

A woman in a black dress and high heels is running across a yellow background. She is carrying a large, dark brown hat with white text on it. The text on the hat reads: "THE ELDERLY GENTLEMAN'S MOSTLY LEGITIMATE ESCORT ASSOCIATION".

THE ELDERLY
GENTLEMAN'S
MOSTLY LEGITIMATE
ESCORT
ASSOCIATION

by Maxwell Cooke

The Elderly Gentlemen's (Don't Call Us Geezers) Mostly Legitimate Escort Association:

The Caroline Knepper Case

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1 About the Women

A word about the women in this story: Patient.

Truth is, Robert and Jasper wouldn't have been quite so eager for Franny and Charlotte to go to work for a *female* escort service as the women were for Robert and Jasper to go to work for this one. Of course, the women had their hands in on it from the beginning and that must have given them some reassurances. Still they weren't with the men when the men were with the women they dated, and that meant they had to trust the men. Or maybe they trusted the women they dated. Or maybe—but of course neither Jasper nor Robert believed this—maybe they figured the men aren't really quite so dangerous as the men seemed to think they were.

Franny exudes patience. She'd seen Jasper through several adventures, and he appreciated her for that. She simply saw this as another in a long line. One time she went along with Jasper when he took a job in Africa teaching computer techniques to tribespeople in Uganda. That led to their return to Seattle on a tramp steamer around the Cape and across the Pacific, a five-month trip which ended up in disaster since the steamer they were on had stopped in a small village on the tip of Thailand on its way and apparently someone had picked up about twenty kilos of heroin. They got raided just off the coast of British Columbia. Her mother had to bail them both out of that Canadian jail. And she even went along with Jasper when he went to Clown School for ten months and then worked all over Europe performing as Ronald McDonald and opening McDonalds restaurants. And she's a vegetarian. Jasper fell off a tricycle and wrenched his back or he'd probably still be doing it. He loved it. And then he started going to this beautiful French female chiropractor nearly every day. Franny, as cool as lettuce about it all, became best friends with the chiropractor. And then Franny turned into a hamburger artist, not flipping burgers but creating—and selling—sculptures and paintings and even jewelry of Big Macs and Quarter-Pounders and McChicken Sandwiches. They became the latest rage and the McDonalds Corporation bought up her designs, recreated them out of plastic, and gave them away with their Valu-Meals. Franny earned enough money to pay off their apartment on Capitol Hill in Seattle. Not bad.

Franny made it clear, now that Jasper had reached sixty, that she'd do her best to go along with *whatever plan* he had for his retirement. Since she was fifteen years younger than he, she had no intention of retiring; she'd keep working on her art or her literature or her agronomy or her antiques. But she was willing to help him. He appreciated that.

And Charlotte? Charlotte and Robert had been married for twenty years, a second time for each of them. They'd met in London, where they were both living at the time. She was a swim instructor when he met her. In fact, he had taken swim lessons from her. Robert enjoyed explaining how she taught him the breaststroke, and how he got pretty good at it. Charlotte had also assured Robert that she'd go along with his retirement plans, as long as the plans meant staying together. He'd been retired for almost eight years already, though, and they had pretty much settled in on a routine. That was different from Franny and Jasper. Robert and Charlotte were comfortable, both having a good retirement income, having their house paid for, having a terrific garden of roses and vegetables to take care of, both being interested in golfing, going off on mini-vacations three or four times a year,

and seeing their respective children once or twice a year, either in the states or back in England.

Robert had four vices—obsessions, actually: yoga, cricket, golf, and the library. And while he was off chasing those rainbows, Charlotte studied piano. She once gave a concert at the library while Robert was there reading the latest book on correcting a slice on your drive. He was so involved he didn't even notice who was playing until they bumped into each other on the way out.

Charlotte and Franny had obviously talked this latest venture over, though, because when they all sat down to discuss it they came up with very specific ground rules right away. Well, that was all right with Robert and Jasper. They loved the idea of money, adventure, excitement, new experiences, and interesting women. Not that Franny and Charlotte weren't interesting. Not at all. Just that, well, this should be different.

Yeah, that's it. Different.

2 About the Business

The *Times* advertisement had been simple and direct:

International Escort Service. Mature men
to offer pleasant evenings to lonely women.
REASONABLE RATES and NO FUNNY
BUSINESS. Call and discuss your particular
needs and desires. We aim to please.
References provided. 206-456-6543
in Seattle.

