



Dead Pigeons

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Dead Pigeons

That morning I was killing time waiting for a sign painter. I was Oh for six on tossing cards into a my hat when I noticed Steinbeck.

Steinbeck is a smooth haired Jack Russel terrier with two black eyes and a red 'kerchief around his throat that he's had as long as I've known him.

In his jaws was a pigeon.

The pigeon's head flopped to one side limply, neck broken. No blood. Looked like Steinbeck had shaken the poor bird to death.

"Well? What do you want from me, a treat?" I said.

Steinbeck looked at me as though I'd broken a promise.

"You know it's not polite to go around killing pigeons, anybody ever told you that?"

If they had, Steinbeck wasn't aware of it. He took a few cautionary steps toward me, then

dropped the dead bird at my feet. He nudged the corpse forward with the tip of his wet nose.

"It's a city pigeon, you know that, boy? Can't do much with a city pigeon 'cept maybe fly 'em in a race or—"

The sun caught and bounced off the silver band fixed to the pigeon's ankle.

I leaned forward, hoping, praying that the metal ring wouldn't have an owner's name punched into the surface. This was my day to get the business in check. Sign painter before eleven, then a ride out to Fresno that evening to meet the money behind my café. I didn't have time for a dead pigeon.

And I couldn't ignore one either, not if Steinbeck had any say in the matter.

He rolled the corpse toward me with the tip of his nose and sat back with a big doggy grin on his face. Least it looked that way to me.

"Are you enjoying this?" I said.

He barked.

"I bet you think this is a real hoot don't you?"

He barked twice and wagged his tail. There was no hooting.

"Fine, fine I'll take a look, stop wagging that damn tail and... " I let the words drift as I stooped and snatched the bird from the ground.

What I was going to do when I had the name and the number off the band was anybody's guess. I was hoping that whoever owned the damn bird was too far away to care.

Life never goes in a straight line.

There was no name, no number etched into the metal, but attached to the underside of the band was a cylinder. And inside that cylinder a rolled up piece of paper. And on that piece of paper?

I gave Steinbeck a long, hard stare.

"Sometimes I think I should trade you in for a cat, you know that? A cat wouldn't drop this kind of problem in my lap, no sir."

At the mention of a cat, Steinbeck stopped wagging his tail and lowered his head ready for action.

And I went back to the note.

Four letters were scratched into the yellowing paper.

I pulled down a chair from one of the tables inside the Mermaid Café, dropped the dead bird next to me and lit a cigarette.

Help.

Help?

Now what kind of message was that to find first thing in the morning when you had other things on your mind? And what could *I* do about it?

I blew smoke out into the empty café, watching the silver cloud twist and give punctuation to my thoughts.

Could I ignore the message? Just dump the bird out in back and get on with my life? Maybe it was some kid playing a prank, one of the neighborhood rats looking for fun wherever they could find it?

It was a smooth explanation but not smooth enough for me to swallow.

Who you kidding, Finch? Look at the writing, look at how scratchy those words are, how rushed they are, that's not the work of a kid. That's the work of someone in a hurry.

The kind of hurry that makes you scrawl out a message and tie it to a damn bird's leg. Whatever causes that kind of hurry is bound to be bad.

My gaze fell back to the bird and the ring around its leg.

The shiny metal surface didn't give anything away, no clues as to where the bird had come from, and where it was going to.

But it had to be going some place, right? Had to be a destination in mind for the note writer. You didn't just wrap that word around a pigeon's leg and hope for the best. This wasn't the same as a message in a bottle tossed into the ocean.

Whoever had written the note had to be certain the bird would deliver it. But deliver it to whom?

I bit at my lip, blew an annoyed cloud of smoke out through my nostrils.

The more I looked at the bird, the more I was certain that I couldn't walk away. When somebody asks for help, even a somebody you don't know, then you got to do something, right?

Steinbeck thought so.

He bounded in from outside, his tail wagging, his ears pricked. He jumped up onto my lap, sniffed at the dead bird, then looked at me as if to say: *what are we waiting for?*

"I got a man coming to paint the mermaid on the window, I can't just hightail it out of here," I said, as I stroked his head.

Steinbeck gave me a discouraging look, one that if I'd had dog telepathy I would have known meant: *Give the man a call, reschedule.*

I shrugged apologetically.

