

PAUL DI FILIPPO

THE SHORT ASHY AFTERLIFE OF HIRAM P. DOTTLER

THE HEAD OF THE SPIKE BITES deep into the hard substance of my body, and the man's blunt teeth grip the lower part of my anatomy with compulsive, fearful force. The spike supports me, while my body in turn supports the man's entire weight. He's a small, dumpy fellow, to be sure, but still the strain on me is considerable. Relying thus on a small piece of rusty hardware for our lives, both of us dangle over five stories of empty space, the cobbled street far below us a rain-slick bumpy surface lit by a few dim streetlights casting golden pools of luminance.

My body feels as if it's going to come apart at any moment. For the first time in this new form I feel true pain. Even the birthing blades, the planes and chisels and sandpaper, and the subsequent daily flames applied to my skin offered no sensations such as this.

Oh my goodness, I think wildly, how did I ever come to such a bizarre fate?

And just then the gunshot rings out.

My name is Hiram P. Dottle, and once upon a time I enjoyed a quiet easy life, full of cerebral and sensual pleasures of a mild nature. No guns or danger intruded then into my reclusive private sphere. But all of that security and somnolence ended with the arrival of Sparky Flint.

But I rush ahead of my story. More of this temptress soon enough.

Although not born to great wealth, at the time my tale commences I was living comfortably on a guaranteed income, having retired in early middle age from my career as an accountant. I owed my good fortune to the demise of an elderly and well-off maiden aunt in Crescent City: Denise K. Sinkel, formerly of the Massachusetts Sinkels. Her will left everything to "my nephew, Hiram, the only one who always remembered his lonely old aunt at Christmas."

This statement was accurate, even down to poor Aunt Denise's famous self-pity. My contribution to Aunt Denise's good cheer was, I fear, minimal, and offered me as much pleasure as it did her. I always saw to it that Aunt Denise's house was graced with several handmade wreaths and garlands, as well as a few poinsettia plants during the holidays. Riding the bus myself from Central City to its urban neighbor, I kept careful watch over the homemade wreaths and personally cultivated plants resting securely in overhead stowage, never relaxing my vigilance until the cabbie deposited me safely at Aunt Denise's.

Horticulture and flower arranging, you see, were my hobbies. You'd probably never guess it from looking at me, but accounting was never my real love, merely a safe and reliable means of earning my income.

Mother and Father both insisted that I turn my adult hand to some low-risk mode of employment promising a small if steady return. So I reluctantly discarded my typical childhood fascination with such icons of daring exploration as Lowell Thomas, Frank Buck and Richard Halliburton -- why, today I can hardly believe the youthful dreams I had, involving travel to exotic climes and battle with wild animals and savage natives! -- and when I reached my early maturity I enrolled at Keating's School of Accountancy. Thirty years later Mother and Father had long ago passed away, deeding me the ancestral home where I still occupied my boyhood room. The property consisted of a well-kept but fading Victorian manse set on five acres of land in a neighborhood rather fallen, if you'll permit the pun, to seed. This surprising legacy descended on an asocial bachelor who in the morning mirror seemed undressed without his green celluloid eyeshade and sleeve garters. Having perused enough ledgers and balance sheets to build a tower to the Moon -- had I cared to indulge in such fanciful behavior -- I was more than ready to put my career behind and plunge more deeply into my passions.

The redeeming moments in what I confess most people would categorize as a boring life occurred in my garden. In the suburbs of Central City, my property, through diligent and loving application, had been ultimately turned into a miniature Versailles, replete with espaliers, pollarded aisles and substantial fountains. I venture to say that not even the immaculately landscaped grounds of Idlewhile Cemetery (I am naturally excluding that spooky and mysteriously overgrown portion in the northwest corner) could

compete on a foot-by-foot basis with my land. Why, the neighborhood children, dirty urchins all, frequently congregated at my fence to gape in awe. At least I assumed their emotions were respectful, although several times I thought to detect an out-thrust tongue swiftly withdrawn when I turned to face them. No matter, though, for I was content.

