacking the dog. The retired sheriff who lived across the way said that would not explain why pedestrians were attacked. After all, not all of them were walking their pets. And the ones that were had dogs that actually looked like dogs from the air. His theory was baseball hats. He thought starlings hated baseball hats. I could not refute this because I could not remember whether all the victims had been wearing baseball hats. This made me wonder if the birds only attacked certain colors of hats, or certain sizes, or hats representing ball teams they didn't like.

This particular morning I was mulling over the mystery of the bird attacks while watching one such attack occur. Perhaps it was the shape of the hat. Maybe from the air, the bill of the hat made the person look like a giant bird, perhaps an ostrich. Are larger birds prone to eating smaller birds? Was this why the starlings attacked baseball hats? To drive away larger birds?

Yes, if you looked at it from the birds' point of view, everything changed. It all made

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sense. Most things do if you try looking at them from a different perspective.

The headline on the front page of the paper was about a group of seven state governors who were calling on the president to offer more incentives for the development of renewable energy sources. National security required that we reduce our dependence on foreign oil supplies, they argued.

They were right on target from my point of view. That was my politics showing, but also my desire to sell electric bike motors. Robert was probably right. Businesses trying to make a buck were behind every policy decision, even when those decisions appeared to be motivated by the public interest. But what difference did it make what the motives were if the public benefited?

Inside the paper there was a short story about Tom MacFarlane. Suddenly, the mystery of his death was solved. A suicide letter had been discovered. The deceased wrote that he was despondent about how his career, initially so promising, had somehow faded. He was slipping backward, with lower earnings each year. His health was bad, having suffered a heart attack. 'Family tensions' were also

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mentioned in the letter, according to the reporter. The police had declared the case closed. An obituary for Mr. MacFarlane was printed on page such and such.

An unrelated story briefly described the killing of a bicyclist in Fort Atkinson. The biker was discovered to be dealing drugs, according to police sources. The police statement indicated that the killing was most likely an internal issue for organized crime. They did not expect new developments in the case any time soon. This file also appeared to be closed. Broder and Schmidt were having a productive week.

And, at that moment, the door bell rang: it was Broder and Schmidt. I let them in and we all trudged upstairs. After we had arranged ourselves on the living room furniture, I opened the conversation by saying, "It looks like you guys have wrapped up two cases at once. You must be satisfied with yourselves."

"Just doing our jobs," Schmidt growled.

Broder ignored her. "Thank you, Mr. Schumacher. We try to serve the public as best we can. Which, by the way, is why we are here. We wanted to update you about the shots that were fired through your window."

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"I'm all ears."

"This is for your information only," he said, then added, "and of course for your wife's information." He continued, "Our undercover agents have learned that our original theory was correct: the dealers who were working with Tom MacFarlane, Jr., were seeking to discourage your interest in the case. They fired the shots. However, since this drew too much attention to their operation, the kingpins decided a lesson in discretion was required, as well as a change in local leadership. They eliminated the person who made the decision to fire a weapon at your home." Broder leaned forward. "This, however, does not constitute a 'drug war,' in any way, shape, or form. This was just a business decision to replace a local manager. It is imperative that there be no loose talk about 'drug wars.' We take this very seriously and hope you will as well." He gave me a steely look.

"So, the shooting was poor performance on the part of a local manager who has since been downsized, permanently. Now, it is back to business as usual."

Broder looked surprised. "That seems to sum up the situation accurately," he agreed.

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He hastened to add a footnote, however. "Please be confident that we do not take drug trafficking lightly and will pursue these miscreants continuously within the limits of our resources."

He must have realized that his statement sounded pompous and generated no confidence in my mind. Shaking his head, he decided to stop while he was ahead. Gesturing to Schmidt, he got up and they headed for the stairs down to the front door.

"One more thing, Detective Broder," I said.

"Can I assume that it was the drug dealers who also ran me off the road?"

Broder hesitated, so Schmidt spoke up. "We have no evidence that the incident you reported ever occurred. There were no witnesses other than yourself. You might have imagined the whole thing."

My mouth fell open and Broder could tell I was about to protest. "However," he broke in quickly, "in answer to your question: yes, you may assume that if the incident involving the car chase occurred as you described it, then it was probably another attempt by the drug dealers to scare you off." Then they left,

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leaving me frustrated and unsatisfied.

I went out on my deck to smoke my pipe and try to gain some perspective. After a few minutes, I adjusted to the official doubts about my sanity. After all, it was not the first time people had questioned whether I was imagining things. That was life or at least my life. My mind drifted over the entire episode, not just how I had been affected personally. I became somewhat philosophical.

There I sat, mulling over the life and times of Tom MacFarlane and all the men like him. Men who began their lives as the brash and self-confident crowd dubbed the 'Baby Boomers.' They were self-indulgent and irreverent. They tried pot and created a sexual revolution. They even flirted with political revolution. They brought a war to a crashing halt with mass protests. They helped bring down a president who exceeded his authority. Then they grew up, became blatant materialists, and hustled hard to earn the big houses and expensive cars that they were sure they deserved. And now, they were over the hill, replaced by young MBAs who were clueless about how the initial promise of life could turn to dust and failure. They couldn't

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make their mortgage payments and their families sure as heck did not want to move into duplexes.

How did you adjust to a role of diminished importance, diminished power, diminished status, diminished income, and diminished respect from families who were led to believe that the gravy train would never end? Over the next decade, how many of these men would blow their brains out, jump off of buildings, crash their cars into viaducts on empty highways, or mysteriously drown while fishing? Somebody had to tell them, convince them, that the money, the cars, and the houses weren't that important. The idealism they had flaunted so bravely as young people was right and true and better after all. But then the downsized boomers would ask, "Why did I spend my whole life chasing worthless stuff?" How did you answer that question without telling these men that their values had been all wrong? On the other hand, couldn't you say the same about most generations? Has there ever been a generation that did not eventually drop the idealism of youth in favor of materialism?