"He'll be here before noon. I'll check on the bird after that, good enough?"

It wasn't.

Steinbeck placed both paws on the edge of the table, nudged the bird again then shot me a glance that would have made most cats back away.

"Listen," I said, wagging my finger at him, "you're the one who gave me this damn headache. I don't even know where I'd start. All I know is that it's probably a homing pigeon, or maybe a racing pigeon and what I know about that you could—"

Steinbeck growled at me.

He knew and *I* knew a place where I could find out all about pigeons and it wasn't so much as a cat-chase away from the Mermaid Café.

Not so much a place as a man.

"Getty? You're kidding me?"

I said to Steinbeck. He wasn't.

Getty was dressed to the nines, a dapper white linen suit, a Fedora with a red band that matched the red tie choking the collars of a black shirt.

He had a revolver pointed at me before I could close the door to the Cigar Store.

"Tell me why I shouldn't plug you right now, Finch?" he said raising the .38 until it was level with my head. "Or maybe I just plug that little mutt of yours, huh?"

The gun traveled from me to Steinbeck and back again.

Steinbeck wasn't amused. He let out a low throaty growl that he usually reserved for the most hated of postmen.

"Because of this," I said and pitched the dead bird toward him like a major league player with a fresh arm.

The bird bounced off Getty's chest and dropped down onto the counter. It rolled toward a box of open cigars and stopped there.

Getty jumped back, forgetting for a moment that he wanted to kill me and my dog.

“Holy Christ, what kind of maniac are you—”

I was already running before he could finish the sentence.

I vaulted the counter, ducked low and brought my fist up hard into Getty's stomach before he could turn the gun on me.

“This kind of maniac,” I said as I drove another fist into the soft flabby flesh of his stomach.

Getty doubled forward, all the wind rushing out in one big choking yaw.

I balled my fists and brought both of them down hard onto his gun arm. For good measure I drove my knee into the back of his knee.

The .38 dropped, but Getty didn't. He jumped back, lithe as a cat. A flash of silver appeared in his hand. A nasty little six inch pig-sticker.

“You'll pay for that, Finch!” he roared as stalked toward me.

I rushed to meet him, my foot out and swinging hard toward his groin.

Getty, more agile than he looked, dodged to my right. He slashed at the air.

"You sonafabitch!" he yelled.

Where he should have been and where my kick should have connected were just two wishes that would never come true.

I met the thick, tobacco air with my foot and lost my balance.

Getty swung the blade at my face.

Balance gone, arms waving madly, I dropped forward into the path of Getty's swinging pigsticker. I couldn't stop myself. I couldn't do a thing but pray for miracles.

My miracle arrived on time.

It was white and howling like a rabid wolf, only a lot smaller.

Steinbeck, his bark just as bad as his bite, leaped onto the counter and then bounced off. He landed on Getty's arm and clamped down on the loose linen material.

Getty yelped, dropped the knife and hopped toward the edge of the counter, shaking his hand as though he'd dipped it into molasses and didn't like the stick.

"Jesus, Finch! Get your damn mutt off me before it breaks through to the skin."

My breath still coming in fast and hard, I picked myself up, then scooped the .38 and the pigsticker from the floor. I dropped the knife in my jacket pocket and brought the business end of the revolver around to Getty.

"Now why in hell should I should help you?" I said.

"Christ, get this mutt off of me, will ya!"

Steinbeck hung on and there was no chance of him letting go without my say so.

"Funny thing with that breed, they're a *ratter*, you heard that name before haven't you, Getty?" I pulled a cigarette from the front of the counter and hung it off my lip. "Ratters, well they don't kill their pray by biting, no, they shake them to death. Break their necks. They don't let go until the job is done."

Casual, ignoring Getty's plight, I took a book of matches from my pocket, thumbled one to life and lit the cigarette. I took a big, long drag and then blew the smoke out in the air.

Getty shook his arm again, his eyes growing wider and more panicked.

Steinbeck held on. His little legs dangling in the air, all his concentration focused on biting. I'd seen him do this countless times before with a baseball bat and from the end of a piece of knotted rope.

"I'll pop this little mutt of yours in the brain if you don't tell it to leggo. It's ruining my God-damn suit, Finch!"