After Aunt Denise's independence-granting demise, I enjoyed four whole luxurious years of complete devotion to gardening. My joyful days were filled with propagating and repotting, grafting and staking, double-digging and turf-laying. I managed the funds that had so unexpectedly become mine with care and wisdom, investing them in U.S. Treasury Bonds at a solid one-and-a-half percent annual return.

Combined with my own personal savings, this interest income satisfied all my simple needs. Although I admit I did once boldly dip into some of the capital to secure a new wheelbarrow, a toolshed, and some fine handwrought British tools.

Including, in a magnificent example of life's irony, the well-honed axe that killed me.

You will have gathered by my small clues that an unexpected climacteric occurred in my life shortly after my inheritance. That deadly turning point consisted of my meeting the irresistible Sparky Flint.

I can't say now what came over me that fatal night. Some Imp of the Perverse took hold of my lapels and whispered evil urgings into my ear. To be short about it, I developed an instant but avid craving for a spot of sherry.

Aunt Denise had always treated me to a small annual glass of sherry upon completion of my decorating her house. After ten years of the ritual I grew accustomed to the taste, and actually came to look forward to the uncommon indulgence. Now, four years without tasting a drop of sherry and my quiescent desires suddenly came to a head. I felt an unquenchable thirst that only strong drink could satisfy. So I set out with grim determination for a saloon.

The trolley dropped me off downtown. Walking the unfamiliar nighted streets of Central City, I tried to gauge which establishment might prove most suitable for a gentleman of my retiring nature.

Unfortunately, my instincts were flawed. I ended up entering a most ungentle "dive."

The "joint" was packed with smoking, sweating, cursing, laughing humanity, their voices echoing off the garish walls and grimy ceiling. I felt like a frightened cow amidst his ignorant bovine peers on the abattoir walkway.

Nonetheless my unnatural compulsions for the fruit of the vine still held sway. I worked my way toward the bar, past lap-seated trollops hoisting foamy mugs of beer to their lips and brawny laborers knocking back "boilermakers."

At the bar I secured my drink, enduring a sneer or two at my uncommon choice of beverage from my immediate neighbors and even from the bartender himself, an ugly bruiser. I rested one foot on the brass rail, in imitation of my fellow imbibers, but the stance felt too unsteady, and I moved off to a small empty table.

And then the singing began.

Supernal, sirenic singing like nothing I had ever heard before, as if hundreds of calla lilies had suddenly taken voice.

I suppose the mode employed by this diabolically angelic female voice might have been termed "torchsong." If so, the metaphor was apt, since my whole soul was enflamed by the unseen songstress.

No doubt the alcohol coursing wildly through my veins played its part as well.

I stood up instinctively in an attempt to spot the singer and was rewarded by sight of a small, lighted stage. And there she stood, microphone in hand.

Sparky Flint.

Her hair a tumbling mass of poppy-red curls, her cosmetic-enhanced face brazenly sensuous, her Junoesque figure wrapped in a tight jade evening dress, the singer caressed each syllable of her lustful song in a way that delivered the words like vernal osmosis straight to my heart.

I remained standing for the exotic chanteuse's entire hypnotic performance, learning her name only when a coarse emcee ushered her off the stage.

Collapsing back into my seat, I downed the remaining inch of my sherry in one dynamic swallow. And as I set the glass down, my eyes confronted the satin-swaddled bosom of Sparky Flint herself.

"Mind if I pull up a chair, honey?"

"Nuh-no, nuh-not at all."

She took up her seat so closely to mine that our knees almost touched, and I could see the very weave of her silk stockings where they caressed her ankle above the strap of her shoe. Conquering the reek of spilled ale and tobacco and human musk, a whiff of her sharp synthetic floral scent carried to my nostrils. The barroom seemed to spin in circles about me.

"Care to buy a girl a drink, sport?"

"I-- that is-- why, certainly." I tried to adopt a dapper manner. "I fear I must have misplaced my manners in my other suit."

