

just to see if he still had it
he was great
he fooled everyone there
even me
and now you tell me he's dead?
go on

Jimmy Durante is mortified
remember?

-- Paul Fericano

Millbrae CA

MURDER MYSTERY

-- to Stuart Allingham

The small estate is hidden behind a wall of closely clipped eugenia hedge and manicured lawns. The vines on the darkened, second floor balcony leading from the master bedroom have been ripped as if someone had pulled at them and the back door swings ajar in the late summer breeze. There is no sense of the violence of murder committed, only the silence of death. Blood spreads across the darker maroon silk dressing gown, one side held to the front of his naked body only by the knife blade broken off in his chest.

All the major suspects are in the house, except for the gardener and his teenage daughter who have been working late and are driving away and perhaps the man running along several blocks away. In her separate bedroom, the victim's wife, earlier told he was divorcing her, sits at her vanity in a peach colored slip. She is in tears and face down among an endless row of creams and nail polish and a half-empty glass of gin which she usually refills from a bottle in her clothes closet, a badly kept secret among everyone in the house. Her position tonight is no different from any other night, except worse, for she has long since acknowledged that no one in the house loves her, but cannot understand why they hate her. The victim's mother tosses fitfully in her bed across the hall, a murder mystery in her strong hands, her mouth in a perpetual purse, the old-fashioned kind with a snap lock on it. Her son, over a vicious argument at dinner, has threatened to place her in a home. His teenage daughter, staring at her horse

pictures, paces in her room quivering with uncontrollable anger, the unloved, not wanted child. Searching quietly but frantically through the victim's desk in his study downstairs, his corporate business partner fails to locate the photograph from the set which he has been shown earlier with which he has been threatened with blackmail by the victim. Everyone assumes he has left the house after a brief meeting. The third partner in this perfectly honest corporate business now waits nervously outside in his car. He is also the other subject in these clandestinely taken pornographic photographs. Both are married men. The Oriental housekeeper, recently threatened with deportation by the victim, rubs an animal derived balm on her throbbing temples and prays to a religious picture in her basement room. The gardener drives away, gripping the steering wheel, his teenage daughter who also helps about the house cowers next to him, pregnant by the victim and staring at her hands as if dead objects in her swollen lap. A neighbor, single and middleaged and prone to paranoia, has seen someone in dark shadows on the victim's balcony, but pulled her blinds and her testimony is too vague for use. A young man in tennis shoes runs down the dark street several blocks away, caught momentarily in the glare of the gardener's headlights. Perhaps he is only a jogger, but no one ever knows because he is never identified.

The knife handle, broken off in the violence of the thrust, thrown in an arcing but clumsy curve from the master bedroom's balcony, the other hand clutching the ivy, remains under the peonies in the garden with a perfect set of fingerprints. It will slowly be buried under falling petals and leaves and accidentally be even further buried under the spade of the gardener. Not the same gardener of the murder night, but a new one.

The detective assigned to the case appears at first to be incompetent and turns out to be merely competent and never solves the murder. No one has an alibi, no one ever admits their guilt and no one is ever indicted. The wife marries again and again, waking nightly in her peach colored slips in an alcoholic haze from nightmares of violence. In an old age home, the mother alternates calling her dead son's name with screams of laughter from her loosely held mouth. The daughter eventually becomes a horse trainer, known for her cold cruelty. Both business partners dissolve the business, divorce and plan to move elsewhere together. But one of them commits suicide shortly after and the other one ends up tattooing sailors in a grimy shop near a Navy yard. The Oriental housekeeper is deported anyway, but for another reason. The gardener becomes famous as a rose grower though eccentrically naming all his roses after his daughter who died during an abortion. The neighbor has her blinds perpetually drawn and admonishes

her cats to stop looking. Under the peony bushes the earth eats away the perfect set of fingerprints from the knife blade handle.

There is only one obvious and telling clue, which only you and I have seen. In his death throes, the victim wrote one initial in his own blood across his naked stomach, identifying the murderer who in flight also saw the telling initial. But the pumping blood concealed that graphic indictment before anyone else could see it. But the murderer knows that you and I have seen that scarlet clue.

-- Michael Laurence

Los Angeles CA

THE PET HITMAN

he used to do it for free,
swerve to run down the barking basset,
pick off a too perky poodle.

then he said, "why not?
romance, intrigue, money are where you find it.
time to turn professional."

the first job was a mercy killing:
two deformed kittens a widow
could not flush down her disposal.

he didn't have to advertise.
word spread around suburbia like middle-aged hips.
pet-haters came out of the closet by the litter.

comforted by his clandestine clientele,
he worked kennel to corner.
dachshunds disappeared; beagles barked no more.
schnauzers snoozed into Eleysium.

his one firm rule: no hard contracts.
James Coburn was his idol.

now he's retired in pompano beach.
his three sons with masters' degrees
in animal husbandry from harvard
run the syndicate,
with no listing in the yellow pages.