I blew out a circle of smoke, then broke it apart with snub-nose of the revolver.

"You want I should tell Steinbeck there to go for something you *really* don't want to get ruined. A little lower perhaps?"

Getty stopped hopping.

"Are you serious, Finch?" he said.

I shrugged.

"You threaten my dog again and we'll see."

"It's just a... dog."

"Yeah, well you're just a mook who thinks he can stick a roscoe in my face instead of saying hello. If I had to do the Pontious Pilot thing with you and Steinbeck there, Getty, guess who I'd choose?"

He didn't want to guess, he didn't want to do anything but get his arm free from Steinbeck.

"Listen, Finch, listen up, just tell your mutt to get off and we can start this thing over all friendly like. Jeez, I'll even throw in a box of Cubans on the house, what do you say?"

I looked at him, I looked at the .38 in my hand, I looked back at him.

"And you promise to stop pointing guns in people's faces?"

"Swear to God, swear on my sainted Mother's grave, just get this mutt off of me will ya."

"And then you're going to help me out too," I said.

"I am?"

"You betcha, unless you want... " I let my eyes stray south.

"Okay, okay, fine, you got it. I'll help you with whatever you need, Finch, just get the dog off of me and we'll go from there."

I wasn't a hundred percent sure Getty would keep his promise. Who knew what other little surprises he had hidden away, but I didn't have time to play around. The sign I'd left on the front of the café said: *Mr. Rifkin, I'll be back in half an hour. Called away on urgent business.*

I'd already blown half of that driving out to the cigar store and tussling with Getty.

Two fingers between my lips I whistled, hard.

Steinbeck gave me a confused little glance then grudgingly let go. He dropped to the floor, shook his head then leaped up onto the counter next to me.

"Good boy," I said.

He wagged his tail.

Getty had his sleeve held up, inspecting the damage.

"Look at what your mutt did, Finch. This is a two hundred dollar suit. I had this imported in from Italy, it's one-of-a-kind."

"Now it's *even* more unique."

Getty gave me a stare that would have melted ice cream on a cold winter's day in Nebraska.

"You're not funny, Finch, not then and not now."

"I'm working on it," I said, "now how about you tell me whose bird that might be?" I nodded toward the dead pigeon on the counter.

Getty looked at me, he looked at the bird, then he looked at me again.

"I knew it, Finch, knew you'd lost your marbles when you turned your back on the Outfit, but this?"

"You still harking on about the Outfit? That was five years ago."

"Five hard long years for me, how about you, how you been doin' Finch?"

Five years of anger and lost opportunity were locked into Getty's angry stare. Five years of

trying to get back in with the Outfit and blaming me for losing his position.

I'd turned my back on that life, but Getty couldn't stop blaming me for being turfed out of the Outfit.

"The bird," I said, "you know about racers don't you. Didn't you keep them when you were in that place over in Berkeley?"

Still worrying the edges of his suit, Getty shook his head.

"That wasn't me, Finch, that was the Outfit. Don't you remember what they did with them?"

I shrugged.

"I try not to remember too much about *those* days. I got my own life now, a better life."

"Doing what? You a working stiff now, Finch? Got yourself a house, two kids and a shiny new car?"

"Not that it's any of yours, but I put some money down on a Café."

He laughed.

"A café? Well well, you're moving up in the world. What's it called, this café of yours?"

I was about to tell him but Steinbeck drew my attention back to the pigeon. He lay down flat next to it, sniffing the tail feathers.

"We can catch up some other day when there aren't so many guns being pointed. Tell me what the Outfit used to use the birds for."

Getty walked over to the counter and turned the bird with the edge of his hand. He didn't seem so shocked any more, just curious.

"You really don't remember? He said, shrugging. "Back in the prohibition days they used them to send messages, you know, attached to the leg of the bird. Good way to outfox the bulls. Some of the old boys kept it up out there when we were in Berkley."

"That's it? That's all you know?" I said, disappointment rising in my voice.

"You come waltzing in here with your crazy mutt and expect me to be the National Almanac or something? You asked, I told." His eyes drifted back to the bird. His hand reached down for

the metal ring around the ankle. His face slowly changed as he spoke. "What I know about birds you could—"

Getty's jaw went slack. He prodded at the bird's ankle.

