BONES IN THE BASEMENT

Danvers was a somewhat sleepy farming and sheep ranching community in the flat Central Valley of northern California. Founded in 1868 by its namesake, Cyrus Danvers, its population had grown to about 8000 inhabitants by 1981. On Main Street stood a historic landmark -- a classic Carnegie public library, built in 1913. It was in the basement of this building that the once drowsy town was shockingly aroused by a grisly discovery.

Although the street-level public reading and borrowing area was properly neat and tidy, the library’s basement had become quite a neglected mess over the decades. Creaking wooden stairs led down into the dim bowels of ‘The Dungeon’, as the staff referred to it. The cement floor was cracked and buckling, and certain sections would leak after each winter’s rains. Broken chairs littered one corner. The three ground-level windows were unwashed and forgotten, with torn window shades blocking any natural light because they were never raised. The basement was oddly partitioned like a maze, with several small closets and storage rooms -- most packed with obscure file cabinets. The air downstairs was perpetually musty. Old, dusty stacks of books, magazines, and newspapers were in haphazard piles on tall wooden shelves -- some volumes even succumbing to mildew. A defunct coal-burning furnace stood in one corner, the building’s heating having been switched to gas back in the 1950’s. The basement walls were mostly faded red brick, with some dull, pale green wood paneling in parts. The town Library Board finally appropriated enough money for badly needed repairs and remodeling, after repeated pleas from the Library Director and her staff.

One of the first jobs of the remodeling crew was to knock down one of the basement brick partitions abutting a foundation wall. Imagine their surprise when they found a rotting burlap potato sack in a 9” gap behind some crumbling bricks. A dozen or so bricks had been stacked up sideways on the side of the wall, but they were not mortared -- thus nobody ever really noticed the gapped space before. Upon careful examination, the old sack contained what appeared to be a complete human skeleton, the bones visibly devoid of any tissue.

Work was immediately halted and the local police chief was notified. Because Danvers was too small a community to have its own detective, the County seat of Oakton quickly became involved. Detective Burt Talbot was assigned to the case. Talbot was a fifteen-year veteran detective who once worked in San Francisco. Divorced for a second time at age 47, Burt was obsessive about his work solving criminal mysteries. His hair was still free of gray, and he had newly cultivated a rakish mustache. Lately, he had given up chain-smoking, and was now a compulsive devotee to Dentyne chewing gum. Talbot also favored wearing stylish sport coats over colorful polo shirts. He never wore a shirt and tie unless he had to appear in court. Though just medium in height, Burt was unfailingly confident in his strut and his public persona.

When he showed up at the Danvers Library with the County Coroner and forensic expert, Charlie Owens, they were escorted directly to the basement by a local policeman.

Owens quickly put on his latex gloves and began transferring the bones into assorted, labeled plastic bags for transport back to the Oakton County forensic lab. Detailed photos of the found scene had already been taken an hour earlier by a County crime scene photographer.

“These bones have been meticulously cleaned, Burt. By someone who knew what they were doing. Scraped, soaked probably in bleach, then scrubbed white. The pelvis and skull indicates the deceased was a female, approximate age late 20’s-early 30’s, about 5’7’’ based on the femur size. This skeleton is complete too, every bone accounted for. No sign of any trauma – no bullet or knife nicks, or blunt instrument dents. Best guess is this pile has been here for 40-50 years, completely undetected, based on the condition of the sacking. The lab results will tell us more. Did she die naturally, or was she killed? Any lethal poison might show up in the bone analysis. Either way, what is she doing here, in a secret space behind a partition in a library basement?“ Owens wondered aloud.

“Any dental evidence could obviously help me,” Talbot remarked, opening a new pack of Dentyne and unwrapping three of the tiny cinnamon gum pellets, then popping them into his mouth. “Maybe a few fingerprints will show up under ultraviolet light, but that is a long shot,” he added. “If I could have any more specifics within 48 hours, that would be great, Charlie.” The coroner said he’d get right on it.

Talbot got the lab reports back quickly, as Owens promised. The bones were found to be about fifty years old, give or take a year. No fingerprints anywhere. Even under a microscope, no tissue cells or human hairs were detected. No trace of any poison in the bone cells. Some tooth fillings remained, however, and were mapped by Owens on an upper and lower dental chart which was included with the report.

