

MARTHA GRIMES

Author of Foul Matter

THE WAY OF ALL FISH

a novel



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THE WAY OF
ALL FISH

A Novel

Martha Grimes

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New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

“The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.”

—*Henry the Sixth, Part Two*

Not quite. Here’s to three of the good ones:
Kenneth Swezey, David Wolf, and Ellis Levine

“Reardon [is] behind his age; he sells a manuscript as if he lived in Sam Johnson’s Grub Street. But ~~our Grub Street of today is quite a different place . . . it knows what literary fare is in demand in every part of the world, its inhabitants are men of business, however seedy.~~”

—George Gissing, *New Grub Street*

INCIDENT IN THE CLOWNFISH CAFÉ

They came in, hidden in coats, hats pulled over their eyes, two stubby hoods like refugees from a George Raft film, icy-eyed and tight-lipped. From under their overcoats, they swung up Uzis hanging from shoulder holsters and sprayed the room back and forth in watery arcs. There were twenty or so customers—seven couples, two businessmen in pinstripes, a few solo diners who had been sitting, some now standing, some screaming, some crawling crablike beneath their tables.

Oddly, given all that cordite misting the air like cheap champagne, the customers didn't get shot; it was the owner's aquarium, situated between the bar and the dining area, that exploded. Big glass panels slid and slipped more like icebergs calving than glass breaking, the thirty- or forty-odd fish within pouring forth on their little tsunami of water and flopping around in the puddles on the floor. A third of them were clown fish.

All of that took four seconds.

In the next four seconds, Candy and Karl had their weapons drawn—Karl from his shoulder holster, Candy from his belt—Candy down on one knee, Karl standing. Gunfire was exchanged before the two George Rafts backed toward the door and, still firing, turned and hoofed it fast through the dark.

Candy and Karl stared at each other. "Fuck was that?" exclaimed Candy, rising from his kneeling position.

They holstered their weapons as efficiently as they'd drawn them, like the cops they were not. They checked out the customers with their usual mercurial shrewdness, labeling them for future reference (if needed): a far table, the two suits with cells now clamped to their busy ears, calling 911 or their stockbrokers; an elderly couple, she weeping, he patting her; two tables shoved together that had been surrounded by a pair of nuts probably from Brooklyn or Jersey, hyenalike in their braying laughter, all still under the table; a couple of other business types with Bluetooth devices stationed over their ears, talking to each other or their Tokyo counterparts; a blond woman, or girl, sitting alone eating spaghetti and reading something, book or magazine; a dark-haired woman with a LeSportsac bag slung over the back of her chair, who'd been talking on her Droid all the while she ate; and a party of four, girls' night out, though they'd never see girlhood again. Twenty tables, all in all, a few empty.

All of that ruin in under a minute.

The Clownfish Café was nothing special, a dark little place in a narrow street off Lexington, its cavelike look the effect of bad lighting. A few wall sconces were set in the stone walls, apparently meant to simulate a coral reef; candles, squat and fat, seeming to begrudge the room their light, were set in little iron cages with wire mesh over their tops, their flames hardly flickering, as if light were treasure they refused to give up. They might as well have been at the bottom of the sea.

Now the brightly colored fish, clown fish, tangs, angelfish of neon blue and sun-bright yellow, were drawing last breaths until the blonde who had been eating spaghetti tossed the remnants of red wine from

her glass and scooped up some water and added one of the fish to the wineglass.

Seeing this, Candy grabbed up a water pitcher, dipped up what he could of water, and bullied a clown fish into the pitcher. The other customers watched, liked it, and with that camaraderie you see only in the face of life-threatening danger, were taking up their water glasses or flinging their wineglasses free of the cheap house plonk and refilling them from water pitchers sitting at the waiters' stations. The waiters themselves ran about unhelpfully; the bartender, though, catapulted over the bar with his bar hose to slosh water around the fish. Wading through glass shards at a lot of risk to their own skin, customers and staff collected the pulsing fish and dropped them in glasses and pitchers.

It was some sight when they finished.

On every table was an array of pitchers and glasses, one or two or three, tall or short, thin or thick, and every glass swam a fish, its color brightened from beneath by a stubby candle that seemed at last to have found a purpose in life.

Even Frankie, the owner, was transfixed. Then he announced he had called the emergency aquarium people and that they were coming with a tank.

“So who the fuck you think they were?” Karl said as he and Candy made their way along the dark pavement of Lexington Avenue.

“I’m betting Joey G-C hired those guys because he didn’t like the way we were taking our time.”

“As we made clear as angel’s piss to him, that’s the way we work. So those two spot Hess in there, or they get the tip-off he’s there and go in with fucking assault weapons thinkin’ he’s at that table the other side of the fish tank, and that’s the reason they shoot up the tank?”

“Call him,” said Candy, holding tight to his small water pitcher.

Karl pulled out his cell, tapped a number from his list of contacts, and was immediately answered, as if Joey G-C had expected a call. “Fuck’s wrong with you, Joey? You hire us, and then you send your two goons to pull off a job in the middle of a crowded restaurant? No class, no style, these guys got. Walked in with Uzis and shot the place up. And did they get the mark? No, they did not; they just messed the place up including a big aquarium the least you can do is pay for. Yeah . . .”

Candy was elbowing him in the ribs, saying, “Tell him all the fish suffocated and died.”

“And there was all these endangered fish flopping on the floor, some of them you could say were nearly extinct, like you will be, Joey, you pull this shit on us again. Yeah. The job’ll get done when the job gets done. Good-bye.”

