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THE CAT WHO COULD READ BACKWARDS

A *Jove* Book / published by arrangement with the author

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THE CAT WHO COULD READ BACKWARDS
THE CAT WHO ATE DANISH MODERN
THE CAT WHO TURNED ON AND OFF
THE CAT WHO SAW RED
THE CAT WHO PLAYED BRAHMS
THE CAT WHO PLAYED POST OFFICE
THE CAT WHO KNEW SHAKESPEARE
THE CAT WHO SNIFFED GLUE
THE CAT WHO WENT UNDERGROUND
THE CAT WHO TALKED TO GHOSTS
THE CAT WHO LIVED HIGH
THE CAT WHO KNEW A CARDINAL
THE CAT WHO MOVED A MOUNTAIN
THE CAT WHO WASN'T THERE
THE CAT WHO WENT INTO THE CLOSET
THE CAT WHO CAME TO BREAKFAST
THE CAT WHO BLEW THE WHISTLE
THE CAT WHO SAID CHEESE
THE CAT WHO TAILED A THIEF
THE CAT WHO SANG FOR THE BIRDS
THE CAT WHO SAW STARS

THE CAT WHO HAD 14 TALES
(short story collection)

THE CAT WHO ROBBED A BANK
in hardcover from G. P. Putnam's Sons

The
Cat
Who
Could
Read
Backwards

Lilian Jackson Braun



JOVE BOOKS, NEW YORK

ONE

Jim Qwilleran, whose name had confounded typesetters and proofreaders for two decades, arrived fifteen minutes early for his appointment with the managing editor of the *Daily Fluxion*.

In the reception room he picked up a copy of the early edition and studied the front page. He read the weather prediction (unseasonably warm) and the circulation figures (427,463) and the publisher's slogan snobbishly printed in Latin (*Fiat Flux*).

He read the lead story on a murder trial and the secondary lead on the gubernatorial race, in which he found two typographical errors. He noticed that the art museum had failed to get its million-dollar grant, but he skipped the details. He bypassed another feature about a kitten trapped in a drainpipe, but he read everything else: *Cop Nabs Hood in Gun Tiff. Probe Stripper Feud in Loop. Stocks Soar as Tax Talk Irks Dems.*

Qwilleran could hear familiar noises beyond a glass-paneled door—typewriters clattering, teletypes jiggling, telephones screaming. At the sound his ample pepper-and-salt moustache bristled, and he smoothed it with his knuckles. Aching for a sight of the bustle and clutter that constituted the City Room before a deadline, he walked to the door for a squint through the glass.

The sounds were authentic, but the scene—he discovered—was all wrong. The Venetian blinds were straight. The desks were tidy and unscarred. Crumpled copy paper and slashed newspapers that

should have been on the floor were collected in wire wastebaskets. As he contemplated the scene with dismay, an alien sound reached his ears—one that did not harmonize with the background music of any city rooms he had known. Then he noticed a copyboy feeding yellow pencils into a small moaning contraption. Qwilleran stared at the thing. An electric pencil sharpener! He had never thought it would come to this. It reminded him how long he had been out of touch.

Another copyboy in tennis shoes bounced out of the City Room and said, “Mr. Qwilleran? You can come in now.”

Qwilleran followed him to the cubicle where a young managing editor was waiting with a sincere handshake and a sincere smile. “So you’re Jim Qwilleran! I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Qwilleran wondered how much—and how bad. In the job résumé he had mailed to the *Daily Fluxion* his career traced a dubious curve: sports writer, police reporter, war correspondent, winner of the Publishers’ Trophy, author of a book on urban crime. Then came a succession of short-term jobs on smaller and smaller newspapers, followed by a long period of unemployment—or no jobs worth listing.

The managing editor said, “I remember your coverage of the trial that won you the Publishers’ Trophy. I was a cub reporter at the time and a great admirer of yours.”

By the man’s age and schooled manner, Qwilleran recognized him as the new breed of editor—one of the precision-honed generation who approached newspapering as a science rather than a holy cause. Qwilleran had always worked for the other kind—the old-fashioned nail-spitting crusaders.

The editor was saying, “With your background you may be disappointed in our offer. All we have for you is a desk in the Feature Department, but we’d like you to take it until something turns up cityside.”