But at least Burt had an approximate time frame to work with now -- the year 1931. Who was working at the library then? Who was the library director? Were any local citizens listed as missing at that time? Were there any serious unsolved crimes or dramatic arrests that year? After a French Dip sandwich with a side of cole slaw and a Diet Pepsi for lunch at Bud’s Restaurant, Detective Talbot went to the Danvers Tribune newspaper office down the street from the library to tackle some needed research.

Using the Tribune's microfilm records, Talbot discovered that Clarissa Mott was the library director at the Carnegie from 1921-1939. There was also a sole circulation staff member, two teen pages who re-shelved the books, and one children’s/young adult librarian. A part-time janitor, Sven Johansson, cleaned up after hours. Miss Mott (she never married) handled the adult reference desk as well as her various director’s duties, such as ordering books, dealing with bills and finances, and attending the monthly Library Board meetings.

Talbot also found out that over a three-year period (1928-1931), six people had been reported missing or simply vanished in either Danvers or Oakton County. They included: Elmer Pratt, a sunflower/tomato farmer; Constance Bigelow, a spinster who worked as a secretary for Estate Vineyards; Denton Marx, a sheep rancher; Hattie Lofner, a farm widow; Josh Mickelson, a Hudson car salesman; and an unnamed Hispanic male drifter who had briefly stayed in town.

The detective spent the next two days tracking down old timers in the area who remembered any details about the life of Clarissa Mott. Of course, the discovery of the skeleton in the library basement was the biggest news to hit Danvers in decades, so townsfolk were eager to line up and offer their two cents. Burt chewed his way through a dozen packs of Dentyne during this time -- listening, asking questions, scribbling notes -- his tongue getting increasingly numb from the gum’s cinnamon flavor.

What Talbot eventually found out disturbed him. First of all, Mott had died ten years earlier, at age 80. Obviously, she was beyond questioning. She was, however, ‘obsessed’ (according to several interviewees) with the mystery-crime stories of Agatha Christie – though she preferred the author’s character of Miss Marple to that of her Belgian sleuth, Hercule Poirot. “She was always reading those Christie books, or recommending them to patrons. She couldn’t wait to order each new book by Agatha,” one remembered. “Miss Mott also followed the Leopold & Loeb murder case and trial with fascination,” another added. “That was in 1924. They were two college boys who attempted to pull off the so-called ‘perfect murder’, but of course they slipped up and got caught. Thought they were so smart and superior! Killed an innocent 14-year-old boy in Chicago and then tried to hide the body. Both killers got life in prison plus 99 years. Loeb was murdered in prison in 1936, and Leopold died ten years ago in 1971. Good riddance, I say!”

Still another person recalled that “there were rumors that Miss Mott was covertly keeping tabs on any local single men and women who frequented the library – you know, any spinsters, bachelors, or widows. Maybe she was checking out the men, looking for a potential husband. You know she unmarried, right? Or maybe she was checking out the female competition for the single, available men in Danvers. Who knows exactly why people do things anyway? Maybe she was just a great big snoop. I also recall that she was a rather aloof personality, not much of a mixer, not many friends. Come to think of it, I don’t believe I ever heard anyone call her by her first name, Clarissa. It was always ‘Miss Mott’. She had a younger sister who lived in Reno. Not sure if she’s still alive. Can’t say I knew her name either, so can’t help you there.”

Detective Talbot next checked on the ages -- as they would have been in 1931 -- of the five named missing persons: Elmer Pratt, 41; Constance Bigelow, 57; Denton Marx, 40; Hattie Lofner, 82; and Josh Mickelson, 38. Fifty years later now, most likely all were dead even if they could be found. No woman in this group in her late 20’s-early 30’s, as the bones had indicated. Possible dead end.

Next, Burt went looking for matching dental patterns from the mystery skull in every dental offices in both Danvers and Oakton County. Nothing came up. Records that old were routinely discarded over the years.

Back at Bud’s for another meal a few days later, Burt was approached by a new local woman with flaming henna-dyed hair. “You that detective fella from the County? You should look up the oldest person in Danvers, Granny Smyth – you know, like the apple, only it's spelled with a "y." Makes it an easy name to remember, don’t it? She’s a few years shy of 100. Lives at the retirement home down on Willow Street. She’s in a wheelchair now, all shrunken up and whatnot, but her mind is still sharp as cider vinegar. She might help you find out more about those mysterious library bones. Tell her Melanie Sperl sent you.”