“We saw Hess leave through the side door. You’d think he knew they were coming.”

“Jesus, I’m tellin’ you, C., the book business is like rolling around fuckin’ Afghanistan on skateboard. You could get killed.”

“You got that right.”

They walked on, Karl clapping Candy on the shoulder, jostling the water pitcher as they walked along Lexington. “Good thinking, C. I got to hand it to you, you got everyone in the place rushing to save the fishes.”

The water was sliding down Candy’s Boss-jacketed arm. “Don’t give me the credit; it was that blonde dame that did that. She was the first to ditch her wine. You see her?”

“The blonde? I guess. What’d she look like?”

Candy shrugged; a little wave of water spilled onto Lexington. “I couldn’t see her face good. She had a barrette in her hair. Funny.”

“You didn’t see her face, but you saw a hair barrette?” Karl laughed. “Crazy, man.”

They walked on.

There are those girls with golden hair whom you half notice in a crowd. You see one on the outer edges of vision, in the people flooding toward you along Lex or Park or Seventh Avenue, blond head uncovered weaving through the dark ones, the caps and hats, your eye catching the blondness, but registering nothing else. Then you find, when she's passed, it's too late.

A girl you wish you'd paid attention to.

A girl you knew you should have seen head-on, not disappearing around a corner.

Such a girl was Cindy Sella.

Some of them would talk about it later and for a long time. The businessmen climbing into a cab, the girl with the LeSportsac bag, her Droid lost inside.

As if there'd been an eclipse of Apple, a sundering of Microsoft, a sirocco of swirling iPhones, BlackBerrys, Thunderbolts, Gravities, Galaxies, and all the other smartphones into the sweet hereafter; yet as if all that had never been; nobody, nobody reached for his cell once the fish were saved and swimming. They were too taken up with watching the fish swimming, dizzy-like, in the wineglasses.

Nobody had e-mailed or texted.

Nobody had sent a tweet to Twitter.

Nobody had posted on Facebook.

Nobody had taken a picture.

They were shipwrecked on the shores of their own poor powers of description, a few of them actually getting out old diaries and writing the incident down.

Yes, they talked about that incident in the Clownfish Café the night they hadn't gotten shot, told their friends, coworkers, pastors, waiters at their clubs, their partners, wives, husbands, and kids.

Their kids.

—Way cool. So where're the photos?

—Remarkably, nobody took one.

—Wow. Neanderthal.

—But see, there were these neon-bright blue and orange and green and yellow fish, see, that we scooped up and dropped in water glasses, and just imagine, imagine those colors, the water, the candlelight. Look, you can see it . . .

But the seer, seeing nothing, walked away.

NEW GRUB STREET

Cindy Sella walked along Grub Street in the West Village with a clown fish in a big Ziploc bag that Frankie had furnished when she'd asked whether she could keep her fish, the one she had saved, and take home with her. Yes, he had told her, my pleasure.

As many times as she'd eaten at the Clownfish Café, she could not remember coming across Frankie. He must have been there, somewhere behind the bar or in the kitchen or watching the fish, but she hadn't been observant enough to see him.

That was the difference between today and yesterday.

She thought about the extraordinary episode at the Clownfish as she passed the stingy little trees set in their foot-square patches meant to beautify the streets of Manhattan. They were blooming thinly, the branches mere tendrils. She didn't know what kind of trees they were. This, she thought, was shameful. If someone threatened to beat her with a poker until she named ten trees, she'd be dead on the Grub Street pavement.

Cindy had decided she was one of the least knowledgeable people she knew. And she was a writer. How did she ever manage to create a book without the most rudimentary knowledge of basic facts, such as what this little tree was right outside the door of her building? What reader would want to place himself in the hands of a writer who didn't know that?

Didn't she really know the names of ten trees? Apple cherry lemon orange peach banana. For God's sake if you were going to name fruit trees, any five-year-old could do it.

Speaking of which, there was one sitting on the stoop of the row house right next door to her building. A five-year-old named Stella something. What was she doing out here at ten at night without her mother?

"Stena!"

Oh, there she was.

"Stena!"

Mrs. Rosini yelling from the doorway. Stena, not Stella, because Mrs. Rosini was adenoidal or perhaps had a cleft palate. You see, Cindy told herself, you don't even know the difference between these physical maladies.

Stella stood up and gazed at Cindy, who said, "Hello."

Stella stuck out her tongue.

"Stena, get in here!"

When Stella turned her back, Cindy stuck out her tongue, too. Then she entered her building.

Cindy liked her apartment building. It was painted white and was only eight stories high. It was dwarfed by the new high-rise co-op across the avenue, which was all metal and glass, glass at odd angles so that the sun staggered around it, drunk with its own light, setting off knifelike reflections. The building rose unsteadily upward to thirty or forty stories. The higher it got, the more it became the sun's broken mirror.

The doorman, Mickey, caught the door as she pushed it. Mickey and his little mouse-brown terrier were standing guard. The dog was tiny enough to carry off in a spoon. With the light from one of the art deco

ish door sconces illuminating the dog, the little scene looked as if it were an illustration by Sempé. A *New Yorker* cover, surely. Sempé with his little cats and dogs.

Cindy said hello to the doorman and bent and patted the terrier. It barked once, and its stubby tail wagged frantically.

Mickey touched the worn shiny brim of his cap. His uniform jacket was not in the best of repair. "Mick, was your evening full of laughter and music?"

He couldn't just say "hello." No, he seemed to feel he had to make up these things.

"Not unless you count gunfire in a restaurant music."