“And until I’ve proved I can stay on the job?” Qwilleran said, looking the man in the eye. He had been through a humbling experience; now the problem was to strike the right chord of humility and confidence.

“That goes without saying. How are you getting along?”

“So far, so good. The important thing is to get back on a newspaper. I wore out my welcome in several cities before I got smart. That’s why I wanted to come here. Strange town—lively paper—new challenge. I think I can make it work.”

“Sure you can!” said the editor, squaring his jaw. “And here’s what we have in mind for you. We need an art writer.”

“An art writer!” Qwilleran winced and mentally composed a headline: *Vet Newsman Put to Pasture.*

“Know anything about art?”

Qwilleran was honest. He said, "I don't know the Venus de Milo from the Statue of Liberty."

"You're exactly what we want! The less you know, the fresher your viewpoint. Art is booming in this town, and we need to give it more coverage. Our art critic writes a column twice a week, but we want an experienced newsman to scout stories about the artists themselves. There's plenty of material. These days, as you probably know, artists are more plentiful than cats and dogs."

Qwilleran combed his moustache with his knuckles.

The editor continued in a positive vein. "You'll report to the feature editor, but you can dig up your own assignments. We'll want you to get around on the beat, meet a lot of artists, shake a few hands, make friends for the paper."

Qwilleran silently composed another headline: *Journalist Sinks to Role of Glad-hander*. But he needed the job. Necessity battled with conscience. "Well," he said, "I don't know—"

"It will be a nice clean beat, and you'll meet some decent people for a change. You've probably had your fill of mobsters and con men."

Qwilleran's twitching moustache was trying to say who-the-hell-wants-a-nice-clean-beat, but its owner maintained a diplomatic silence.

The editor consulted his watch and stood up. "Why don't you go upstairs and talk it over with Arch Riker? He can—"

"Arch Riker! What's he doing here?"

"He's feature editor. Know him?"

"We worked together in Chicago—years ago."

"Good! He'll give you all the details. And I hope you decide to join the *Flux*." The editor extended his hand and smiled a measured smile.

Qwilleran wandered out through the City Room again—past the rows of white shirts with sleeves at three-quarter mast, past the heads bent obliviously over typewriters, past the inevitable girl reporter. She was the only one who gave him an inquisitive look, and he stretched to his full six-feet-two, reined in the superfluous ten pounds that pushed at his belt buckle, and passed a preening hand over his head. Like his upper lip, it still boasted three black hairs for every one that was gray.

Upstairs he found Arch Riker presiding over a roomful of desks, typewriters and telephones—all in a single shade of pea green.

"Pretty fancy, isn't it?" Arch said apologetically. "They call it Eye-Ease Olive. Everybody has to be pampered these days. Personally, I think it looks bilious."

The Feature Department was a small edition of the City Room—without the smolder of urgency

Serenity filled the room like a mist. Everyone seemed to be ten years older than the crew in the City Room, and Arch himself was plumper and balder than he used to be.

“Jim, it’s great to see you again,” he said. “Do you still spell your name with that ridiculous W?”

“It’s a respectable Scottish spelling,” Qwilleran protested.

“And I see you haven’t got rid of that overgrown moustache.”

“It’s my only war souvenir.” The knuckles smoothed it affectionately.

“How’s your wife, Jim?”

“You mean my ex-wife?”

“Oh, I didn’t know. Sorry.”

“Let’s skip that What’s this job you’ve got for me?”

“It’s a snap. You can do a Sunday piece for us if you want to start today.”

“I haven’t said I’ll take the job yet.”

“You’ll take it,” Arch said. “It’s just right for you.”

“Considering my recent reputation, you mean?”

“Are you going to be touchy? Forget it. Quit needling yourself.”

Qwilleran parted his moustache thoughtfully.

“I suppose I could give it a try. Want me to do a trial assignment?”

“Anything you say.”

“Got any leads?”

“Yes.” Arch Riker drew a pink sheet of paper from a tickler file. “How much did the boss tell you?”

“He didn’t tell me anything,” Qwilleran said, “except that he wants human-interest stuff on artists.”

“Well, he sent up a pink memo suggesting a story on a guy called Cal Halapay.”

“So?”