"What? What's the matter?" I said.

"Holy shit," he said, drawing out the holy so it sounded like *hoooooleee*.

I scooted along to his side.

"What?" I said. "What's got you so excited?"

Getty had his fingers in under the ring. With a little flick the ring came undone.

"Jesus, Finch, you do know how to pick 'em don't you?"

"Pick what? What are you talking about?"

The ring came off and Getty closed his fist around it. He held it up in front of my face, a smile warming his own chops.

"You want the good or the bad news?" he said.

"I want to sock you in the jaw, if you don't stop toying with me."

Getty shook his fist like a mambo musician would shake maracas.

"This clasp has seven diamonds encrusted on the underside of it. The ring itself is platinum. It's worth about three, large, give or take."

"How do you know that?" I said.

"Well that's where the bad news comes in, Finch. And Jesus if this isn't the worst kind of luck I ever did hear of. Do you remember the last guy you tussled with before you left the Outfit?"

How could I forget.

"Donny Franco? What does Donny Franco have to do with—"

It dawned on me and I wished all of a sudden it was midnight the night before and I was still sleeping.

Getty's smile grew wider, he started laughing and pointing at me.

I gestured toward the bird.

"Are you saying that the pigeon is one of Donny Marco's? Is that what you're telling me, Getty?"

He wasn't telling me anything. He couldn't stop laughing.

But I knew the truth.

"Where is Marco now?" I said.

Getty stopped laughing long enough to ask me; "Are you kidding? You really asking me about Donny Marco?"

"Where?" I said.

"If you wanna dig your own grave, Finch, no problems, I'll give you the tools, but you gotta tell me why?"

"Just spill, I don't have time for any back and forth this morning."

"You'll wind up dead if you tangle with Donny Marco again, you know that?"

"You won't be shedding any tears, will you, Getty, when I die that is?"

"I'll toast you at the wake."

“Generous. Where's Donny?”

Getty nodded slowly.

“Fine, the man is out in Palo a lot. He had that famous architect build him a place out there, what's his name... Frank Lloyd? Frank Wright? Lloyd Frank? Whoever the hell built the place, Franco named it the Magdalene House. It's his little hideaway, if you catch my drift.”

“Address?”

Getty shook his head at me.

“You're really going through with this? Do you have a death wish? Just dump the bird and walk away. There's no reason for you to—”

“Address,” I said.

He gave it to me and some parting words.

“Don't know why you're doing any of this, Finch, but I suppose I owe you at least this. That place of his out there is like a fortress. He's hired himself a crew of heavy-hitters who like to shoot people.”

“Thanks,” I said, walking away.

Getty's voice chased me out into the sunshine.

"Especially *people* like you."

Donny Marco had run half of Chicago for the Outfit in the old days. Somewhere along the line he'd decided that all that snow and wind in the big city wasn't doing him any good, and besides, he kinda liked the rolling fog that came in off the Bay.

He also liked the *Japantown* girls, and he liked that nobody cared much when he got carried away and killed one or two of them.

I'd stuck a blade in Donny Marco's gut as a parting gift, but the sonofabitch hadn't died like I wanted. He did make me a promise though. One I couldn't forget.

"I'm gonna know where you are all the time, Finch, you get me? The Outfit say I can't come after you, but they never said nothing about me bumping into you by accident. So you hear me and good, Finch, you're never gonna be safe as long as I'm alive. Never gonna know when it's *your* time. And one of these days I'm gonna *make* it your time."

I could still remember the speech he'd given to me on the phone. He'd called me from the hospital the moment he knew he was going to live.

And now I was driving out to face him, one-on-one.

You're a real hero, Finch, a real hero, I thought, someone should give you a medal.

It would have to be awarded posthumously if I knew anything about what I was getting myself into.

Like *I* knew what I was doing, that was the biggest joke of all. I'd been happy sitting outside the Mermaid Café flicking cards into my hat and waiting for the sign painter. That was only, what, an hour before? And now I was following a dead bird right into the path of a man who had threatened to end my life.

I turned to Steinbeck.

He had his head out the side window of the Plymouth, biting down on the wind.

"So what the hell do I do when I get out there, huh?"

Steinbeck snapped his jaws a few times before pulling his head in and answering the question for me.

He leaned forward his nose touching the glove compartment.