Naturally, he thought she was joking and snickered and held the door for her.

In Prague or Marienbad or wherever he'd come from in Czechoslovakia, Mickey had been a dancing master—an improbably romantic occupation—and he missed it passionately, as he missed Prague (or Marienbad).

Cindy was from a small town near Topeka, Kansas, where she had been not a dancing mistress but a cashier in a Walmart, which she considered the most soul-depleting job in the universe. At night, she took classes at a community college, among them creative writing. She had discovered she could write. She wrote stories, then a novel. Naively, she had brought her novel to New York. Then she went back to Kansas and wrote another one.

After Mickey's long good night that rivaled Raymond Chandler's good-bye, Cindy stepped inside the elevator. It was always waiting as if it, too, had a tale to tell, and she rode, listening to its story of who'd gone up or come down that day before she landed at her floor.

She walked on the generic beige carpeting, along the corridor painted in Calamity White (a person named Duron with a sense of humor) to her own rent-controlled—*we will all get hammers and kill you dead*—apartment. Having a rent-controlled apartment in Manhattan was far more dangerous than owing huge sums of money to Visa or the Mafia.

Her cat, Gus, was sitting in the little entry hall, looking bored, waiting not for her but for some fresh hell. He blinked in his bored way, as if he'd been forced to listen to Justin Bieber all evening, until he saw what Cindy carried. He pounced.

"Not so fast!" She'd raised the Ziploc bag quickly out of reach. She went directly to her kitchen cupboard and took down a big glass bowl some flowers once were delivered in, filled it halfway with tepid water, and carefully slid the clown fish, together with the old water, into the new bowl.

Gus was up on the counter, his paw nearly in the bowl, until Cindy pushed him and he fell like a sack of grain.

Cindy removed an armful of books from a sturdy shelf on the living room wall that was isolated enough from the other furniture that Gus couldn't get to it. Tomorrow she would get a proper tank and maybe another fish; she could ask Frankie or someone at a fish supply place if a clown fish would be okay with a strange fish. She could always get a second clown fish, or the pink skunk was nice. Frankie had pointed it out in one of the glasses.

Only now did she take off her down vest and her shoes and sink into one of the armchairs that matched the small sofa. They were all covered in a cream twill with dark brown piping. They came as a group together with the glass and wood coffee table around which they "grouped." ("Shame to split 'em up," the salesperson had said, as if the sofa and chairs were three lost kittens.)

Finally, Cindy looked around the room painted in Calamity White. Last year, when the halls were painted, she decided to paint her apartment and asked the jack-of-all-trades manager if there was a gallon left over, and could she buy it? He said he had two gallons that he'd let her have at a discount, or better, he'd throw the paint in for free if she gave him the job.

The only reason she wanted the paint was because it was called Calamity, and looking at it now, she didn't see what had invited the name. It was just another shade of white, "A Whiter Shade of Pale" was what she thought of, and she reached over to a little stack of CDs by her Bose unit. She sorted through them and put on that song, Joe Cocker's version. She'd listened to several different singers and still didn't understand some of the words, which she counted as a plus, for it made the whole song, mysterious enough as it was, even more mysterious. They were dancers dancing a fandango, then turning cartwheels. There was a story Cindy didn't understand, involving a woman who was listening to a miller tell a tale, and her face "till the just ghostly, turned a whiter shade of pale."

Cindy didn't think she had ever written a line, not a single line, that was as good as that line. It was a startling line, the way Emily Dickinson wrote startling lines, lines that hit you like a slap across the face.

Gus was sitting beside her on the sofa, both of them looking at the fish bowl (for widely different reasons). The clown fish was proof of the events of the night. It had really happened. She thought that if she woke in the morning without her fish there, she'd put the whole thing down to dreams.

The two dark-coated men who'd marched into the café must have been Mob guys. But they shot the fish tank, not the other two (probably Mob guys also) eating in the restaurant. The ones who'd pulled guns and probably saved the lives of the other diners. The first two hadn't been aiming at the customers, either.

"They tried to murder the fish," she said to Gus, who kept his eyes on the bowl.

Did anyone call the police? No cops came. Of course, no one was shot, and they were all busy saving the fish. There'd been around thirty fish and twenty diners; some had saved more than one.

Frankie was too busy calling the emergency fish service to call the police. And when the fish were safely swimming in their separate goblet seas, Frankie had hurried around the room hugging and shaking hands and talking so fast in Italian or Spanish that it should have crippled his tongue.

Then it struck Cindy that she hadn't the faintest notion, the least idea, nor did anyone else in the Clownfish Café, what had been happening. If they'd all started turning cartwheels on the floor while the ceiling flew away, it couldn't have been stranger. A calamitous evening: Like the paint, like the song, it had made no sense.

Only one fish had gone missing: an albino clown fish. "Ghost fish," Frankie called it. "My poor ghost fish."

Had it been swept away by the water into some dark corner where it had lain, flopping back and forth, suffocating, turning even ghostlier, turning a whiter shade of pale?

That night she dreamed she was Dorothy (without pigtails), and in place of the dog, Toto, stood Gus.

They were in their small house when the tornado came waltzing—literally—into Kansas, "Tales from the Vienna Woods" playing in the background.

Everything was blowing to kingdom come; the winds were sawing and sawing away on the reedy marsh. But where had there ever been a marsh in Kansas? Even in dreams, she couldn't stop editing. This marsh had ducks bobbing and rising and flying and guns going off, missing everything they aimed at. The little house pinwheeled, floor to ceiling, ceiling to floor, and they went head over heels with it, doing cartwheels in the sky.