Talbot thanked Melanie and finished his mixed- berry cobbler dessert, then drove his tan BMW up Willow until he arrived at Happy Haven Retirement Center. He checked in with the director, Hannah, and was escorted to see Granny Smyth. Granny was dozing in her room after eating lunch, her wheelchair facing an open, screened window on this sunny, warming, early April afternoon. Like most nursing homes for the elderly, the room smelled of disinfectant, baby powder and adult diapers. Hannah gently roused her resident awake. “Sugarplum, you’ve got a handsome new man visitor!” she cheerily announced. “Mr. Talbot, can I get you some tea or coffee? Granny likes her peppermint tea this time of day.” Burt asked for a cold Diet Pepsi instead if she had it, and Harrah soon delivered his choice along with Granny’s teapot.

Talbot faced Granny and was reminded somewhat of a dry, wrinkled apple. She wore hearing aids in both ears. Her hair was thinning and white, with a few wisps of gray. But her striking green eyes (Green, just like the apple, Burt mused. Probably how she got her tag...) were sharp and alert, her smile genuine.

“So you’re the Sherlock Holmes trying to crack the case of the bones in the library, eh? I was wondering when you’d get around to visiting me,” Granny chuckled. “I read about the strange discovery in the Tribune. I still like to keep up with all the happenings in Danvers, you know,” she added. Burt told her about his encounter with Melanie at Bud’s Restaurant.

“Melly’s a good old gal. You can trust her opinion. She comes and visits me now and then. Anyway, my full name is Olivia Smyth. I was born in 1884 in Oklahoma. Lord willing, I’ll turn 97 next month. My family settled in the Central Valley around 1900. I married Orin Smyth in 1902 and we moved here to Danvers. He was a sheep rancher. We were married for 72 years and raised three children, all deceased now, I’m sad to say. My Orin passed away five years ago too. Now it’s just me,” Granny wistfully admitted.

Burt directly asked her about the library janitor, Sven Johannson, and whether she knew the name of Clarissa Mott’s sister in Reno.

“Well, Sven was a Swede who spoke in a thick accent. He was tall and strong, with blonde hair. Nice, friendly fella. Worked part-time as the janitor at the library, and at the grammar school, and at the high school right here in Danvers. He could fix just about anything too. Married and had twin daughters, I recall. He’s buried in the cemetery south of town. I went to his funeral...must have been twenty years ago or so. Miss Mott was there too. She died about ten years ago. But she’s buried in Nevada, not California. Seems her sister purchased a two-plot in Reno. The sister is still alive, the last I heard. Her name is Edna McPherson. She divorced her husband years ago but kept the name. You should take a drive over the Sierras and visit her. Don’t know her address or anything, but hey, you’re a police detective, right? You can figure it out!” Granny laughed, then sipped her tea, which had now cooled enough for her to drink.

Olivia cleared her throat, then continued. “Now, you probably know that most small towns are just like Peyton Place. You’ve heard of that scandalous book and movie, I’m sure. Lots of rumors and gossip, secret love trysts, lust, infidelities, shady business dealings, and other immoral or illegal shenanigans. Raw human nature unleashed. The Bible warns us about such, but do people pay heed? Nope. Anyway, I figure that a sack of bones hidden behind a wall is clearly not normal behavior. No surprise, right? Someone did an evil deed and tried to cover it up. Maybe a sinister murder was actually committed here in our little town…which is why you are here to investigate, isn’t it, Detective Talbot?” Granny Smith’s green eyes twinkled with playful curiosity.

Burt smiled and nodded, then took out his pocket notebook and read aloud the names and ages of the five missing persons from the time period when the bones were probably hidden.

Granny immediately recognized the name of Denton Marx. “He was a sheep rancher, like my Orin, so they knew each other. They traded equipment and asked each other advice on sheep illnesses and such. Denton had a fair-sized herd, about four-hundred head, like we did. Did a good job selling his wool. He was also a top-notch butcher. Sold his surplus meat to the town meat market back then. You know, lamb chops, legs of lamb. This is before supermarkets came to be. You had to go to a butcher shop to get your steaks, stewing meat, and roasts. Oh, the prices back then compared to today! Of course, this was during the Depression, so even a nickel was a big deal. As for poultry, most did their own killing and plucking in their backyards. Ever use a chopping block and a hatchet, Mr. Talbot? Probably not. But we sure did.”