Shocked, I wagged my head.

"Do you understand English, is that it? I bet you can talk too, can't you, when I'm not around? God-damn, Steinbeck, but you're a clever little mutt."

One hand on the wheel of the Plymouth I reached over and popped open the glove compartment.

Inside was Getty's .38 and my Browning. Besides the guns was a strip of half-chewed jerky that I'd left in there from a camping trip about a month earlier.

Steinbeck bolted forward and grabbed the jerky before I'd had a chance to grab the guns.

"So it was the jerky all the time?" I said as I pulled out the Browning and the .38. "You're a grifter, Steinbeck, a real grifter that's what you are."

Whatever the reason, Steinbeck *had* pointed me in the right direction. He always seemed to be there when I was confused or couldn't make up my mind.

This time my mind had been made up for me a long time before I'd climbed into the Plymouth and pointed it away from 'Frisco.

Someone wanted help, they'd called out by attaching a message to the leg of that bird. And that bird belonged to Donny Marco. All I had to do was put two and two together.

Two plus two, in this case, equaled some poor girl trapped and at the mercy of Donny Marco. Well, what else could it be? I had no other ideas, and no other leads to follow.

What I did have was the .38 and the Browning. The larger stuck in my belt, the smaller, my inside pocket.

Two guns against who knew what was waiting for me out there in the Magdalene House.

I was beginning to envy that dead bird.

I parked the Plymouth in the shade of a cedar tree at the bottom of the hill, cracked the window a little, then told Steinbeck to stay.

He lay on the seat, both paws on the jerky while he fought an important battle against the dried meat. He didn't look at me.

"Good boy," I said anyway.

The Browning in hand I crept through the brittle and dried brush that flanked the side of the Magdalene House.

From the bottom of the hill you could see the house like the cherry on top of a particularly muddy brown chocolate cake. The Magdalene House was one level, dome-roofed and constructed of a bright red brick. A white pebble driveway snaked up to the house, flanked on either side by shrubbery that had been left to

grow wild and untouched by landscapers or gardeners.

Before I'd reached the top of the hill I heard a familiar voice. It floated down toward me, lilting, kinda sad, but at the same time upbeat.

Art Lund singing *Mam'selle*.

A small cafe, mam'selle

Our rendez-vous, mam'selle

*The violins were warm and sweet and so were you,
mam'selle*

The song had been popular that year, and not just Art Lund's version . Sinatra had covered it too. I'd never paid it much attention, but now the lyrics actually meant something to me.

Damn it, I'd forgotten all about the café and Mr. Rifkin the sign painter. And I'd managed to get a good price from him too. Now I'd have to shop the job around to another painter, and how long would that take? At the pace I was moving

I'd have the Mermaid Café open in two years, not two weeks.

“Damn you, Donny,” I said under my breath, “you and your damn bird can go to—”

A flash of green stopped me talking.

At the top of the hill, emerging from between two conifer trees was a woman in a green silk kimono.

I narrowed my eyes and scooted forward a few feet to get a better look.

The woman was Asian, Marco's preference. A black dragon crept up the green silk covering her thigh. The same dragon journeyed under her breast and around to where her pale skin was exposed by a low cut in the back of the garment.

I crept forward, the gun still in hand, but my eyes fixed on her.

She was alone, no bodyguards or hired muscle to protect her, and no Donny that I could see.

A few more feet and I could see that she wasn't *so* alone after all.

Birds.

Everywhere I looked there were birds.

At the entrance to the house, atop a black Lincoln Continental in the driveway, perched on the domed roof, littering the tiled floor that led to the front door.

Big birds, little birds, colorful ones and ones that had no color at all. Parrots and parakeets, miner's, cockatoos, budgies and pigeons. Pigeons everywhere.

Dead pigeons.

I froze.

The rest of the birds were very much alive, but there wasn't a single living pigeon out there.

And then I knew why.

From her opposite side the woman drew a .22 rifle and tucked it in against her shoulder. She took a few shaking steps backward and fired a shot wildly into the air. Then she started giggling.

She was crazy, the kind of crazy you saw after someone had chased the lotus for too long and couldn't put down the pipe.

I crept forward.

Where was Donny Marco in all this, I thought? He wasn't the kind of man to let any woman go wild on his property. He wasn't the kind of man who would let *anyone* go wild if he was nearby.