Awake, Cindy smiled and watched the ceiling fly away.

Really awake this time, she saw the ceiling was (sadly) intact. Gus wasn't on the bed, so he was out there in—

She rolled out of bed and ran to the living room.

The bowl was still on its shelf, clown fish intact. Gus was lying below it with his paws encircling his chest.

watching.

~~She went back to the bedroom and drew on her blue chenille bathrobe and trailed its sash into the kitchen.~~

On the white (well, white-ish, though no calamity) Formica counter lay yesterday's mail, topped by a letter from her lawyers telling her more about her crazy ex-agent's unfolding plot, the fifty-page complaint he had filed with the New York state court, his convoluted plan to get his commission out of her for a book he hadn't agented. She'd fired him years before.

She put water and Dunkin' Donuts regular coffee into her Mr. Coffee machine and switched it on. She shoved the letter aside, not wanting to know what act this was in L. Bass Hess's play, though really, it had never gotten beyond Act One, had it? It had never really gotten out of rehearsals. The same old stuff was sorted through and moved around and mulled, argued, intrigued over.

Finally, Mr. Coffee dispensed his brew, and she filled one of her thick white mugs. This she took into the living room to join Gus. She sat down on the sofa as she had the night before. But she found herself thinking about the L. Bass Hess charade, and she would have to short-circuit such thinking. How she dealt with things she didn't want to think about was either to get down Proust and read a few pages, or allow herself a definite, limited time period in which to think. This morning she decided on sixty—no, thirty—thirty seconds. She watched the second hand on her watch as she thought:

Awful person, awful agent control freak, sociopath—perhaps psychopath?—no, sociopath because (she struck "because," reminding herself not to use unnecessary words) cold as Alaska—thirty seconds! Stop!

She drank her coffee and wondered if what she'd just done was a kind of anti-obsession. Was it like, say, Lady Macbeth allowing herself only one hand-wash?

Finished thinking about L. Bass Hess, she rested her eyes on the clown fish, who was darting (as well as could be darted) back and forth in his little water world. She thought over the problem of getting him another fish or two for company. There shouldn't be a problem if it were another clown fish, surely? What would be nice would be to get Frankie to sell her another of his fish, but she was pretty sure he wouldn't do it. It would be nicer for her fish if the new fish were familiar to him.

She sat up. She knew how to get another fish from Frankie!

Am I gonna have to put up with you obsessing about that goddamn fish?” Karl was reading the arts section of the *Times*. He rattled the page just to get Candy away from C.F. That was the name Candy had settled on for his rescued fish—C.F. Karl had said helpfully that it was the dumbest name he’d ever heard. Candy had said, “No kidding. What fish names have you heard?”

They’d been arguing about the fish not being a clown fish, anyway. Karl had snapped open a colorful book he’d picked up that morning on tropical fish. “It’s like one of these symphon-whatever. It’s completely different.”

Candy insisted it was striped, so what?

“For God’s sake, it’s red squiggles. It don’t look anything like a clown fish.”

The fish tank had been purchased at midnight from a “colleague” with a warehouse. The tank was big. The colleague had tossed in a bag of pinkish stones, some gravel, some coral, other junk like a miniature deep-sea diver. It had taken upward of an hour getting back to East Houston and their own warehouse; the upper spaces of this one, however, had been converted into two very large apartments. The makeover for each floor had been one and a half mill. The interior designer, Lenny Babbo, was awed by the space he had to work in and the money he had to work with.

“You’re feeding it too much, anyway,” said Karl. “Frankie would be horrified.” Karl had given up on the fish book and was reading a review of a new book.

Candy was watching his fish, considering a new name. “You think maybe we ought to go to Frankie’s, see how he’s doing? After last night,” he ended vaguely.

“Dunno. Listen to this: It’s a review of a book by some asshole writer calls herself Angel. What is that one-name shit? Only ones deserve that are Elvis and Frank.”

“Frank Giacomo?”

“Sinatra, fuck’s sake.”

“Yeah. Ol’ Blue Eyes. So how about Madonna?”

Karl shook his head. “No. See, that’s a different kind of thing. She was always Madonna. Who is she? Madonna Jones? No, always one name. She didn’t *earn* the right to use just one name. Not like Elvis. He was Elvis Presley before he got famous. He earned that one-name treatment. Like Sinatra.” He tossed the paper down. “What the hell. The book looks like a real freak job.” He slid down on Candy’s white leather sofa. “How in hell does this twat get a publisher?”

Barnes & Noble had become one of their main hangouts ever since Candy and Karl had a run-in with Mackenzie-Haack’s publisher, Bobby Mackenzie, who’d come up with the novel scheme of getting rid of the writer named Ned Isaly by hiring a couple of contract killers. To do Bobby the little credit he deserved, the idea did not originate with him but with mega-bestselling author Paul Giverney, whom the avaricious Bobby Mackenzie wanted to publish, and who would agree only if Ned Isaly were terminated. Nobody knew what Paul wanted him gone, including the hit men. It was fortunate that Candy and Karl had “standards,” the chief one being that they always got to know the mark before they offed him, insisting that they be the on-

to decide whether the guy goes or stays. Two years ago the “guy” had been an award-winning writer named Ned Isaly. Now the guy was New York agent L. Bass Hess, whom they had been following around Manhattan for a couple of weeks.

Books had added a new dimension to their lives. Books were to die for. Literally. They were things you got killed over. Candy and Karl knew New York, licit and illicit, better than half the Metropolitan police and as well as the other half. How would they ever have guessed the publishing world was so shot through with acrimony that they’d just as soon kill you as publish you?