The deal was that whenever anyone called, either Franny or Charlotte handled it. Franny and Charlotte were the “references” they “provided,” actually. And the women loved their role. It gave them a sense of belonging, of censorship ... and of power. Jasper listened to them talking with the callers and they made it sound as though they had a fully developed business going. They could really lay it on. In addition, their working with Jasper and Robert meant they were in on the deal from the beginning. They figured they could screen the clients in ways the men might not be able to do on their own. Jasper was a sucker for a woman’s sweet talk and Franny knew it; he could hardly resist. Of course, he could see the bare bones of every *hint* of a lie by some dirty dog trying to sweet talk Franny, but that was different. And the women shared that sense when Jasper or Robert was concerned. They appreciated—to a degree, at least—their abilities to see things the men might miss. Like ‘some sort of set-up,’ for example, which was Robert’s favorite phrase, even though none of the group knew what that might be.

“We’ve got to be vigilant for some sort of a set-up,” Robert would say, and they’d all nod their heads in agreement while not having the vaguest idea what he was talking about. He’d been in the military, though, so they sometimes gave him the benefit of the doubt.

Franny and Charlotte took scrupulous notes on every caller, and they had a patter they passed on to the caller as well. One thing they made certain to get clear was that this business was for escorting *only*, that it *by-god* didn’t include any after-hours sexual relationships. They were blunt about that. The other thing—no minor detail—was that the cost was \$95 per hour with a five-hour minimum for the escort regardless of the activity (i.e., dinner or a movie or a cocktail party or slow stroll along the waterfront or even a trip to a dog show, whatever), and the chargeable time included travel each way. Payment at the end of the evening, in cash. No client, come time to pay, should have been surprised. They also informed the caller that they had a money-back guarantee if she wasn’t satisfied.

The clients were told they could probably have either an American or a British escort, but they may need to juggle their schedules if they were particular. The fact of Robert’s being British gave the group the name of the business, the “international” part, although the four also figured they could escort women across the Canadian border to Vancouver if someone so desired and that would internationalize it. Or maybe even to Victoria, British Columbia, on the long ferryboat ride. Franny and Charlotte avoided mentioning how few escorts they had on their staff, and they made sure each man had the agreed-upon two days

between clients. This was supposed to be a pleasant retirement pastime, sort of like gardening or stamp-collecting, after all, not a full-time job. They got to be very good about explaining that a particular escort may not be available on a particular night.

One more thing: Clients had to wait at least one month before using the same escort a second time. This was done for a couple reasons, mainly because of the need to keep a distance between the business and any personal connections (Charlotte's idea). Secondly because they were so short of 'gentlemen.' (Or, as Franny liked to put it, "We don't even have enough actual *gentlemen* to take the two out of three nights we accept clients.")

3 On the Death of Caroline Knepper

Here's what happened: A slam of the door jolted the little house. It jolted Jasper as well, actually.

"Jasper! Omigod! She's dead." Robert's screeching voice struck Jasper before he really saw him. *What* did he say?

Jasper figured he must not have heard right.

"What?"

"She's dead! That's what! Are you *deaf*?" Robert had blasted into the living room. He wasn't smiling.

"Who's dead?"

"Is Charlotte awake?"

"No," Jasper said. "And neither was I until a minute ago. Now..."

"Wake her up *No*, don't wake her."

"What the hell is up?"

"Caroline Knepper—my, my what? My client? She's dead."

"When? How?" This might have been serious if it hadn't been Robert talking. Robert loved to rag. Jasper wasn't about to bite. "I don't believe it."

"I don't either. But it's ... it's true."

"Are you saying that—"

"Get me a Chivas, Jasper. I need one." Robert flopped into the big overstuffed vinyl chair in the living room. Jasper heard the chair wind whoosh out as he landed. He dutifully opened the cabinet under the TV and brought out the bottle of Chivas, along with a couple glasses. He hated to see a man drink alone. Charlotte was splayed broad on the couch, snoring. Did somebody say "dead"?

It was just past two when Jasper had heard the car wail into the driveway and scream to a stop. Robert didn't usually drive fast, so Jasper right away had gotten that lump filling him up from his stomach. He was sure something must have gone wrong. One look at Robert's face when he shot through the door—sort of reminded Jasper of a dinner plate full of cold spaghetti, but maybe he was just hungry—convinced him he'd figured right. Charlotte kept sleeping, loudly.

"Omigod," Robert said. "I can't believe I'm home. Listen: We're in trouble."