But if he didn't know then he couldn't do a thing, could he, and I had to put down a bet that Marco *didn't know* what was going on at the Magdalene House.

So what exactly was I watching here? A jilted lover? A one-in-a-million madness that had never happened before, and would never happen again as soon as Donny Marco found out?

At least I knew where the pigeon had called home. But would the writer of the note still be here or had Donny moved her on to someplace else? Would the drunken women even know?

I had to find out.

I scanned the area again for any hired heat and when I saw nobody, I tucked the Browning away in my belt and stood up. Hands up, palms out, I walked toward the woman.

"Hey there, Miss!" I called out.

She swung the .22 toward me. She closed one eye and then the other, then staggered back a few paces.

"Don't take another *shtep*," she said, the words coming out like a 78 playing at 45.

"I'm not stepping anywhere, miss. You mind pointing the nasty end of that thing away from me and we can talk some?"

"No funny business?" she asked.

"Hire yourself a comedian for that, I'm here for something else."

"What?"

I stepped forward, my hands still raised.

"Donny, where is he?"

It took a moment for the question to make it into her brain, then she smiled.

Close enough now I saw her face.

Her skin was thick with white powder, the kind of theatrical slop that actors wore. In stark contrast her lips were stained a blood red with lipstick and her eyes were deep-cut with thick mascara. She might have been pretty underneath all that, she might have been sixty years old, I just couldn't tell. She *was* drunk, though.

The smell of whiskey hit me full in the face as she spoke.

"Donny," she spat the word out, "Donny, Donny, Donny."

"Yeah, Donny, is he around here any place?"

"Gone, good riddance," she said.

I took a step forward.

"Gone where?"

Her dark, drunken eyes drifted from the house to the winding road that led away from the Palo Alto hills. She got lost there for a moment, seeing something that had happened before I'd arrived and before she'd started her pigeon slaughtering fun.

“Gone for good, that sonofabitch!” Her eyes cleared, she stopped swaying, her fists clenched around the stock of the rifle.

I don't think I've ever seen anyone sober up so quickly, but I was sure that the woman had done just.

Cautious, as though I was approaching a rabid dog, I took another step forward.

“Listen, I need to get in contact with him, you hear me? I need to know if... ”

How could I ask her what I needed to ask? Did she even know about Donny's sickening little hobbies? Was she aware of any *other* girls Donny had brought back to the Magdalene House? Or was she just the latest Japantown girl that Donny...

My eyes picked up the dead birds.

Now why would she be killing the pigeons and none of the others, I thought? Unless....

I lowered my hands, shook my head in disbelief.

No, it couldn't be, could it? Had I played this all wrong? Had I been looking for the wrong victim?

I looked into the drunk woman's eyes, but couldn't see anything there that would hint at the answer.

Jesus, I thought, was Donny the one who'd written the note? Was he the one who'd sent out the bird? Had he sent out the bird because he knew where I was and that I would find it and—

Had the woman killed the pigeons to stop Donny from being rescued?

"Miss?" I said, trying to gain her attention.

"What do *you* want?" she said, bringing the rifle around slowly until it was about an inch from my heart. "No, don't answer, I know what you want, you're the same as the rest of them. Damn pigeons cooing all the time. *Coo. Coo.* Someone should just—"

She shook and shivered as though a cold wind had touched her bare skin. Her eyes closed.

I tried not to panic too much, but it was hard to be cool, calm and collected when you had a pigeon murderer pointing a rifle at your chest.

"It's okay, miss," I said, "everything's gonna be okay now."

Her eyes opened up slow like a trapdoor into a dark

cellar where the worst kinds of secrets were kept.

"Okay? What do *you* know about okay?" she said.

"I'm here to help. I'm going to help you. Just put the rifle down and we'll—"

"Help? Are you a cop, is that it? Cop's don't help, they're all bought and sold, get me? All bought and sold by *him*. Well he ain't selling nothing now, is he? Can't sell a thing when you're dead!"

She shivered again, but this time a pleased look flitted across her overly made-up features.

"Dead," she said with a tone reserved for the discussion of chocolate and sex, "deader than

dead. Sonofabitch thought he could kill me. Thought he could use me up and throw me away just like that. Well no! No! I'm a human being goddamn it. I deserve to be treated better than a God-damn bird."