Their experience up to the time Danny Zito had thrown this job at them was Danny Zito himself. Danny had rushed headlong into hell by writing a tell-all (“meaning tell-some,” Karl had said) book about the Bransoni family. (“Danny can write?” Leo Bransoni had snickered. “Danny can’t even fucking spell.” “Probably he had a ghost,” Candy had said. “Probably he’ll *be* a ghost inside forty-eight hours,” Leo had answered.)

Danny had gone into the Witness Protection Program by hiding in Chelsea. WITSEC had strongly advised against it. “In plain sight,” Danny had told them. He wrote books and painted. There were so many galleries in Chelsea now.

Joey Giancarlo, or Joey G-C, as people called him, had asked Candy and Karl, three weeks before, to do a hit on a guy named L. Bass Hess, of the Hess Literary Agency over on Broadway.

“My son, Fabio, he’s got this book he wrote. It’s a novel about Chicago in the thirties, a time with which he got no speakin’ acquaintance, but it’s fiction, so what the hey?” Joey shrugged shoulders so meaty that his neck disappeared into them. “So Fab, he talks to Danny Zito—”

“Danny’s in WITSEC. How’s Fabio get to talk to him?”

Another shrug. “Who cares. Danny got his book published—”

Karl laughed. “Which is why he’s in Witness Protection.”

Joey ignored this. “So Fab figures Danny can give him some pointers who to publish the book, but Danny says, ‘No, first you get an agent.’ ‘What the hey?’ says Fab, he’s like, ‘Agent?’ ‘The agent sells the book,’ says Danny, ‘the writer don’t.’ Danny gives him the name of this guy Hess. Well, Fabio goes all the way into Manhattan down to Broadway—”

The present conference was taking place behind the eight-foot stone wall surrounding a five-acre estate on the Jersey shore.

“—and the guy won’t see him. Won’t see him.” Joey removed the Cuban cigar from his mouth and spat out a tiny piece of tobacco as if spitting in the eye of L. Bass Hess. He continued: “This bleach-head old hick that’s sittin’ in the outer office behind a counter says for him to leave his manuscript with her and they’d get back to him. Well, Fabio don’t much like leavin’ it, but he does. And does this asshole agent get back to him? A month, a friggin’ month, goes by until the ho calls, says”—here Joey changed his voice, upping several decibels—“‘Mr. Hess says the manuscript is not marketable in its present form. Sorry.’” Joey shook his head slowly again and again. “Let me tell you, I never seen Fabio so down. You know the kid—”

They did, a real jerk.

“—always the smile, always the sunny side showin’, Fabio. A regular sunset kinda guy.”

Key West has sunsets, maybe Santa Fe, but not Fabio. Fabio dragged his bad mood around like a cart horse pulling life’s bleak side.

His cigar gone cold, Joey struck a match on his thumbnail and said out of the corner of his mouth, “It’s a personal insult to the family. Get him.”

“You know the way we work, Joey: Follow the mark around, get to know him, see how he goes about

things—”

“Christ sakes, Karl, I just told you how the sumbitch goes about things . . . Yeah, yeah, okay, I know you got conditions. But you’re the best, so get on it.” Joey removed a fat envelope from his inside pocket.

They refused it. “No money up front, Joey. Only if we take the job.”

Joey G-C rolled his eyes. “You guys.”

From his office promptly at twelve-thirty, L. Bass Hess ventured forth for lunch every day at 21 or the Gramercy Tavern; these were the restaurants where he took clients or met up with editors or other publishing people. During the week, he stayed at his pied-à-terre on the Upper East Side and ventured downtown for dinner at Bhojan on Lexington (which surprised Candy and Karl, Hess eating Indian food but then it was cheap, too). But Bhojan was closed for a few days, and that was when he decided to go to the Clownfish Café. Again, much to Karl and Candy’s surprise.

Beside the sofa where Karl sat was a stack of magazines, mostly trade, like *Publishers Weekly*, *Booklist*, *Kirkus*. They liked to keep up, but they got behind sometimes. Karl had picked up a several-weeks-old *Publishers Weekly* off the top of the pile and was leafing through it.

Candy had picked up a couple of *National Geographics* early that morning in an ancient coffee shop that she had stashed them. Candy had been reading aloud from the one that had a photograph of coral reefs on its cover until Karl told him to shut up, just let him drink his coffee.

They both thought e-books were terrible. They thought the Kindle was cretinous; you read, you want to read a book, not a slab of hardware. Hardware was something that shot bullets.

Candy had managed to get out of P.S. 111 with body and brain intact, but with no books in it, as it were. Karl, on the other hand, had gone to college and read Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald before that fracas with the dean of students. He was only a month short of graduating (a fact that stunned Candy, who had never known anyone within light-years of finishing any school) when he’d signed on to do a job on the dean. Nothing serious, no wet work, just a warning, a little shin-busting, when a couple of guys had stepped out from the shadows—another dean, a phys ed department head—*guys who were teaching our youths, can you believe it, stepped up with guns, teachers with guns!, and gave me no choice, right?*

Candy had never been clear on the details, like who was paying Karl or why. The dean of arts and sciences landed in a heap, and Karl had taken off from the college, from the town, with nothing but his .38 his bolt-action Browning, and a copy of *The Great Gatsby*.