"Here's your drink," Jasper said, though he knew Robert hardly ever drank anything so late at night, anything, that is, except for a hot tea with milk and sugar, maybe a 'bikkie' on the side. Took him back to his days as a kid in England when his "mum" used to pamper him.

This time he swallowed about half his Chivas in one swig. The only other time Jasper'd seen him drink like that was when he'd heard that Australia were 329 runs for

four after the first day in a cricket test match against England. Jasper hesitated to ask for details, but

“Okay, old man. Just relax and tell me about it. There must be some mistake.”

“Mistake? No, no mistake. It’s worse,” he said, “worse than you could imagine. Even you. She’s dead. The woman’s dead, I tell you.”

“Dead?”

“Dead. She just, boom, died. End of story. That’s all. Listen to me, Jasper. D-E-A-D. I didn’t do it. It just happened. I don’t even know HOW it happened.” He paused and took another drink, emptying the glass and eyeing the bottom as though he was hoping another blast of the booze would magically appear. “But it DID happen.”

Jasper was right, for sure: Something had gone wrong. Robert was right too: It was worse than either of the men could imagine. Jasper might have imagined that Robert had thrown up on her, or that he’d had a raging argument with her and had been thrown out of the restaurant, or even that he’d discovered that he’d walked around all evening with his fly open. But not this. Dead? No, not this.

“Are you trying to tell me the woman—what was her name? Caroline Knepper?—the woman you spent the night with ... er, I mean, the evening with ... our first client—died? Is dead? That she’s, well, she’s *kaput*? How? What caused it? Are you serious?” Robert relished the experience of “winding Jasper up”—as he called it—so Jasper was more than a bit suspicious of this tale. But if winding is what he was doing, he was capital-E-ffective.

“Maybe we should wake Charlotte,” Robert said. “She’d better hear this. I guess she’s sort of involved, too, isn’t she? I mean, she’s my wife, and ...”

Jasper couldn’t say, of course, since he still had no idea how serious Robert was. All he knew for sure was that Robert had taken an elderly woman out to dinner, someone he’d never met before. That was the deal. Other than that, what? “She’s dead,” he had said. How in the world was Charlotte involved? By being Robert’s wife? Involved in what? The death of this woman? But he hadn’t done anything, he said. “She just died.” That’s what he said. Jesus. “She just died”? Had he met with the police? Where had it happened? Was there some sort of trouble?

“Did you meet with the police? Did it happen during dinner? Was there some sort of trouble?”

“No, of course not,” he said, answering one of the questions, though Jasper didn’t have any idea which one. “That is, well, I called the hotel desk, and they must have called the medical alert team. And maybe they called the police. Anyway, I saw the police come to the hotel. When I called, I told them the room number. I’d already slipped out. Of the room, I mean. By the time the police showed up. That’s—the room—that’s where it happened. Not at dinner. I thought I’d better not be there when they came, so I—well, I left. Why did I leave? That’s what you’re wondering, right? So am I. How should I know why? I don’t understand it myself. I didn’t do anything wrong. I had nothing to do with her keeling over. I just felt guilty, like I shouldn’t be there, like she wouldn’t have wanted me there. So I took off. No one saw me, I’m sure, but I’m still shaking. Just look at me. I can’t hold my hand still.” He looked at his jiggling hand, the one holding his empty glass.

Jasper took this to mean he wanted another drink, so he took the glass from Robert and fixed him another Chivas. Fixed himself one as well. He suddenly decided he needed another one too.

“Actually I sat outside in the car with the lights off until the medical team showed up. I just sat there staring. The police came just after the medics. I then waited while they were in the hotel. Pretty soon—like about thirty minutes later at the most—I saw them all come out with a body on a stretcher, covered up. I sat in my car for another half-hour or so—seemed like four or five hours—after they left, just sat there sort of shaking. I know she was dead. I’ve seen dead people before, Jasper. She was dead.”

Charlotte peered out of her hole on the couch and rubbed her eyes. She slipped on her glasses as if she just couldn’t possibly say anything without them, but Jasper could tell she had something to say. “Did I hear somebody say someone was dead? Who? When did you get in, Robert? Was I asleep? Who’s dead? Or was that on the telly? What happened in the movie, Jasper? Or was that you what done it, Robbie? Eh? Didn’t I always say you was a killer, Robert?” Robert didn’t laugh. For just waking up, Charlotte had masterfully gotten into the swing of things, so to speak.