CHAPTER 18. EPILOGUE

That afternoon, after a light lunch that consisted of toast and unsweetened tea, I was back on the deck smoking my pipe when Willy Bundt walked up to my front door. He rang the bell, not seeing me on the deck. "Hey," I called down to him, pretending that I didn't recognize him. "Can I help you with something?"

Bundt peered up at me hesitantly. He clearly was nervous. He spread his hands. "Can I talk to you? It's okay. See? No baseball bat." He was wearing his bread uniform and looked harmless enough, so I went down and let him in. He followed me back onto the deck and we sat in the wicker chairs we use for deck furniture.

I said nothing, letting him start the conversation. He cleared his throat, then said, "I came by to apologize."

"Really?"

"Yes. I was out of line. Threatening you

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that way was ridiculous. I'm sorry."

"Why did you do it?"

Willy shifted in his chair, clearly uncomfortable. "You were asking questions about Tom MacFarlane. Wanda is a close friend of mine. In fact, I care a lot about her. I was trying to protect her."

"You thought she killed Tom."

He smiled sheepishly. "It seemed like a possibility. She couldn't get over being angry with him. I tried to make her see that was all in the past, but she just couldn't let it go. When Tom died, I couldn't help thinking that she had finally done it. I know she wanted to, sometimes."

"Is that why you ran me off the road and fired a bullet through my window?"

Bundt was genuinely startled. "I don't know anything about that. It wasn't me. I promise you, it wasn't me."

I believed him. It must have been those darn drug dealers, still trying to scare me off.

"Why did you decide to come tell me about it?"

"The police dragged me in for questioning. They traced all the people who owned cars like mine. They have me dead to rights on

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threatening you. I would really appreciate it if you wouldn't press charges against me. I have never done anything like it before and never will again."

We didn't exactly part friends, but we shook hands and I thanked him for coming to see me. I also wished him the best of luck with Wanda. He was probably going to need it.

A few minutes after Bundt left, the phone rang. It was Winters.

"Ed," he asked, "is there any chance you could come over to the office about five this afternoon? We are having a little ceremony for Tom MacFarlane."

"Sure thing. That's very nice of you."

"Can you bring Tom's son? And the guys in your support group are welcome, also."

"I'll do my best to round them all up."

It took about an hour to reach everyone, but all agreed to attend the event. Even Tom Junior said he would come, though he didn't sound enthusiastic. I offered to pick him up, but he said he had his own transportation. Betty insisted on being present as well.

We all gathered in the reception area of the insurance office at five. Robert, Louis, and George had each asked me what was

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happening, but I didn't know what Winters had planned. Somehow, I had confidence that it would be appropriate and appreciated by all of us.

Winters stood by the starboard, which was draped with a cloth, and encouraged us to gather around him. All of his office staff and sales reps were present along with my group, so it was a big crowd. Brenda was there as well. Betty ignored her.

"First," he announced, "after consultation with staff, we all agreed that the least we could do was to honor Tom by shifting him to the starboard." He pulled away the drape and Tom's photo could be seen hanging on the hook on the board. The words "Sales Rep of the Month" were affixed above his photo. Tom Junior was obviously startled.

Winters continued his presentation. "As I said, this was the least we could do. Why stop with making Tom the sales representative of the month? So, we had an award made for him." Winters opened a box to remove a plaque made of dark wood. An engraved piece of bronze was in its center. "Tom," he said, looking at Tom Junior, "will you please step forward to receive the award for your father?"

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Tom Junior screwed up a scowl but did as he was asked.

Winters positioned himself next to Tom Junior, holding up the plaque so that it faced the group. "The award reads," he said, "Awarded to Tom MacFarlane by the Fort Atkinson Office of the American Insurance Corporation for Being the Best Overall Sales Representative for the period 1985-2005. Mr. MacFarlane will be remembered by his friends and colleagues for his unfailing good humor, honesty, and concern for others. He was a mentor and friend to all who knew him." Then Winters handed the plaque to Tom Junior and shook his hand. Everyone in the room clapped. Tom Junior broke down, tears streaming down his face. Come to think of it, there was not a dry eye in the place.

Later that evening, Betty and I sat in our chairs, reading. She looked up and said, "That was a nice ceremony today."

"You bet. Winters gets my vote for manager of the year. Of the decade."

"What do you think will happen to Tom Junior now? Will he turn out okay?"

"Winters mentioned to me that Tom Senior left all his life insurance to the kid. It's

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in trust, so Tom Junior can't blow it all at once. But it's enough to get him through college if he wants to go."

"That's nice. At least a little good will come of all this." She changed the subject. "Will you get another member to replace Tom in your support group?"

"The Downsized Boomer's Support Group is officially defunct."

"No! When did that happen?"

"When we were leaving the insurance office after the ceremony, Robert told me that he had accepted a job as a VP for strategic planning for an accounting firm down in Georgia. Apparently, they lost a lot of executives due to some scandal and they needed new leadership fast. He is headed out there immediately."

"That still leaves three of you."

"Would you want to talk to Louis every week? I don't. I'll call George for a beer every now and then. Truth is we weren't helping each other that much."

Betty reached over and patted my arm. "I think you were. And I think you could help other people. You are just burned out right now. I hope you will start the group up again

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some day. There is a real need for it.”

“Maybe I will, someday.” I said. “In the meantime, I’m selling bike motors. So far, twenty three kids have sent me an email message wanting to buy one. These things are going to sell like hotcakes.” And they did. For a while.