“Hey, C,” said Karl from the couch, “check this out: This friggin’ agent we been following around. The asshole’s suing one of his former clients for a commission on a book the writer says he had nothing to do with; says she had a new agent that worked on it.” Karl put down the magazine, thinking. “Maybe it’s time we did a face-to-face with Hess.” They always did a face-to-face before they decided if the mark was worth the bullet. Karl swung his legs off the sofa.

“You mean, like, now?”

Karl was getting into his “I Am Not Available” Arfango loafers. “Yeah, now.”

“Bass Hess,” said Candy. “Sounds like a snake hiss.”

They had tracked L. Bass Hess’s comings and goings for two weeks, and a bigger tightass they had never come across. It was the first time they’d considered turning down a job because the mark was so boring, they didn’t want to be around him.

They could have offed this guy in their sleep; he was as routinized as a day with Martha Stewart (in or out of jail). They could have stopped in front of Saks and fired over their shoulders at Fifty-first and Fifth and dropped Hess on the pavement in front of St. Patrick's as long as they did it at precisely 5:55 on Wednesday, when, for some reason, he went to church. The same routine day after day, the only difference being in the people he met for lunch at the Gramercy Tavern or 21 or a new French place that had a lot of buzz going, named Arles, in SoHo. At these places, he'd meet up with clients or editors or fellow agents.

Since Candy and Karl knew in advance he'd be at one of those restaurants, they'd call and ask if he'd arrived yet. After finding out which one he was going to, they'd go there and get a table near his. They ordered whiskies and steaks, rare, and didn't bother with the menu. The stuff on it was hardly pronounceable, much less edible. They did not want the soup de mer, the baby-greens salad, the ahi tuna (which Karl said sounded like a fish sneezing), the charcuterie pâté. They liked to watch plates being served—the saucy designs, the bright colors, the small broccoli trees, the canoes of romaine lettuce—boats that should be out on a lake somewhere, the flutes, the volutes, the drifts, the sprinkles. What the fuck was this stuff doing on a fork? It should have been on a runway. They should make plates with little legs that could walk, turn, spin, hobble back to the kitchen.

They liked the Gramercy Tavern best. They liked its straightforward fish dishes (even though the chef did like to dress up the cod and halibut with superfluous bits of this and that). They liked to listen to Hess ordering the striped bass. That gave them a kick. Hess always ate a piece of some kind of fish with a boiled potato and green peas or beans. Never strayed into the fried or the sauced. But that was almost noneating. No dessert, no booze. Drank iced tea. No wonder he was skinny as a subway rail. Candy and Karl were always happy when Hess's writer or editor guest ordered up a double martini, rocks, three olives; then followed by food leaking butter and oil, designed back in the kitchen by some architect; then went for a bottle of Sancerre and several bolts of ice cream for dessert.

Hess really had to pay up the snout for that one. Candy and Karl enjoyed tuning in to the conversation behind them because they liked gossip about the publishing industry. As when an editor said, "The contract is lousy. If they can't up the payout, he'll walk." Or "I'm tired of being held up by these guys."

"Okay, so he doesn't do it. We can sign Bobby Three Winds." "Bobby Three Winds?" "Why not? Remember that Vegas job? Steve Wynn and the Bellagio?" "It was perfect." "Gorgeous. The guy never misses."

It sounded exactly like listening to Joey G-C putting out a contract. The shooter he mostly wanted was a short muscle-bound guy named Ralph Double-Shoes Bono. Ralph had his shoes specially made to be another inch or so. The other guys started calling him "Double-Shoes," and the name stuck.

"Who the hell is Bobby Three Winds?" Karl asked afterward.

"He's that writer that's part Sioux or Cherokee. Some Indian."

"Native American is what you say," said Karl.

"Okay, Native American Indian. He's some hotshot travel writer."

Karl snickered. "Such acrimony in publishing."

"Very hostile people."

So they knew their way around L. Bass Hess and the route to his office near Broadway and Twenty-third. They could have found it blindfolded.

That was where they went.

Cindy was standing on a street in Sunset Park in Brooklyn in front of a desiccated-looking building, more like a warehouse than any sort of residence, doubting her judgment in answering the ad on Craigslist for an albino clown fish. “A hundred,” the seller had said.

She had agreed and said she’d be there in an hour or a little more. She wasn’t sure how long it would take to get there. He’d told her to take the N train, so she’d walked over to Washington Square.

She was glad at least that it wasn’t dark, although it was looking pretty dusky. Still, it was only midafternoon, probably a downtime for killers, drug drops, joyriders, carjackers, rapists, kid—

“Yeah?”

The single word seemed to explode through the opening of the door, and she was jolted from her fantasy. The heavy door had swung inward with a clatter as if nuts and bolts were falling out of its hinges.

She took in the flat face of the man, youngish, the ripped jeans, the T-shirt with lightning bolts and knives and other ephemera of death. This did nothing for her confidence.

When her response was slow in coming, he said it again—“Yeah?”—and looked her up and down, though in an oddly nonsexual way.

Her hand went to her throat. “Oh, I’m sorry, I must have the wrong—” She was backing off.

“Hey. You’re the lady called about the fish. I’m Monty. Come on in, come in.” He turned back into the hall and drew his arm in an arc like a discus thrower, gesturing for her to follow.

Too late now. She followed him down a narrow hall, dully carpeted, dully painted, the surface webbed with fine cracks.

He went into a room where there were three other men—or boys? they could have been anywhere from eighteen to thirty-eight—all looking glassy-eyed and vaguely smiling from smoking (she guessed) the same thing the fish owner, Monty, was. They, too, wore torn jeans, but less threatening T-shirts. One said “Now You See It.” The other T-shirt sported a smiling alligator.