Slaughter’s Law, Pt. II: If you build it, all hell will break loose. Something like that. Jasper had been so psyched up about their first escort job. So had Robert. Couple old farts like them, they really looked forward to this. And Robert was the ideal person to kick it all off: British. Suave. Knew his way around. Really a pro at showing a lady he cared. Nice looking, in his way. Maybe a bit short, but otherwise quite handsome. Put Burt Reynolds into Danny DeVito’s body and you’d have Robert. Roughly speaking, of course. They passed him off as 58 although he’s really 71. You couldn’t tell with Robert. Honestly. Because of his hair. He had the hair of a young man, no gray, no thinning, a head filled with flowing blondish hair, same’s it’d been when he was roaming the streets of London as a thirty-year-old. So when this woman called and said she’d read the ad and was interested in a gentleman escort for the evening, ‘preferably not American,’ Jasper figured they were in luck. Now this.

“Charlotte,” Jasper said, playing the role of stability, not a usual role for him to play, “Robert is, well, a bit shook up. I’m not even certain he knows what happened. He hasn’t managed to get it all out yet, that’s for sure. But I guess he’s telling us that Catherine Knepper—you know, his date for the evening—well, that she died.” He paused for the effect, but Charlotte’s expression didn’t change. It was as though he’d just told her they’d be having shepherd’s pie for dinner. Jasper continued. “Maybe he’s winding us up. I’m really not sure. You know Robert, Charlotte. Are you winding us up, Robert?”

Jasper looked at him. Robert just sat and stared at the scotch in front of him like one of those old women you sometimes see on buses or in subways in eastern Europe, the ones in those heavy black overcoats on with shopping bags between their feet. Just staring. Jasper wasn’t even certain Robert was still with them. No, he wasn’t winding them up.

“How did it happen, Robert? And relax, for god’s sake. You’re making us all nervous. You’re in no trouble, I’m sure, and the woman must be beyond help. So tell us what happened. Exactly. From the beginning. Take your time. What the hell? We’re retired.”

4 How It Happened

Robert raised his head and slowly eyeballed first Jasper, then Charlotte. If he was messing with them, if he was putting them on, he teetered on the edge of pushing it too far. “Well, I met her outside the Florinda Hotel, just as she’d asked. I guess she didn’t want people in the hotel to talk, but I didn’t know that at the time. I assumed she’d been there before, at that hotel, maybe with some other chap, probably her husband. She told me later she was married. Or she had been married. But then again I remember she said this was her first time in Seattle. Hell, I don’t know. I don’t remember quite what she said.

“Anyway, I picked her up at 8:30. She was there when I drove up. The hotel—do you know which hotel it is? Down there in Pioneer Square just east of the old Smith Tower? You’ve seen it, I know. It’s one of those old neo-gothic structures, ornate, old, lots of high windows. You know the type, at least. Anyway, she had the red rose in her lapel. That was the deal, a red rose, even though as it turned out no one else was even around there. She looked nice, actually. I mean, I would have been interested even if I weren’t being paid—if I were single, that is.” Robert took a quick glance over at Charlotte, anticipating some comment from that admission. Charlotte just sat there, probably putting that one in the bank to draw on later. Robert went on.

“She’d said she was fifty-four, but I’d guess she was closer to sixty-five. A nicely preserved sixty-five, though, let me tell you.” He was pushing his luck with Charlotte now, getting cocky. “She had a blonde wig on—pretty easy to spot, but that didn’t make her look much younger. Still, I didn’t mind. I hadn’t been quite accurate about my age, either.” He paused a moment, sipped his Chivas. He was getting off on the drama of the scene. He had Jasper’s and Charlotte’s attention, that’s for sure.

“We drove to Johnny’s Dock, that classy restaurant out past Ballard. She’d told Franny she wanted French food, remember? So that’s where I’d made the reservations. You know that, I guess. Am I making any sense?”

“About as much as you always make, Robert,” Charlotte said.

“It’s okay,” Jasper said. “Just go on. We’re following okay.”

“Anyway, I was as witty and considerate as I could be—joked about the Seattle weather, the Mariners, the coffee, the Space Needle, even threw in a Bill Gates joke, just to test her business know-how. All the usual stuff. I must admit I had a bit of an upset stomach—I think I was just nervous—and I was afraid I’d have trouble getting through my meal. She ordered a martini, very dry, right away. I asked for soda water, since I was driving, and since I felt I needed to keep my head throughout the evening. And besides, my stomach didn’t seem to want more than that.”