“Here at the *Flux* we have a color code. A blue memo means *For Your Information*. Yellow means *Casual Suggestion*. But pink means *Jump, Man, Jump*.

~~“What’s so urgent about Cal Halapay?”~~

“Under the circumstances it might be better if you didn’t know the background. Just go out there cold, meet this Halapay person, and write something readable. You know all the tricks.”

“Where do I find him?”

“Call his office, I suppose. He’s a commercial artist and head of a successful agency, but he does oil paintings in his spare time. He paints pictures of kids. They’re very popular. Kids with curly hair and rosy cheeks. They look apoplectic, but people seem to buy them Say, do you want lunch? We could go to the Press Club.”

Qwilleran’s moustache sprang to attention. Once upon a time press clubs had been his life, his love, his hobby, his home, his inspiration.

This one was across the street from the new police headquarters, in a sooty limestone fortress with barred windows that had once been the county jail. The stone steps, bowl-shaped with age, held the evidence of an unseasonable February thaw. In the lobby the ancient woodwork gleamed red under countless coats of varnish.

“We can eat in the bar,” Arch said, “or we can go upstairs to the dining room. They’ve got tablecloths up there.”

“Let’s eat down here,” Qwilleran said.

It was dim and noisy in the bar. Conversation was high-key, with confidential undertones. Qwilleran knew it well. It meant that rumors were circulating, campaigns were being launched, and cases were getting solved unofficially over a beer and a hamburger.

They found two empty stools at the bar and were confronted by a bartender wearing a red vest and a conspiratorial smile that brimmed with inside information. Qwilleran recalled that some of his best story tips had come from Press Club bartenders.

“Scotch and water,” Arch ordered.

Qwilleran said, “Double tomato juice on the rocks.”

“Tom-tom on the rocks,” said the bartender. “You want a squeeze of lime and a shot of Worcestershire?”

“No, thanks.”

“That’s the way I fix it for my friend the mayor when he comes in here.” There was more of the authoritative smile.

“No, thanks.”

“How about a drop of Tabasco to give it a bite?”

“No, just pour it straight.”

The bartender’s mouth turned down at the corners, and Arch said to him, “This is Jim Qwilleran a new staffer. He doesn’t realize you’re an artist . . . Jim, this is Bruno. He gives his drinks a lot of personal expression.”

Behind Qwilleran an earsplitting voice said, “I’ll take less expression and a bigger shot of liquor. Hey, Bruno, make me a martini, and leave out the garbage. No olive, lemon twist, anchovy or pickled unborn tomato.”

Qwilleran turned and faced a cigar clamped between grinning teeth, its size vastly out of proportion to the slender young man who smoked it. The black cord hanging from his breast pocket was obviously attached to a light meter. He was noisy. He was cocky. He was enjoying himself. Qwilleran liked him.

“This clown,” Arch said to Qwilleran, “is Odd Bunsen from the Photo Lab . . . Odd, this is Jim Qwilleran, old friend of mine. We hope he’s joining the *Flux* staff.”

The photographer extended a quick hand. “Jim, glad to meet you. Care for a cigar?”

“I use a pipe. Thanks just the same.”

Odd studied Qwilleran’s luxuriant moustache with interest. “That shrubbery’s getting out of hand. Aren’t you afraid of brush fires?”

Arch said to Qwilleran, “That black string hanging out of Mr. Bunsen’s pocket is what we use to tie his head on. But he’s a useful man. He has more information than the reference library. Maybe he can fill you in on Cal Halapay.”

“Sure,” said the photographer. “What do you want to know? He’s got a sharp-looking wife, 34-22-32.”

“Who is this Halapay, anyway?” Qwilleran asked.

Odd Bunsen consulted his cigar smoke briefly. “Commercial artist. Runs a big ad agency. Personally worth a few million. Lives in Lost Lake Hills. Beautiful house, big studio where he paints two swimming pools. Two, did you get that? With water being so scarce, he probably fills one with bourbon.”

“Any family?”

“Two or three kids. Gorgeous wife. Halapay owns an island in the Caribbean and a ranch in Oregon and a couple of private planes. Everything money can buy. And he’s not tight with his dough. He’s a good joe.”

“What about these pictures he paints?”