“Now, those other four names you mentioned were all single if I rightly recall,” Olivia added. “I can picture each one in my mind even today. In a small town, you can bet your bottom dollar that they were all ‘aware’ of each other. Maybe a love affair or two, or even a love triangle. Like those steamy romance novels. But there is a mistake on one of your ages, Mr.Talbot. Hattie Lofner was definitely NOT eighty-two in 1931. She was a much younger woman, a pretty young thing, about twenty years younger than I was at that time. Hattie was widowed very early when her husband, Lloyd, was killed in a terrible disc-harrow accident on his own land. Bled to death out of earshot before any help could come. So you might double-check your sources on that one,” Granny Smyth advised.

The detective gratefully thanked Olivia and gently squeezed her gnarled, blue-veined hand, then said his good-byes to her and director Hannah. “Anytime I can help you some more, just drop on by, Mr. Sherlock! Maybe I can be your Dr. Watson. I’ve got nothing but time now, and I like to stay active. I hope you solve this mystery of the bones in the basement,” Granny said excitedly. “If you do, I bet you’ll get a big, fat promotion, and get your face on the TV too!”

Burt went back to the Danvers Tribune office to recheck their microfilm files on Hattie Lofner. Sure enough, Granny was right: In 1931, Hattie was 28, not 82. This was a common newspaper typing error of transposing numbers. To double check, Talbot visited the town high school ("Go Rams!") and examined archived copies of the school yearbooks. In the 1921 version, he found a senior black & white portrait of an 18-year-old Hattie -- maiden name, Flint. Like the other girls in the yearbook, she was clear-eyed, but typically plain and unsmiling.

Because Danvers was quick 35-minute drive from his home in Oakton, Burt was able to sleep in his own bed each night after work. The following morning, he drove the faster route on I-80 rather than the slower, more scenic Route 50 through the mountains to Reno. The Sierras still had plenty of snow on their peaks and passes; when the white pack melted by June, it would provide the always needed fresh water for a thirsty California, even going to the more populated southlands through an elaborate series of aqueducts. The weather was pleasant as Talbot passed the Lake Tahoe area and wound his way down into the lower lands of Nevada.

The detective quickly found the address of Edna McPherson simply by asking at the downtown Reno Police Department. He called her first so as not to shock her by showing up unannounced at her door. When they met, Edna was gracious and cooperative.

"I was the youngest of four daughters," she began. "Clarissa was the oldest. I'm 84 now, the only survivor you might say. There was a 6-year age difference between Clari and me. She was always the smart one in the family. I wasn't surprised when she went to college and got her degree in library science. She was an independent gal, a 'free-thinker' we used to call her type back then. She probably wanted to get married, but she could never find a decent man as smart or even smarter than she was, so wedding bells never rang for her. But Clari came to my wedding, and she was a good aunt to my children. She warned me that my husband was a snake, though, and she was right, and I eventually got divorced. But Clari really enjoyed her job. She lived a very productive life. Was she happy? Maybe yes, maybe no -- who can say? At her funeral in '71, I gave the eulogy. Not many showed up, which surprised me a bit. She's buried here in Reno, did you know? After her personal affairs were put in order, I inherited a large trunk of hers. Among the usual things, it was filled with several thick notebooks -- her detailed journals, one for each decade, beginning when she was nine years old in the year 1900. I casually read the first two -- up to 1920 -- to help me remember the good old days, and what life was like back then. But I never got around to reading the rest of them since. So you say you are trying to solve a possible murder mystery? Well, Clari loved mysteries with a passion! If she was still around, she would probably offer her own theories and opinions on who she thought 'did the deed.' Now Detective Talbot, if you want to borrow her journals to search for clues, you are welcomed to take them with you. Just mail them back to me when you are done, and let me know if you find anything interesting." Edna led Burt out and wished him good luck. On the drive back to Oakton, Talbot chewed still more Dentyne, anxious to get home and tackle Clarissa Mott's journals -- especially focusing on the year 1931.