The three of them squinted and nodded and smoked, sitting on a couple of dilapidated daybeds. One had wrapped himself in an Indian blanket. The other two roused themselves a little, seeing a stranger, and one of them moved his genitals from one side to another with a look of profound accommodation that had nothing to do with her.

Monty introduced them: Molloy, Graeme, and Bub. Bub was the one in the blanket.

They seemed to regard her as just one of the guys, so she stopped thinking murder and rape; yet she felt a little hurt that no one seemed to give a damn that this young blond woman had stepped into a setup that couldn’t have been more conducive to some sexual attack if it had been choreographed by Bob Fosse or whoever did *West Side Story*.

Her host had retreated into a darker region and was now back. “Here we go! Here’s your fish. Albino clown fish.” The little fish was in an oversize Ziploc bag. “Cute li’l fucker, ain’t he?”

“Is it the same as a ghost clown fish?” She caught movement out of the corner of her eye, but nothing there seemed directed at her.

“You like fish?” One of them, Molloy, had spoken in a dreamy way, through a haze of smoke. Was it real question? Was it a dream question? His T-shirt was the one with the friendly alligator. He wore headband with *aquaria* printed on it in bouncy letters.

“Yes,” she said to him. Then again to the owner, “But is it a ghost fish?”

“Well, yeah, I guess.”

“It does look, well, not quite opaque.”

They all looked at her with varying degrees of frown.

“Well, I mean, kind of transparent orange and not quite white.” The ghost, the spirit of a clown fish, or clown fish slowly leaving. She smiled.

He held up the bag and squinted as at a too bright sun. “Yeah, yeah.” He didn’t know anything about it.

Molloy of the alligator T-shirt said, “It’s an albino, yeah, a ghost fish, all right. Albino clown fish.” He spoke with some authority. Cindy wondered if *Aquaria* was a shop that sold fish and fish tanks and so forth. She wondered if he worked there.

“See?” Monty brushed his brown hair off his forehead and looked at her out of innocent eyes. He looked six years old.

That was what seemed familiar to her, what she recognized from childhood: her little brother in an orchard shed out back with three or four of his friends. It was their club. It could have been them transplanted from the Kansas fields right here and now in Brooklyn. It made her so sad, she was afraid she’d cry if she didn’t get out.

She opened her bag and brought out the two fifties she’d folded into one of the little pockets inside. “A hundred, right?”

“A hundred? A hundred for that there little bitty fish? Monty, you cheatin’ this gal?” This came from the one she thought was Graeme. The introductions had been hastily performed.

Cindy held up her hand. “No. He isn’t. This kind of clown fish sells for even more some places.” She didn’t know whether it did or didn’t. “It’s a fair price.”

Monty went back to smiling at the money she handed over. He set it on a table with a glass to hold it down, as if the winds were roaming.

Cindy adjusted her shoulder bag and smiled at them and said good-bye. She held up the bag as if giving the fish its chance to say good-bye.

They all nodded or grinned through the smoke scrim, held up their hands in a powwow fashion. Indian style around a campfire.

Now she wished she’d brought a lot more, for she had a sudden yearning to enlist their help. *If I pay you five hundred, would you go to Manhattan and beat up some people for me? Or even a thousand? I’d really appreciate it.*

They would put their heads together. *Yeah, okay. Where we find this dude?*

Dudes. More than one dude. There are lawyers and a literary agent.

Hell, yeah. They’d high-five all around.

Then she would tell them how to find them—her lawyer, Wally Hale, and the Mackenzie-Haack counsel and L. Bass Hess—put the five hundred on the table with a glass to keep it down, and leave before the ceiling flew away.

She did not want to walk to the Thirty-sixth Street station carrying a fish in water. She found a cab on the corner and, on the long drive back to Grub Street, sat in a peaceful frame of mind, wondering about the world Monty and his friends inhabited.

She sat thinking about them, riding back to Manhattan with the watery bag on her lap.

There was no one in the outer office of the Hess Literary Agency, so Candy and Karl just walked unannounced (and uninvited).

Candy attested to surprise that the outer door wasn't dead-bolted and security-locked. This was, after all, New York.

There was a curved desk at the other end of the room for the secretary or receptionist, neither of whom was present. The two long walls held shelves of books—lots of books. Prominently displayed were books and photographs, a couple almost poster-sized, the subjects presumably L. Bass Hess's clients. These big pictures appeared on tiers to the left and right of the door.

The most prominent was a famous High Desert writer named Creek Dawson, in a ten-gallon hat and neckerchief with a rope slung over his shoulder, a toothpick in his mouth, and a stable full of horses visible behind him. He had a lined, weathered face and eyes squeezed tight to blue slits.

"Ever read him?"

"Hell, no. I like Louis L'Amour. He lived in a real place. Durango."

"This desert ain't a real place?"

"It's California, C. California's California. Hey, look." Karl indicated a photo of a dark-haired, youngish man posed with half-shut eyes and one arm wrapped like a scarf about his neck, a pose meant to look smoldering. "Dwight Staines. Remember, the guy was in Pittsburgh same time we were?"

"Mr. Idiot, yeah. Hess and old Dwight, that sounds like a good match. Pair of pricks."

Beside Creek Dawson was affixed a photo of Mia Pennyroyale, wearing gold hoop earrings you could have rolled down Seventh Avenue if you had a stick. She wrote things called romans à clef.

Then there was a bronzed-god-like guy with the snappy name of Harve Hanks who wrote a series about an L.A. private eye "in the great tradition of Raymond Chandler."