“Did she seem at all ill?” Jasper asked. “Or uncomfortable?”

“No more than any woman would seem uncomfortable who had just arrived in a strange city and had hired a strange man to take her to dinner to a strange restaurant. In fact she explained right away that this was the first time she had ever hired an escort. She said she’d heard of escort services before, but she’d always assumed they were for men. She also said she’d thought they were pretty much always involved with call girls and

wealthy Japanese and Russian businessmen; but a friend of hers had told her that wasn't necessarily the case, so she decided to check us out. She told me she felt like she was going to her high school prom—that was her analogy—kind of nervous.”

“And you were her idea of a prom date?” Charlotte threw in. She couldn't resist any longer. “She must have had a miserable adolescence.”

Robert ignored her and went on. “But she said she'd be damned if she'd stay in her hotel alone in Seattle one more night, and she confessed she hadn't met anyone she trusted well enough to ask to go with her. Any men, that is. She'd had dinner the night before with a couple women from New Jersey, people she'd met on a city bus tour on her first day here; but ‘they bored the piss out of me,’ she told me, plus they were women. She confessed to me that she preferred the company of men. At least sometimes. And she wanted to meet someone who knew the city. I asked her if she was an anthropologist, or if she was writing a book, but she just laughed. Since this was her first time in Seattle, she said she wanted to get to know it, and wanted to have a real adventure.”

“Yeah, like it's really complicated getting to know Seattle,” Charlotte threw in. “Maybe she ought to try Beirut, or Jakarta. Now *that* would be an adventure.”

Robert continued to ignore Charlotte's digs. “She made a special, very overt point of letting me know she wasn't looking for a sexual partner. Then she laughed, I guess because I hadn't given any indication of such an interest either”

“I should hope not,” Charlotte said.

“... and also because our ad so explicitly stated that our business was escorting *only*. I know Franny made the terms of our agreement clear when she told Catherine about the business, on the phone.”

“I'm glad of that,” Charlotte said, adding her own particular touch of joy and light to the situation. “Poor lady I'd hate for her to be disappointed.”

“Come on, Charlotte. This is serious. Let him go on,” Jasper said. He'd heard these two bantering before—Robert brings out the Roseanne Barr in her—and once they got going there was no stopping them. The whole story would have gotten lost if Jasper didn't keep the reins tight. “Go on, Robert. What happened?”

Robert wasn't smiling. Or biting. “We stayed at the restaurant for about two hours, and we had a really nice dinner. She had the French-style baked halibut and I had Dungeness crab Louie salad. Terrific. I guess I even silently gloated about the fact that she'd be paying because the bill came to nearly a hundred bucks, a hell of a lot more than I'm used to shelling out for dinner.”

“That's for sure,” Charlotte chimed in again. Robert paid her no attention.

“But she slipped me the money very discreetly, I paid the bill, and we left. Must have been around eleven, by then. She asked for an after-dinner drink, so I drove her over to Fremont to a nice little club called Gino's, live jazz and comfortable tables. She said that since she was paying for five hours of my time, she figured she'd get it. Earlier she'd asked me how much the charge would be.”

“But she must have known that from her conversation with Franny. I wonder why she

asked,” Jasper said.

“I know. I wondered too, but still she asked me right off how much the evening would cost. Maybe she figured that since she was such great company I wouldn’t charge so much; or maybe she figured I didn’t even know how much it would be. In any case, I just said \$95 an hour with a five-hour minimum, as we’d agreed. I don’t know why she asked. How would I know? Jesus.”

“And then?”

“Well, she asked me up to her room for a nightcap, so I—”

“And you WENT?” Charlotte couldn’t believe that one. “Oh, brother, I’ve heard everything now.”

“Just hold on, Charlotte,” Robert said. “Yes, I did. I went. I mean, I didn’t see any harm in it. She was perfectly polite, clearly lonely, and she’d had quite a bit to drink. I figured she might need a bit of help. And she still had an hour left—of the five hours, that is—by the time I got her back to the Florinda. Also—the main thing—she told me she only had about fifty dollars with her, that the rest of the money was in her room. That alone seemed to be a good enough reason to go up there.”

Charlotte gave Robert an oh-my-god-I’ve-heard-everything-now look.

“Now don’t look at me like that, Charlotte. Damn it, if you’re going to be questioning me in every decision I make, I’d better get out of this business right now.”