As might be expected, the library director was detailed and thorough, her handwriting clean and precise. The journal entries were dated weekly, filled with facts, opinions, and hearsay. Here is some of what the detective found:

\*Constance ("Connie") Bigelow was likely close friends with Hattie Lofner, based on their meeting regularly at the library and conversing in hushed -- "but sometimes quite animated" -- tones.

\*The small town's biggest tawdry rumor was of a supposed "love triangle" between Hattie, Elmer Pratt and Denton Marx.

\*Elmer sold his sunflower/tomato farm and moved away to parts unknown in August, 1931.

\*Shortly afterwards, Hattie stopped coming by the library, and Constance was starting to get worried after several days. When Connie went to visit Hattie at her farmhouse, Hattie was gone, and no one knew where. It being the Depression -- with people coming and going due to money problems and the constant search for work -- no real alarm was raised. She would probably turn up in a while, folks figured. "Likely visiting relatives," was the consensus.

\*Next, Denton Marx left town in October, selling his sheep and his land "in a rush" and telling everyone that he wanted to move to Oregon to start a new life.

\*Finally, Josh Mickelson left the following month for San Bernardino, explaining that Hudson car sales would be better in an area that was "rapidly expanding and spread out" and hence more "dependent on automobiles."

Talbot thought it peculiar that, other than Constance Bigelow, everyone in question had either left town or vanished from August through November, 1931. Yet the following June, even Connie retired from her job as a secretary at Estate Vineyards, citing poor health at age 58. Her trail afterwards went cold. Burt could find nothing at this point as to where she lived or moved to, or when she died.

The following morning at home, after some scrambled eggs and a bowl of Cheerios with a sliced banana for breakfast, the detective took out a yellow legal pad and began calling each California men's prison, beginning with those in the northern part of the state. He wanted to see if Elmer Pratt, Denton Marx, or Josh Mickelson had ever done any time behind bars. As he took notes and checked off his calls without success, Talbot was beginning to get discouraged. Trying to crack a fifty-year-old case was a tough nut, seeing as the trail appeared to be ice cold. He was chewing so much Dentyne by now that his jaws ached.

That's when his luck changed.

Talking with Folsom Prison Warden Marvin Yeager's secretary, Stella, Burt learned that a man named Josh Mickelson had been an inmate there from July, 1949 to December, 1954. He was 56 years old when he arrived, and was sentenced to a seven-year stretch for fraud and embezzlement against the Hudson Motor Car Company. He was later diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and died in the prison hospital on December 31.

Talbot played a hunch at this point. "Stella, by any chance, did this particular inmate make any kind of 'dead-bed confession,' maybe to a prison guard or staff doctor or to your chaplain? Sometimes, convicts panic when they face their final moments and they want to come clean to ease their conscience."

"That I couldn't say, Detective Talbot," Stella replied. "That was twenty-seven years ago, about two years after the time I began working here at Folsom. But I do remember that 1954 was the tragic New Year's Eve when our chaplain, Father Timothy McLaughlin, was killed on his way home to his church rectory in Carmichael by a drunk driver. There was a terrible winter storm that night, and the roads were icy and dangerous. Maybe Father Tim talked with your man earlier that night. I know that prison chaplains often take detailed notes at death beds, just in case something unusual is mentioned in the last dramatic minutes of life."

"Would Folsom have kept any such notes from this or any particular Padre?" Talbot asked.

"No, sir...such things are considered personal effects and are routinely given to any remaining family members. Let me see if I can find anyone for you to contact. I'll call you back in a while, O.K.?" Stella offered.

About an hour later, she called Burt back. "Father Tim had a brother, Michael, who lived in Salt Lake City. I have the address and telephone number for you. Don't know if the brother is still alive, though. I found the contact information on Father Tim's old emergency card under 'next of kin.' That's about all I can help you with, Detective. I hope you solve your mystery. Good luck!" Talbot gratefully thanked the secretary and hung up.

Burt called the number from his home that evening. Michael McLaughlin answered, much to Talbot's great relief. Father Tim's brother had no objections to the detective visiting him, once the reason for the call was explained. So Burt booked the relatively short flight from Sacramento to Salt Lake City for the following afternoon.