“Sharp! Real sharp,” said Odd. “I’ve got one hanging in my living room. After I photographed Halapay’s wife at a charity ball last fall, he gave me a painting. Couple of kids with curly hair Well, I’ve got to go and eat now. There’s a one o’clock assignment on the board.”

Arch drained his drink and said to Qwilleran, “Talk to Halapay and size up the photo possibilities, and then we’ll try to assign Odd Bunsen. He’s our best man. Maybe he could try some color shots. It wouldn’t hurt to do this layout in color.”

“That pink memo has you straining a bit, hasn’t it?” Qwilleran said. “What’s the connection between Halapay and the *Daily Fluxion*?”

“I’m having another drink,” Arch said. “Want another tomato juice?”

Qwilleran let the question drop, but he said, “Just give me one straight answer, Arch. Why are they offering me this art beat? Me, of all people.”

“Because that’s the way newspapers do things. They assign baseball experts as drama critics and church news writers to the nightclub beat. You know that as well as I do.”

Qwilleran nodded and stroked his moustache sadly. Then he said, “What about this art critic you have on the staff? If I take the job, do I work with him? Or her, as the case may be?”

“It’s a guy,” Arch told him. “He writes critical reviews, and you’ll be doing straight reporting and personality stories. I don’t think there’ll be any conflict.”

“Does he work in our department?”

“No, he never comes to the office. He does his column at home, puts it on tape and sends it down by messenger once or twice a week. We have to transcribe it. It’s a fat nuisance.”

“What keeps him away? Doesn’t he like pea green?”

“Don’t ask me. That’s his arrangement with the front office. He has a neat contract with the *Flux*.”

“What’s the fellow like?”

“Aloof. Opinionated. Hard to get along with.”

“That’s nice. Is he young or old?”

“In between. He lives alone—with a cat, if you can picture that! A lot of people think the cat writes the column, and they may be right.”

“Is his stuff any good?”

“*He* thinks so. And the brass evidently thinks so.” Arch shifted around on the barstool while he weighed his next remark. “There’s a rumor that the *Flux* has the guy heavily insured.”

“What’s so valuable about an art critic?”

“This one’s got that certain magic that newspapers love; he’s controversial! His column pulls hundreds of letters a week. No, thousands!”

“What kind of letters?”

“Angry ones. Sugary ones. Hysterical ones. The arty readers hate his guts; the others think he’s the greatest, and they get to brawling among themselves. He manages to keep the whole city stirred up. Do you know what our last survey showed? The art page has a bigger readership than the sports section! Now you know and I know that’s an unnatural situation.”

“You must have a lot of art buffs in this town,” Qwilleran said.

“You don’t have to like art to enjoy our art column; you just have to like blood.”

“But what do they fight about?”

“You’ll find out.”

“I can understand controversy in sports and politics, but art is art, isn’t it?”

“That’s what I used to think,” said Arch. “When I took over the feature desk, I had this simpleminded notion that art was something precious—for beautiful people who had beautiful thoughts. Man, did I lose that dream in a hurry! Art has gone democratic. In this town it’s the greatest fad since canasta, and anybody can play. People buy paintings instead of swimming pools.”

Qwilleran chewed the ice in his tomato juice and pondered the mysteries of this beat the *DailyFluxion* was offering him. “By the way,” he said, “what’s the critic’s name?”

“George Bonifield Mountclemens.”

“Say that again, please?”

“George Bonifield Mountclemens—the Third!”

“That’s a stickful! Does he use all three names like that?”

“All three names, all nine syllables, all twenty-eight letters plus the numerals! Twice a week we try to fit his by-line into a standard column width. It can’t be done, except sideways. And he doesn’t permit any abbreviations, hyphens, contractions or amputations!”

Qwilleran gave Arch a close look. “You don’t like him much, do you?”

Arch shrugged. “I can take him or leave him. Actually I never see the guy. I just see the artists

who come to the office wanting to punch him in the teeth.”

“George Bonifield Mountclemens III!” Qwilleran shook his head in amazement.

“Even his name infuriates some of our readers,” Arch said. “They want to know who does he think he is.”

“Keep talking. I’m beginning to like this job. The boss said it was a nice wholesome beat, and I was afraid I’d be working with a bunch of saints.”