Charlotte looked as contrite she could, no easy task. Maybe she was starting to take this whole thing seriously, like she was just beginning to believe Robert had got involved in something heavier than a pulled hamstring at the yoga class. Robert went on.

“She asked me to come up about five minutes after she went in, so no one would notice. She was really concerned about that. I thought it was sort of strange for a grown woman to be so worried. It was as if her daughter might be there and might see her with a strange man, or something. Anyway, no one saw me. That lobby is small, but no one was around. I guess the desk clerk was in the back room having a drink or something. I went up the elevator and found her room and knocked. She didn’t come right away, but when she finally opened the door I noticed she wavered a bit. She looked pale. I asked her if anything was the matter, and she said she didn’t feel well. I asked her if I should call the hotel doctor, and she said not to bother. She sat down on the couch and asked me to get her a drink of water, which I did. She took one sip and dropped it. I mean, it slipped out of her hand and fell to the floor. I was sitting right next to her. She apologized and said she’d better get up and go to the bathroom, and I helped her to the door. She went in and closed the door. I just went back to the couch and sat down to wait. Started reading a *Cosmopolitan* she had sitting on the coffee table.

“After about five minutes I heard nothing—absolutely nothing—from the bathroom, so I called to her to ask her if something was wrong. I asked her if I should call the hotel and request a doctor. She didn’t say anything. I called to her again. Still nothing. I got really nervous, didn’t know quite what to do. I didn’t really know her well enough to go into the bathroom to check on her, but still I figured I’d better do something. So I tried the bathroom door—sort of tentatively, if you know what I mean—and I was shocked that it

swung right open. It wasn't even locked. So I went in. She looked as though she hadn't moved once I let her in the bathroom. She was sitting on a chair against the wall and her eyes were sort of rolled back, and her head was back with them. And ... and her mouth hung open, and ... and then I noticed that she wasn't breathing."

"Just like that? She had stopped breathing?" Jasper was stunned.

"Just like that. I stood there for maybe as long as two or three minutes. I felt her pulse. Nothing. Then I sat down on the floor next to her, sort of collapsed, actually. My god. *She wasn't breathing*. I couldn't believe it. I *still* can't believe it."

"So that was when you called for help?" Jasper asked. "How long did you wait before you called the hotel reception?"

"Well, I know that's when I *should* have called. If I'd had it together, I would have. But I was too nervous. She hadn't wanted anyone to know I was there, remember? So I thought I'd better leave. Which I did. And that's when I called. After I left. I mean, I walked through that lobby—which was still empty—and left the place. Then I went to a phone booth just down the street and called the hotel to tell about her. Didn't want to use my cell phone because, well, because I really didn't want the call traced to me, don't ask me why. The desk clerk asked who I was and I just said, 'a friend.' And then I hung up. I guess you know the rest."

"Do you think she was trying to seduce you? When she asked you to her room, I mean," Charlotte asked. "Why else would she invite you to her room?"

"Charlotte, you've always got to think the worst, don't you? I think she was just lonely, and she liked me, and she didn't quite want the evening to end just yet. And she needed to get some money. She still hadn't paid me, remember."

"That might have just been a ploy to get you up there, Robert. You're so naive sometimes. You'll believe anything," Charlotte said. "I've known women like that before. In fact, I knew someone once who—"

"So I should have demanded that she show me the contents of her purse while we sat there outside the hotel?" Robert said, interrupting Charlotte and sounding pretty fed up. "Is that what I should have done?"

"And what about the money?" Jasper asked. He just had to ask, even though it seemed terribly crass. On the other hand, they were involved here in a partnership, and Jasper even suspected somewhat that the whole thing was a put-up job by the woman to get out of paying. He hated it when he thought such things. "I mean, did you ever get the money?"

"No," Robert said. "Of course not. I completely forgot about it. Well, I did think about it as I was going to her room. But once all this happened, all I could think about was getting out of the hotel without being seen, and still doing whatever was right. I mean, I thought perhaps she was still alive and in some sort of a coma. I've heard of such things. So I knew I had to contact someone soon. And I couldn't very well go rifling through her belongings in her room looking for money before leaving to call the hotel, could I?"

"What are you going to do now, Robert?" Charlotte seemed resolved, finally, that this was serious.