As she spat out the last word a parakeet flapped into the sky above us.

She swung the gun high, away from my chest and aimed it at the passing bird.

"God-damn pigeons!" she shouted.

I saw my opportunity.

I barreled forward and took her out at the midriff.

The gun popped, but it hit nothing but sky.

I pushed her to the ground, pinning her arms underneath my knees.

She kicked and punched, but I had about four inches on her and at least fifty pounds. I grabbed the rifle and flung it off into the dusty shrubs flanking the driveway.

"Calm down," I said.

She stopped punching at me, her body becoming still beneath me and then she started laughing.

It was a crazy, high-pitched laugh. The kind of screech that might be heard on the bleached corridors of a mental asylum. Through that laughing, she spoke.

"Calm, I am calm, I'm better than calm mister, I'm happy. Get me, I'm happy."

"Bully for you, now tell me, where is Donny? Did you kill Donny? Is he still alive?"

She ignored me, her eyes closing as she drifted back into a world that I had no access to.

"Gone, gone, the wicked witch is dead and gone. Thought he could get me, but he couldn't. Sonofabitch thought he had me, but he didn't. Thought he could get his goons to—"

I shook her.

"Listen, you daffy broad, I need some clarity here. I don't give one damn if you killed that sick bastard, but I gotta know if he's dead or not,

and where the body is. You tell me that and I might help you out of this jam."

"Help?" she said.

Her voice was tinged with confusion and more than a little surprise.

I pulled my knees off her arms and pulled her up onto her feet.

"Listen," I said, "this place will be crawling with uniforms and Detectives soon. They're gonna ask you some tough questions. Questions you might not wanna answer. So here's the deal, sister, you help *me* out and I'll make sure you don't ride the lightning for Donny."

"You'd do that for me?" she asked.

I would, and I'd have done it for anybody else that had dropped Donny Marco, but I wasn't about to explain my reasons to her.

"Where is he?" I said more forcefully.

"I don't know," she said.

"What?"

"I don't know."

"You said you killed him."

"I did kill him."

I blinked hoping that the confusion wasn't spreading.

"How can you kill a man and not know where he is?" I said.

She reached up slowly to the side of her head and pulled at the hair.

Underneath, cut into the scalp was a groove that had whitened with age. A scar about eight inches long and an inch wide.

"What am I looking at?" I said.

"That's what *they* did to me."

"They?"

She glanced over her shoulder to the house.

"Donny's men."

"I'm not getting this, what has that scar got to do with you killing Donny?"

"They said I locked Donny away somewhere. They said I planned on starving him to death. They did this to me before they asked me any

questions and then... then I couldn't remember."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing, but it was all beginning to make a strange kind of sense to me. As was the reason for the dry brush and uncultivated land surrounding the Magdalene House. It was a kind of sense I didn't want to acknowledge, but what else could I do?

"How long have you been here?" I said.

"Months? A year? I'm not sure. But today... today I got free and..." she glanced again to the house as though it was an answer in and off itself.

"Donny's men?" I said.

"Dead, all of them."

"In the house?"

She nodded.

"And you don't know where Donny might be?"

"Not a clue, and I don't care, mister. That sonofabitch treated his pigeons better than me, I remember that much, that much I won't forget.

Them damn pigeons were like children to him. But what I want to know, mister, is why *you* care?"

The question surprised me.

I hadn't thought about Donny in a long while. I'd gotten over the threat he'd posed and carried on with my life and my plans. I'd walked away, something that this poor girl hadn't had the chance to do until that morning. And now she was free. A freedom that rested in my hands, at least partly.

But I *had* to know where he was. I *had to know* how this ended, and if he'd written *help* so that my eyes would see the word.

There was only one way to find out the answer to that question and that was to find Donny.

"I care enough to want to find his body," I said, "you're sure he's not inside the house? I mean, did you look? Did you lock him away in there and forget and..." "

She laughed, bringing her hand up to her lips like a schoolgirl who'd been told her first dirty joke and had understood what it meant.

"What?" I said.

"The house," she said, but that wasn't an explanation or much of anything at all.

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"If he's in there then you won't find him for much longer."

"Why?"

She giggled again.