“Don’t let him kid you. All the artists in this town hate each other, and all the art-lovers take sides. Then everybody plays rough. It’s like football only dirtier. Name-calling, back-biting, double-crossing—” Arch slid off his barstool. “Come on, let’s get a corned beef sandwich.”

The blood of several old war-horses that flowed through Qwilleran’s veins began to churn a little faster. His moustache almost smiled. “Okay, I’ll take it,” he said. “I’ll take the job.”

TWO

It was Qwilleran's first day on the job at the *Daily Fluxion*. He moved into one of the pea green desks in the Feature Department and got himself a supply of yellow pencils. He noticed that the pea green telephone was stenciled with an official reminder: *Be Nice to People*. He tried the pea green typewriter by poking out, "The time of many murders is after midnight." Then he telephoned the *Fluxion* garage to request a staff car for the trip to Lost Lake Hills.

To reach the fashionable exurb fifteen miles beyond the city limits, Qwilleran drove through complacent suburbs and past winter-brown farms patched with snow. He had plenty of time to think about this interview with Cal Halapay, and he wondered if the Qwilleran Method would still work. In the old days he had been famous for a brotherly approach that put interviewees at ease. It was composed of two parts sympathy, two parts professional curiosity, and one part low blood pressure, and it had won confidences from old ladies, juvenile delinquents, pretty girls, college presidents and crooks.

Nevertheless, he felt qualms about the Halapay assignment. It had been a long time since he had done an interview, and artists were not his specialty. He suspected they spoke a secret language. On the other hand, Halapay was an advertising executive, and he might hand over a mimeographed release prepared by his public-relations office. Qwilleran's moustache shuddered.

It had always been the newsman's habit to compose the opening paragraph of his story in

advance. It never worked, but he did it as a limbering-up exercise. Now—on the road to Lost Lake Hills—he made a few starts at the Halapay story.

He thought he might say, “When Cal Halapay leaves his plush executive suite at the end of the day, he forgets the cutthroat competition of the advertising rat race and finds relaxation in—” No, that was trite.

He tried again. “A multimillionaire advertising man with a beautiful wife (34-22-32) and two swimming pools (one filled with champagne, according to legend) admits he lives a double life. In painting poignant portraits of children, he escapes—” No, that was sensationalism.

Qwilleran recalled his brief employment with a newsmagazine and made another attempt in the crunchy style favored by that publication. “With an ascot folded in the throatline of his custom-made Italian silk sports shirt, the handsome, graying, six-foot-two czar of an advertising empire spends his spare time—”

Qwilleran guessed that a man of Halapay’s accomplishments must be that tall, that gray, and that impressive. He would probably have a winter tan as well.

“With a blue foulard ascot accentuating his Caribbean tan—”

Lost Lake Road ended abruptly at a massive iron gate set in a fieldstone wall that looked impregnable and expensive. Qwilleran braked the car and glanced around for signs of a caretaker.

Almost immediately a recorded voice coming from the gatepost said pleasantly, “Please face the pylon at your left and announce your name clearly.”

He rolled down the car window and said, “Qwilleran from the *Daily Fluxion*.”

“Thank you,” murmured the gatepost.

The gate swung open, and the newsman drove into the estate, following a road that meandered through a tall stand of pines. It ended in a severely landscaped winter garden—all pebbles, boulders and evergreens, with arched bridges crossing small frozen ponds. In this setting, bleak but picturesque stood a rambling house. It was contemporary in style with gently curving rooflines and opaque glass walls that looked like rice paper. Qwilleran revised his opening line about the Italian sports shirt. Halapay probably knocked around his million-dollar pagoda in a silk kimono.

At the entrance door, which appeared to be carved out of ivory, Qwilleran found something that resembled a doorbell and reached toward it, but before his finger touched the button, the surrounding panel glowed with a blue-green light and chimes could be heard indoors. These were followed by the bark of a dog, or two or three. There was a sharp command, a moment of silent obedience, and a briskly opened door.

“Good morning. I’m Qwilleran from the *Daily Fluxion*,” the newsman said to a curly-haired, pink-faced youth in sweat shirt and dungarees, and before he could add, “Is your father home?” the young man said amiably, “Come in, sir. Here’s your passport.” He handed over a fuzzy snapshot of a

heavily moustached face peering anxiously from the window of a car.