"Tim was my older brother, but we had a falling out when I left the Catholic Church and converted to Mormonism and moved to Utah," Michael explained to Burt after they met at his modest house on the outskirts of the capital city. The man told Talbot that he had recently turned 80 years old and was doing alright except for pain in a bad hip. "I accepted Tim's belongings after he was killed in that freak car accident back in '54, but to tell you the truth, I never examined the contents of the various boxes. I simply put them in the attic and forgot about them. I'd rather not go up there on a ladder at my age now, but you're welcomed to go up and take a look if you want," Michael offered. He gave Burt a flashlight and showed him where a metal ladder was stored in the garage.

The attic access was through a crawl space in the ceiling of a closet. It was a contorted and tight fit, but the detective managed to wiggle in. As expected, Burt was greeted by a jungle of cobwebs and thick dust. He coughed and sneezed a few times, then found a small stack of cardboard file boxes in a corner. Opening the top one up, he saw a black priest's outfit with a white clerical collar, a well-used leather Bible, a silver crucifix on a matching chain, and a photo album. Lifting these items gently, Talbot discovered underneath a stack of standard-sized, brown spiral notebooks. Each notebook had date years written on their covers. Burt pulled out the one that was marked "1953-1954," and quickly leafed to the end, until he saw the name of Josh Mickelson and the date of December 31.

It took just a short time for Detective Burt Talbot to realize that he had found a treasure trove of very important information. Here were the exact words written by Father McLaughlin:

"Inmate #6724, Josh Mickelson, requested Extreme Unction from his prison hospital bed, which I administered at 11:20 p.m. He was in constant pain but declined any more morphine, and his breathing was increasing labored. He was also afraid, as most men are at this ultimate moment of spiritual reckoning. I asked him if he was truly sorry for all of his sins, and assured him that God would forgive him if he was. He began crying. He told me that he had to finally confess something terrible that he had been involved with many years ago. I told him to tell me everything. Josh told me that his best friend, Denton Marx, had killed a widow woman named Hattie Lofner, whom he had been in love with, in Danvers, California. Denton found out that she was set to secretly leave town with another man named Elmer Pratt, whom she actually loved more. She was planning to meet up with Pratt a week after he moved away from Danvers . When Denton heard about the plot, he flew into a rage and went to Hattie's house and strangled her to death. Then he butchered her body like an animal, and burned her remaining flesh, hair, and internal organs -- finally burying the residue. He saved her skeleton, however, and meticulously cleaned each bone until it shined. Josh was contacted by Denton the next day and he admitted to Josh what he had done. He begged Josh to help him hide the bones, suggesting a most unlikely hiding place --the basement of the Danvers Library. Josh reluctantly agreed after much coaxing. He hid behind some tall book stacks after the building was locked closed for the night by the library director, Clarissa Mott. Then he went downstairs to the basement, and opened the release on the outside lid of the coal chute, which was used to deliver winter coal supplies for the library's furnace. There, he let in Denton with a burlap sack filled with Hattie's bones. Using Josh's flashlight, they found a space behind a brick partition wall and carefully hid the bones there, afterwards placing extra bricks in front to cover up their actions. Then both men left the library through the coal chute opening, the lid snapping shut behind them. Denton later left town for Oregon after swearing Josh to secrecy. Josh finally told me about his own moving to San Bernardino. I stayed and prayed with the inmate until he expired just before midnight. He tearfully swore again and again in his last moments that he never harmed the woman in any way, and that he only helped hide the evidence of Denton's horrible crime out of his own fear and cowardice. Tomorrow -- the first new day of 1955 -- I will report to Warden Yeager, as required by law, all that Josh Mickelson confessed to me, which I have noted here in careful detail."

The detective stopped reading at this point and put the notebook down, realizing that Father McLaughlin had died before having a chance to share with anybody the gruesome details of such a heinous crime. For fifty years, the secret of the bones was unknown, until now. Burt climbed down out of the attic, asked Michael if he could borrow this particular notebook for a few days for official police work, thanked him when Michael agreed, then took a cab back to the airport. There were two final things Talbot needed to check before this case could be considered closed. While he waited for his flight back to Sacramento, Burt bought a few more packs of Dentyne at an airport shop. He had earlier run out and needed to chew again. He had long convinced himself that chewing gum helped him think better.

The next day, Talbot went back to his office at the Oakton County Courthouse. He asked Coroner Charlie Owens if he could send a clerk over to Records and see if a death certificate had been issued for Hattie's husband, Lloyd. Burt also wanted to know if there was a death certificate for Hattie herself. "I would guess that Lloyd Lofner died sometime around 1929, if that helps," Burt added. "And Hattie went missing in 1931, so check then and a few years after too."