"Yeah, sure," said Karl. "Only guy that writes in the great tradition of Raymond Chandler is Raymond Chandler."

Candy snorted. Karl read a lot more, but Candy was catching up.

Fifth and last was a girl or woman, hard to say, with burnished-to-gold hair that looked like she'd cut herself, raggedy as it was, and calm gray eyes and an unsmiling mouth. A kind of silent face.

Candy's mouth dropped. He punched Karl on the arm, saying, "Christ, K., it's her, the girl in the Clownfish."

"Huh?" Karl leaned closer. "She's kinda cute."

"It's her, one that started saving the fish. Same girl!"

Karl was reading the brief text. "Jesus." He turned to look at Candy. "This is Cindy Sella. This"—he flung his thumb over his shoulder at the photo—"is Cindy Sella, for fuck's sake!"

It was then that the receptionist/secretary breezed in from a side door and fitted herself behind her desk. "Oh!" she said. "So sorry. Yes, gentlemen, you're his three o'clock." She checked her watch. "You're twenty minutes early, but I think Mr. Hess can see you." Her smile was near beatific.

Karl was about to respond that they weren't his anything, they didn't have an appointment, but Candy said to him, "Gift horse. Mouth."

"Oh, right." Karl smiled broadly.

L. Bass Hess's receptionist raised a gentle hand, letting them know they needn't inconvenience themselves with a response. She pressed a button. A staticky reply came through, and she answered, "Mr. Hale and Mr. Reeves are here." More static.

Karl saw the nameplate as they passed her desk, which told them she was cutely called Stephie, although she was well into her sixties.

The office was leather, glass, and books, much the same as the reception room. It was inhabited by a couple of leather sofas face-to-face across another magazine-toting coffee table; a couple of chairs pulled up to Hess's desk; and the desk itself, holding neat stacks of books and folders and writing tablets.

And inhabited by Hess himself, a man with insanely red hair that looped and whirled around his head, untamable. His eyes were such a watery light brown that they looked washed away, and his face was haggard and hawklike. He wore a wide-striped shirt and a bow tie, and the jacket hitched on the back of his chair with a dark Donegal tweed that did not go with the tie, the shirt, or the hair. A man of many parts, and none of them fit.

He stood behind the desk as if he couldn't bear to waste a minute of his time by sitting down. Instead of greeting them with a handshake and hello, Hess darted a look from Candy to Karl and back. "Who's Hale and who's Reeves?"

Candy and Karl looked at each other, Candy making a gesture that said "you first." Karl said, "I'm Hale." Candy said with a wide smile, "That makes me Reeves, then."

Hess didn't wait for confirmation, nor did he invite them to have a seat. He bent over a folder on his desk, slowly fingering its pages. He wet his forefinger to help with this task.

Candy thought that was kind of cute—that is, for Hess being otherwise a perfect jerk. No manners at all, probably treated everybody but his high-flying clients like scumbags.

"I'm adding this to the complaint. She should certainly want to settle."

Since they had no idea what he was talking about, they simply looked thoughtfully at different fixtures in the room. They shrugged, then muttered versions of "yes," "maybe," and "who knows?"

Candy wondered where the Bass came from. On the wall beside the window that looked out over Broadway, there was a big stuffed fish that could have been a bass. Interesting name, wasted on this guy. And what did the L. stand for?

"Right. Now, about this complaint—"

Hess's eyes narrowed. "Duke Borax told you, didn't he?"

Duke Borax. Candy mentally sorted through the names of Joey G-C's outfit, but he didn't come up with anybody as insecure as a guy who would call himself Duke.

"Of course, of course," said Karl. "Only, you know, Borax, he ain—he isn't always a stickler for details."

"He's one of the partners at your law firm, for God's sake. Of *course* he's a stickler for details. Just what don't you understand?" The eyes narrowed to even thinner slits.

Candy heard the suspicion in his voice and said, "We understand. It's just that Mr. Hale here likes things straight from the horse's mouth." He smiled.

The horse's mouth didn't exactly smile back. It was more of a crumple of the lips, up and down in a wavy line, as if the mouth couldn't decide on a course of action. It was a Charlie Brown mouth without the Charlie Brown charm. Bass Hess hovered over the file, leaning on it as if it were about to come alive beneath his hands. "Let's be clear about one thing: I've got the papers on her. You should be urging her to settle."

As two circles flushed in Hess's cheeks, Karl said, "Understood." He reached out for the folder that Hess

had clamped to his chest like a mother reluctant to give up her child to the baby minder. Then he unclenched and handed the folder over. “Otherwise, her career will be in ruins.”

Candy was used to snakes, but the hiss actually made him retreat a step.

With a few more assurances of confidentiality, they left.

Just as they set foot outside the Hess Agency door, they glanced down the hall to see the elevator door open and two guys in suits emerge. The suits looked as if they shopped together to make sure their clothes complemented one another. Both in pinstripes, one gray, one navy, they stood for a moment conferring. The taller and handsomer of the two reminded Candy of somebody, but he couldn't place him.

“If that's the three o'clock appointment, we better hit that exit.” Karl nodded toward the red sign on their side of the elevators. “Hess is going to go bananas. He'll call security.”

The two who had just exited the elevator were walking slowly, turned toward each other, hands moving. To Candy they looked, in their synchronized movements, like a couple of tap dancers. Then he realized who the tall one reminded him of: Richard Gere in *Chicago*.

They reached the exit before Hale and Reeves (if that was who they were) passed them. It was only for a moment, but they were used to running down stairs. They reached the lobby in two minutes flat and left the building.

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