“That’s me!” said Qwilleran in astonishment.

“Taken at the gate before you drove in,” the young man said with obvious delight. “It’s spooky, isn’t it? Here, let me take your topcoat. I hope you don’t mind the dogs. They’re sort of friendly. The love visitors. This one is the mother. She’s four years old. The pups are from her last litter. Do you like blue terriers?”

Qwilleran said, “I—”

“Everyone wants Yorkshires these days, but I like the Kerry Blues. They’ve got beautiful coats, haven’t they? Did you have any trouble finding the place? We have a cat, too, but she’s pregnant, and she sleeps all the time. I think it’s going to snow. I hope so. The skiing has been lousy this year—”

Qwilleran, who prided himself on conducting interviews without making notes, was taking mental inventory of the house: white marble foyer with fish pool and tropical tree probably fourteen feet high. Skylight two stories overhead. Sunken living room carpeted with something like white raccoon. Fireplace in a shiny black wall. Probably onyx. He noticed also that the boy had a hole in his sleeve and was padding around in sweat socks. The flow of chatter had not ceased.

“Would you like to sit in the living room, Mr. Qwilleran? Or do you want to go right to the studio? It’s more comfortable in the studio, if you don’t mind the smell. Some people are allergic to turpentine. Would you like a Coke or something? Allergies are funny things. I’m allergic to crustaceans. That burns me up, because I’m crazy about lobster—”

Qwilleran was waiting for a chance to say, “Is your father home?” when the young man said, “My secretary tells me you want to do a story on my paintings. Let’s go into my studio. Do you want to ask questions, or shall I just talk?”

Qwilleran gulped and said, “Frankly, I was expecting you to be a much older—”

“I’m a boy wonder,” said Halapay without smiling. “I made my first million before I was twenty-one. I’m twenty-nine now. I seem to have a genius for making money. Do you believe in genius? It’s spooky, really. Here’s a picture of me when I was married. My wife looks Oriental, doesn’t she? She’s out taking an art lesson this morning, but you’ll meet her after lunch. We designed the house to go with her looks. Would you like some coffee? I’ll stir up the housekeeper if you want coffee. Let’s face it, I look boyish and I always will. There’s a bar in the studio if you’d rather have a drink.”

The studio had a painty aroma, a good deal of clutter, and one vast wall of glass overlooking a white frozen lake. Halapay flicked a switch, and a filmy shade unfolded from the ceiling to screen out the glare. He touched another control, and doors glided open to reveal a bigger liquor supply than the Press Club had on its backbar.

Qwilleran said he preferred coffee, so Halapay pressed a button and gave the order to a brass grille mounted on the wall. He also handed Qwilleran an odd-shaped bottle from the bar.

“This is a liqueur I brought back from South America,” he said, “You can’t buy it here. Take it home with you. How do you like the view from this window? Sensational, isn’t it? That’s a man-made lake. The landscaping alone cost me half a million. Do you want a doughnut with your coffee? These are my paintings on the wall. Do you like them?”

The studio walls were covered with framed canvases—portraits of small boys and girls with curly hair and cheeks like red apples. Everywhere Qwilleran looked there were red apples.

“Pick out a painting,” said Halapay, “and take it home with you—compliments of the artist. The large ones sell for five hundred dollars. Take a big one. Do you have any kids? We have two girls. That’s their picture on the stereo cabinet. Cindy is eight and Susan is six.”

Qwilleran studied the photograph of Halapay’s daughters. Like their mother they had almond eyes and classically straight hair, and he said, “How come you paint nothing but children with curly hair and rosy cheeks?”

“You should go to the Valentine Ball on Saturday night. We’re having a great jazz combo. Do you know about the ball? It’s the annual Valentine party at the art club. We’re all going in costume representing famous lovers. Would you like to go? You don’t have to dress up, if masquerading doesn’t appeal to you. It’s twenty dollars a couple. Here, let me give you a pair of tickets.”

“Getting back to your paintings,” said Qwilleran, “I’m curious to know why you specialize in kids. Why not landscapes?”

“I think you should write up the ball in your column,” Halapay said. “It’s the biggest event of the year at the club. I’m chairman, and my wife’s very photogenic. Do you like art? Everyone in the art field will be there.”