Next, the detective made an official call to Salem, Oregon, and asked the police chief there to search the entire state's records for any information on a suspect, Denton Marx -- beginning in October, 1931 when Marx was age 40, and continuing the search up to the present. If this murdering bastard is still alive, even at 90, I'll make sure this case goes to trial and the son of a bitch pays the maximum penalty, if it's the last thing I do, Talbot swore to himself. He waited impatiently for the results of his two queries, his mind whirling non-stop while chewing still more reddish-pink pieces of Dentyne.

Charlie Owens got back to Burt the following afternoon. "We found the death certificate on Lloyd Lofner. Cause of death was a farming accident. But this might interest you, Burt: his relatives insisted that he be buried on his farm rather than in the Danvers cemetery. Got legal permission to do it. So Lloyd's buried under a huge, old Valley Oak tree on his former property. I say former because after his wife vanished in '31, the bank repossessed the farm for back taxes, and cited its abandonment. The house went neglected until after the Great Depression when it burned down. Fire department decided kids playing with matches was the cause. Anyway, the farm is for sale and has been since 1938. It's just a big, empty, weed-filled field, unless that oak is still standing. As for the wife, Hattie Lofner? No death certificate. Nothing. Sorry on that one, Burt. Can't win 'em all."

Two days later, Talbot finally heard back from the police chief in Salem. "Sorry for the wait, Detective. This took some real hard digging. We found that Denton Marx was stabbed to death in a bar brawl in Portland on March 15, 1946. Ides of March, eh? He was 55 at the time, so we are convinced that this was the guy you were looking for," the chief reported.

"I owe you and your men some beers, and many thanks," Burt replied. Well, at least Marx is dead and burning in hell, Talbot thought -- though he wished he could have looked the murderer in the eye as he lay dying and reminded him of his brutal crime against a defenseless young woman.

The detective drove his trusty BMW back to Danvers, and asked his waitress after she took his order at Bud's if she knew where the old Lofner farm was located. She was too young to answer that question, but she went in the kitchen and got Bud himself to show up at Burt's table. The restaurant owner drew a rough map on a napkin with a pen and then gave Burt some helpful verbal directions.

When Talbot arrived at the destination, there was nothing there except for tall weeds and the one large oak tree he had hoped was still standing. The day was cloudy and windy --unusually gloomy for a typical Central Valley day in May. Maybe a Pacific storm was coming, he suspected.

Burt walked to the lone tree, kicking aside tumbleweeds and other wild growth as he progressed. At the base of the massive oak was a barely visible, flat stone grave marker. Talbot knelt and used his hands to brush away the debris. LLOYD LOFNER 1898-1929, it simply read. But the detective was surprised to see another flat gravestone beside Lloyd's. It read: HATTIE LOFNER 1902-1931. What the heck was this? Burt thought. His gut told him that there was no body buried here under this marker. And if there wasn't, then the overwhelming evidence pointed to the bones in the basement being those of Hattie Lloyd -- murdered in cold blood by a spurned and jealous Denton Marx.

Talbot had to know if his hunch was true, so he secretly returned that night with a shovel and a flashlight to the old oak tree. He carefully dug a rough 2'x2' square section of the mostly clay sod down to the standard coffin depth of four feet near Hattie's marker. Nothing was there. That's that, he thought. He quickly filled in the hole and headed back to his BMW.

Burt was satisfied that he now knew the truth. He would write up a complete report for his supervisor, who in turn would release the findings to the newspapers, the television networks, and the voracious public. Case closed!

But the detective wondered: who put Hattie's headstone there? The waning romantic in him wanted to believe that Elmer Pratt eventually guessed what had happened to his lover when Hattie failed to show up at their rendezvous. He probably also realized who was responsible. Maybe a year or two later, Pratt had secretly put down the stone in her memory beside her late husband. But who could say? Who knew exactly why people did the things they did? Human nature was the biggest mystery of all, of that fact Burt was absolutely convinced.

Talbot put the shovel in the trunk of his car, and returned the flashlight to his glove box. Then the weary detective took out a piece of Dentyne and popped it in his mouth, and started the car's engine, just as it started to rain...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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