“I need another Chivas. Then I’m going to bed. In the morning, well, I don’t know what I’ll do. I’ll decide about it then. It’s all very confusing to me. Maybe I’ll call the police. Maybe I’ll call the hotel. Maybe I’ll wake up and discover this was all a bad dream.” He paused. “Maybe ... maybe I’ll just go golfing. I don’t know. I just can’t think now, though. I’ve got to get some sleep.”

5 *Dealing with the Death*

Jasper crawled into bed around an hour later. He only lived twenty minutes from Robert and Charlotte, but by the time he got home, he just didn't feel like sleeping. Franny had left a light on for him but she was dead to the world, probably in the middle of one of her rambling erotic dreams. Jasper wondered who she was jogging naked with tonight. Last week it had been Bill and Hillary and the entire Supreme Court. She woke up with a start that morning, shaken by the image of Ruth Ginsburg running along in front of her waving her on. Franny couldn't keep up with her, and that upset her all day.

When Jasper finally did get into bed, he didn't sleep well. Then he woke up early, even earlier than Franny, for a change. His mind wouldn't let him rest. He knew there wouldn't be any notice of Catherine Knepper's death in the morning paper, but he thought maybe he'd hear something on the radio so he turned the kitchen radio on just loud enough to hear but not so loud as to wake Franny. He caught the local news. Nothing.

He started thinking about his upcoming assignment. Jasper's evening was planned according to the wishes of the client who had called a week earlier. She had asked for an escort to go with her to the Seattle Symphony Hall for a piano concert by some famous Hungarian pianist named Istvan Geher, a child prodigy of sorts. Jasper wasn't too keen on the idea since he's usually more the type to take in a good Woody Allen or even an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie or to go see a baseball or basketball game, but since the business was just beginning and this was only their second call, he wasn't particular. If this woman wanted a Hungarian pianist, or if she wanted a Romanian snake charmer or even a German opera star, Jasper was by-god-determined that she'd get one.

By the end of the day they got the call, though, Jasper was sorry he had accepted so fast. They'd had fourteen more calls—fourteen!—in the following four hours. Business had every appearance of booming. In fact, later that first evening, Robert and Jasper had squirmed with excitement and with visions of money and cars and fancy restaurants and vacations on the Riviera. They even rang up two friends who had indicated an interest in what they were doing, and they asked them if they would be willing to join the team, so to speak. Bru Sarnoff, their Polish friend living in New Jersey, nearly strained a groin as he leaped at the opportunity. He said he'd be in Seattle within a week even if it meant going through Cleveland on the way. "Get the women warmed up for me, boys," he said. "Tell them you've got a Special Bru flowing their way."

Cecil Embers, a Finn now living in Tucson, was a bit slower on the up-take. He said, well, he didn't really know if J.B. would go for it because she was right in the middle of a major environmental project and could probably use his support, and besides could he really earn enough to pay his expenses? He'd heard the cost of living in Seattle was 24% above that of Tucson and he suggested that maybe this initial surge in business was only a curiosity thing. And also he had a stairway to build for his house, and the Big Sidewalk Sale for K-Mart was only ten days away, plus he was thinking of trading in his old pickup truck for a new car, and

Finally Jasper persuaded him to agree to think it over and told him he'd call him in a few days to let him know how the business was going. Jasper did emphasize, though, that

it looked as though they'd really be *needing* him, that this wasn't just a whim of Robert's and his, a plan to get him out of his Lazy-Boy, away from "The Young and the Restless," and into another state. They'd been bugging him for years to visit. As a retired executive for Delta Airlines, he could fly anywhere he wanted to for free, so Jasper found any excuse having to do with money to be pretty lame. Then Jasper told him—reminded him—how good looking he was, and how charming he was, and how important he'd be to our business since all the women Jasper knew really dug him, and all that. That definitely helped. Even across thousands of miles of telephone lines he could tell Cecil was glancing in the mirror, stroking his beardless chin, and sucking in his belly.

Since Robert and Jasper had agreed—okay, they were pretty much encouraged by their wives—that they would take no more than one escort job every three days, they truly did need help if they were to maintain any sort of credibility in the trade. How could they say they were a hot business, a going concern, if they turned away one or two out of every three customers just because they didn't have the personnel to service them? (Well, maybe 'service them' isn't the best way to express that.) So they were glad Bru was coming even if he was a bit of a wild man (literally, in fact, since he was a regular participant in those notorious Wild Man Weekends so popular a few years ago, regular enough to have led a couple of them and to have earned the name "Iron Bru"). Robert and Jasper knew him well enough to know they'd need to keep their eyes on him. They thought about others to ask, just in case they needed them, and came up with a couple names, but they decided to hold off asking them, at least for a while, at least until they heard definitely from Cecil. And at least until they learned how demanding the business would be.