“Including George Bonifield Mountclemens III, I suppose,” said Qwilleran, in a tone intended to be jocular.

Without any change in his expressionless delivery, Halapay said, “That fraud! If that fraud showed his face in the outer lobby of the club, they’d throw him out. I hope he isn’t a close friend of yours. I have no use for that character. He doesn’t know anything about art, but he poses as an authority, and your paper lets him crucify established artists. They’re letting him corrupt the entire atmosphere of the city. They should get smart and unload him.”

“I’m new on this beat,” said Qwilleran, as Halapay stopped for breath, “and I’m no expert—”

“Just to prove what a fraud your critic is—he builds up Zoe Lambreth as a great artist. Did you ever see her stuff? It’s a hoax. You go and see her paintings at the Lambreth Gallery, and you’ll see what I mean. No reputable gallery would accept her work, so she had to marry an art dealer. There are tricks in all trades. As for her husband, he’s nothing but a bookkeeper who got into the art racket, and do mean racket. Here comes Tom with the coffee.”

A houseboy dressed in soiled chinos and a half-buttoned shirt appeared with a tray, which he banged down on a table with a lack of grace. He gave Qwilleran an unfriendly stare.

Halapay said, “I wonder if we ought to have a sandwich with this. It’s almost lunchtime. What do you want to know about my work? Go ahead and ask some questions. Don’t you want to make notes?”

“I’d like to know,” said Qwilleran, “why you specialize in painting children.”

The artist lapsed into a thoughtful silence, his first since Qwilleran’s arrival. Then he said, “Zoe Lambreth seems to have this big connection with Mountclemens. It would be interesting to know how she manages it. I could make a few guesses—not for publication. Why don’t you dig into the situation? You might come up with a juicy exposé and get Mountclemens fired. Then you could be an critic.”

“I don’t want—” Qwilleran began.

“If your paper doesn’t clean up that mess—and clean it up soon—they’re going to start feeling it where it hurts. I wouldn’t mind a hot dog with this coffee. Do you want a hot dog?”

At five-thirty that afternoon Qwilleran fled to the warm, varnished sanctuary of the Press Club, where he had agreed to meet Arch Riker. Arch wanted a quick drink on the way home. Qwilleran wanted an explanation.

He told Bruno curtly, “Tomato juice on the rocks. No lime, no Worcestershire, no Tabasco.” To Arch he said, “Thanks, pal. Thanks for the welcome celebration.”

“What do you mean?”

“Was that an initiation gag?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about that assignment to interview Cal Halapay. Was that a practical joke? You couldn’t have been serious. The guy’s a nut.”

Arch said, “Well, you know how artists are. Individualists. What happened?”

“Nothing happened. Nothing I could possibly use in a story—and it took six hours to find it out. Halapay lives in this rambling house about the size of a junior high school, only it’s sort of Japanese. And it’s wired to do all kinds of tricks. The inside is wild. There’s one wall made of glass rods hanging like icicles. They move when you walk past and sound like a xylophone that needs tuning.”

“Well, why not? He’s got to spend his dough somehow.”

“I know, but wait till I finish. There’s all this expensive stage setting, and then out comes Cal Halapay padding around in stocking feet and wearing a sweat shirt with a big hole in the elbow. And he looks about fifteen years old.”

“Yes, I’ve heard he’s youthful-looking—for a millionaire,” Arch said.

“That’s another thing. He keeps boasting about his money and trying to force presents on you. I had to fight off cigars, liquor, a \$500 painting, a frozen turkey from his ranch in Oregon, and a Kerry Blue puppy. After lunch his wife showed up, and I was afraid his generosity would exceed the bounds of propriety. Incidentally, Mrs. Halapay is quite a dish.”

“You’re making me envious. What did you have for lunch? Ostrich tongues?”

“Hot dogs. Served by a houseboy with the charm of a gorilla.”

“You got a free lunch. What are you griping about?”

“Halapay. He won’t answer questions.”

“He refuses?” Arch asked in surprise.

“He ignores them. You can’t pin him down. He wanders from progressive jazz to primitive masks he collected in Peru to pregnant cats. I had more luck communicating with the gatepost than with the boy wonder.”