And I was about to ask her what was up with all the laughing when I saw the flicker of light inside the Magdalene House.

It was Halloween orange at first, turning quickly to the deep red of a burned autumn leaf. And that's exactly what was happening.

The Magdalene House was burning.

I dropped the woman off with a friend of mine who worked as a Hotel Dick at the Powell

and ran across the street to Owl Drug. There I dropped some coins and reported the burning house out in Palo Alto.

When they asked for a name, I told them my name was Harry Pigeon then hung up.

Back in the car I talked over all the madness with Steinbeck.

He'd gotten way past his jerky and was now sitting attentively, listening to my words, waiting to give me a yes or no bark.

"So that's it," I said, "one dead gangster and a woman who can't even remember her own name. And he's somewhere in this town, Steinbeck, but I just can't figure out where."

Steinbeck nodded, although it might have been the motion of the car as we headed back toward the Café.

"If you're gonna starve someone to death like they said she was doing, then where would you do that, Steinbeck? Out in the woods maybe? Somewhere underground? Christ, that could be anywhere. And that note. What do you reckon, was that note for me, you think?"

Steinbeck barked.

"But how could he know I'd get it? How could he know I'd be the one to see the bird and then follow the clues and then follow them back to him unless... "

My mind started cranking, thinking over my history with Donny Marco and it struck me.

"I got it, Steinbeck. Jesus, it's so simple. I know where he is."

Steinbeck barked twice.

I stepped on the gas.

Detective Cal Bailey chewed around the edge of a pencil and shook his big bulldog head at me.

"How did you know to look there, Finch?"

We stood in the alleyway next to what would one day be the Mermaid Café. The same alley that Steinbeck had found so interesting that morning.

About halfway into the alley was a small grid set in the ground and all around the grid the

bodies of dead pigeons were strewn like a confetti after a wedding.

"You mean you haven't figured it out, Detective?" I said.

"Cut the cute act. I remember you when we were swapping lead. Just spill it."

I left out the part about the girl and the burning house, and my run in with my old pal Getty. The rest I made up.

"I knew it was Marco's pigeon, but I couldn't figure out who wrote the note at first, then I remembered something. Steinbeck here is a ratter, you heard that phrase before, ratter?"

Bailey nodded.

"Rat catcher, yeah, I know it."

"Well up until this morning the only thing I ever saw Steinbeck here catch was a rat, never a bird. I just didn't put two and two together."

"I was never any good at math, explain to me nice and simple what you're getting at, Finch."

"Steinbeck didn't kill the bird, he didn't shake it and break its neck. Marco did. He killed the

birds and tossed them out hoping that Steinbeck would lead me to them. At least he did with some of them, I'm betting you're going to find a lot of pigeon bones down there."

"You're crazy," Bailey said. "How could Marco have known you were anywhere near here? And then how could have known that you would follow your dog back to him?"

"I was *his hobby*, that's why he had that little dungeon set up down there, all soundproofed and airtight. That's why he had his pigeons all set up, like they did in the old days, to send messages back and forth without giving himself away on the telephone. When he saw Steinbeck here, he saw an opportunity to bring *me* back here. That's why all the notes saying HELP."

I glanced at Steinbeck, who throughout the proceedings had been watching with the aloof curiosity of a professional who'd seen everything before and was quite bored with it all.

"You were his *hobby*? Don't flatter yourself, Finch," Bailey said. "From what I've seen down

there, he was just clumsy enough to lose the key to that place and just unlucky enough to have nobody reporting him missing."

"Don't believe me?"

Bailey took the pencil out of his mouth.

"What I believe is that I've got one very dead gangster on my hands and that means there's a lot of girls in Japantown that are going to sleep better tonight, and a lot of cops on the take who'll have a lighter wage packet this month. Either way, Finch, I'm happy. Now, why don't you tell me about this café of yours? What was the name again?"

We turned away from the crime scene and back toward the street.

The sign painter was late and all apologies when he came, he'd even offered a discount. Now the front window was painted, and much better than I'd imagined.

Within a circle a red and green mermaid held a cup of coffee in her lap. And below was the legend:

*The Mermaid Café. Est: 1947. Proprietor: Elliot
Finch.*

I smiled.

There wasn't a pigeon in sight, dead or alive.



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