So Robert and Jasper were fully scheduled for the next couple of weeks, and Franny and Charlotte, who were handling the appointments, had compiled a list of twelve more women to get back to, and Bru was booking a flight. All good news. Promising. And tonight, for Jasper's first assignment, he was to take Mrs. Elizabeth Buckner to the Seattle Symphony to this piano concert. No dinner, but drinks following. They—Franny and Charlotte and Jasper—estimated four hours, but with the five-hour minimum, that would still mean \$475. In addition, she pays for the taxi and the drinks. And the tickets, of course.

Franny listened with concern and interest—her eyes as wide as their door—as Jasper told her the story of Robert and Catherine Knepper. She threw in some snide comments and wisecracks, because she couldn't resist. That was Franny. That's why she and Charlotte get along so well. It's their compatible sensibilities. She thought it interesting, for example, that Robert's first client would drop dead before paying him, and she suggested that perhaps Robert might sue the estate for his fee. Then she sort of subtly pointed out that Robert might be, well, a bit 'too much man'—her words—for this business. "How often could such things happen?" she asked. "I mean, suppose all his clients die? Or even most of them. Then what? Maybe you guys should get into a subsidiary business as morticians. Yeah, that's what you should do. Mutually beneficial businesses, right? Sort of like being a baby doctor and also owning a Baby Gap, or being a vet and running a glue factory. That's it, a mortuary. Good idea, don't you think?"

He didn't. In fact, he didn't think any of her comments on the subject were particularly cute or funny. And he didn't smile either. Much.

When Robert called later that day, he was at the golf course. He did some of his best thinking there, Jasper realized, but Jasper still thought it unusual, even a tad crass. “Are you okay?” Jasper asked him. “How are you feeling?”

“Never better, Sport. In fact, I just beat last season’s club champion. Killed him, actually, if you’ll pardon the expression. He panicked after I parred the first three holes and birdied the fourth. Panicked. Couldn’t hit a thing straight. I can’t believe it.”

“But what about, well, you know?”

“Well, let’s face it, Jasper. What can I do about it? I’m sorry it happened. She was a nice lady, from what I could tell. And I figure I’m out the money. But I’ll accept that.”

“The money? You can talk about the money? This woman is dead, man. And you were there. Jesus, Robert, aren’t you at least a bit worried that perhaps someone saw you, or that you will be somehow implicated?”

“Implicated in what? What happened? She wasn’t murdered, for god’s sake. So what do I have to worry about? I didn’t do anything wrong. Even if I’m identified as being with her at the restaurant last night, I didn’t bloody well have anything to do with her death. It just happened. Bad timing. But I’m just not worried. Okay, I’m sorry it happened. To her, I mean. That she died. But it’ll happen to all of us one time or another. Even you, Chum. It could as well have been me last night who keeled over. My adrenaline was pretty high, you know. I’m not used to going out with strange women. And I’m no younger than she is.

“And it could be you tonight. That’s what you *should* be thinking about. Not Catherine Knepper. It was just a heart attack. You know what, Jasper, know what I’ve been thinking? Don’t tell Charlotte, but I’ve been thinking maybe she was fantasizing about my coming up to her apartment and just couldn’t handle the excitement. Maybe Charlotte was right. Charlotte should know, right? Maybe she had, well, designs. Could happen. Gets herself all worked up in her mind, and then, BAM! She’s out. Poor thing. A person’s imagination can be very powerful, you know.”

Robert had a sense of humor that wouldn’t quit even when the whistle blew. And sometimes Jasper wished it would. Like now. “Right, Pal. I’m really sure that’s what caused it. Maybe you’re right, though, about leaving it. Still I feel uneasy, kind of creepy, as though we all should have done something. I can’t help it. Anyway, should I call you when I get back tonight? Should be around midnight.”

“No, thanks, Sport. Call me in the morning, okay? Charlotte and I are planning to get to bed early, if you don’t mind. But do call, of course, if something—shall we say ‘untoward’?—happens.” And he laughed his special Robert laugh. Jasper didn’t laugh. He figured Robert must have gotten over the shock. Well over it.

“See you, then.”

“Yeah. Good luck tonight.”

Good luck. Okay. Didn’t seem to be too much to ask for.

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