“Did you get anything at all?”

“I saw his paintings, of course, and I found out about a blast the art club is giving on Saturday night. I think I might go.”

“What did you think of his paintings?”

“They’re slightly monotonous. All those red-apple cheeks! But I made a discovery. In all those pictures of kids, Cal Halapay is painting himself. I think he’s enchanted with his own looks. Curly hair. Pink complexion.”

Arch said, “I agree this isn’t going to make the kind of story the boss wants. It sounds like *The Arabian Nights*.”

“Do we have to run a story?”

“You saw the color of the memo. Pink!”

Qwilleran massaged his moustache. After a while he said, “The only time I got a direct answer to a question was when I mentioned George Bonifield Mountclemens.”

Arch put down his drink. “What did Halapay say?”

“He exploded—in a controlled sort of way. Basically, he says Mountclemens isn’t qualified to judge art.”

“That figures. Halapay had a one-man show about a year ago, and our critic roasted him alive.”

The readers loved it. It cheered their black hearts to know that a successful money-man could be a failure at something. But it was a bitter blow to Halapay. He discovered his money could buy anything but a good art review.”

“I weep for him. What about the other newspaper? Did they criticize his work, too?”

“They don’t have a critic. Just a nice old lady reporter who covers the art openings and gushes about everything. They play it safe.”

Qwilleran said, “So Halapay’s a bad sport!”

“Yes, and you don’t know how bad,” said Arch, pulling his barstool closer to Qwilleran’s. “Ever since that episode, he’s been trying to bankrupt the *Flux*. He’s withdrawn a lot of advertising lineage and switched it over to the other paper. That hurts! Especially since he controls most of the food and fashion advertising in town. He’s even trying to turn other admen against the *Flux*. It’s serious.”

Qwilleran grimaced in disbelief. “And I’m supposed to write a story buttering up that skunk, so the advertising department can get the lineage back again?”

“Frankly, it would help. It would take the heat off.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Don’t go fastidious on me,” Arch pleaded. “Just write a folksy piece about an interesting guy who wears old clothes around the house, takes his shoes off, keeps cats and dogs, eats wieners for lunch. You know how to do it.”

“I don’t like it.”

“I’m not asking you to lie. Just be selective, that’s all. Skip the part about the glass icicles and the half-million-dollar lake and the visits in South America, and bear down on the turkey farm and his lovely wife and the adorable kiddies.”

Qwilleran brooded over it. “I suppose that’s called practical newspapering.”

“It helps pay the bills.”

“I don’t like it,” said Qwilleran, “but if you’re in that bad of a bind, I’ll see what I can do.” He raised his tomato juice glass. “Halapay or hell-to-pay!”

“Don’t be cute. I’ve had a hard day.”

“I’d like to read some of Mountclemens’ reviews. Have you got them around?”

“On file in the library,” Arch said.

“I want to see what he wrote about an artist named Zoe Lambreth. Halapay hinted at a shady connection between Mrs. Lambreth and Mountclemens. Know anything about that?”

“I just process his copy. I don’t peek under his window shades,” said Arch, and he gave Qwiller a good-night slap on the back.

THREE

Qwilleran, wearing the newer and darker of his two suits, went alone to the Valentine Ball at the art club, which—he discovered—was called the Turp and Chisel. The club had originated forty years before in the back room of a blind pig. Now it occupied the top floor of the best hotel; its membership was large and fashionable; and the impecunious Bohemians who had founded the fraternity had become old, staid and full of dollars.

Upon his arrival at the ball, Qwilleran was able to wander unrecognized about the premises of the Turp and Chisel. He found a sumptuous lounge, a dining room, and a very busy bar. The games room paneled with old barnwood, offered everything from darts to dominoes. In the ballroom, tables were draped with red and white cloths, and an orchestra played innocuous tunes.

He asked for the Halapay table and was greeted by Sandra Halapay wearing a white kimono of stiff embroidered silk. Exaggerated makeup made her almond eyes even more exotic.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t come,” she said, holding his hand long after the handshake had ended and delighting him with a rippling laugh.

“The invitation was irresistible, Mrs. Halapay,” said Qwilleran. Then he surprised himself by bending over her hand and brushing it with his moustache.

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