I summoned a barmaid and Sparky ordered a cocktail unfamiliar to me. Once she had refreshed her tired vocal cords, she fixed me with an inquisitive yet friendly stare.

"I never had no guy stand up for my whole show before. Most of these bums wouldn't know if the management had a hyena cackling up there. You musta really liked my singing, huh?"

"Why, yes, most assuredly. Such dulcet yet thrilling tones have never before laved my ears."

Sparky drained her drink and began toying with a toothpick-pierced olive. "You're a regular charmer, fella. Say, what's your name?"

"Hiram. Hiram P. Dottle."

"Well, Hiram, let me let you in on a little secret. A lady likes to be appreciated for her talents, you know. She can get mighty friendly with the right guy, if he shows a little gen-u-wine interest. And even though I've got a swell set of pipes, that ain't all the assets Sparky Flint's got hidden. Say, speaking of assets -- why doncha tell me a little more about yourself."

I gulped, swallowing some kind of sudden lump big as an iris corm, and began to recount my life history. Sparky brightened considerably when I described my home, and became positively overwrought when I detailed the clever way I had invested Aunt Denise's money. By this point she was practically sitting in my lap, and I confess that I had indulged in two more glasses of sherry.

"Oh, Dottie, you've led such a fascinating life! You don't mind if I call you Dottie, do you?"

No one had ever employed such a diminutive variant of my name before. But then again, never had I established such a quick bond with any female of the species. "Why, I --"

"I thought you'd be jake with that! You're such a broad-minded character. Did anyone ever tell you that your mustache is so attractively wispy, Dottie? I bet it tickles just like a caterpillar when you kiss."

And then to test her proposition, she planted her lips directly upon mine, in the most thrilling moment of my life, comparable only to my success in breeding a pure-white pansy, a feat written up as a sidebar in Horticulture Monthly.

We were married one month later. Only upon securing the marriage license did I learn Sparky Flint's birthname. Christened Maisie Grumbach, she had been raised in Central City's orphanage, and possessed no kin of any degree.

"A girl on her own's gotta be fast on her feet, Dottie. I learned that early on at the orphanage. When it's slopping time at the hog trough, the slow piglet goes to bed hungry. The main chance just don't linger. Grab what you can, when you can -- that's Sparky Flint's motto."

The first six months of our marriage offered all the connubial and domestic joys imaginable. Sparky lavished her affections on me. If I could blush in my present state I certainly would, to recall how she twisted her "little Dottie-wottie" around her slim fingers, with honeyed words and lascivious attentions. And all the while, behind her facade of love lurked the heartless viper of greed and treachery.

The first rift in our romance developed when I proposed to spend one thousand dollars to put in an elaborate carp pond. I realized that this constituted a large sum, but felt justified in devoting this amount to my harmless hobby. After all, hadn't I given Sparky the elaborate wedding she desired, spending liberally on her gown and jewelry, as well as providing a feast for those few guests we could summon up between us? (Sparky's friends I found rather unsavory, and spent as little time with them as possible.)

"Ten Ben Franklins on a fishing hole!" shrieked Sparky, abusing her nightingale's throat most horribly.

"And I haven't had a new pair of shoes in a month! What the hell are you thinking? Do I look like the kind of dame who prefers sardines to high heels?"

"But Sparky, dear--"

"Fuhgeddaboutit!"

Our marital situation deteriorated rapidly from that point on, as if a plug had been pulled on a greasy watertower full of ill feelings that now drained over us. Accusations, vituperations, insinuations -- these replaced whispered endearments and fond embraces on Sparky's part. My share of these increasingly frequent arguments consisted of silence and a hangdog expression, followed by contrite agreement. Nevertheless, unplacated, my wife began spending inordinate amounts of time away from home, frequently returning only after I had finished my nine o'clock snack of milk and common crackers and turned out the lights for sleep.

The final straw apparently came with a most unwise and unannounced expenditure on my part. I had learned by now not to advertise in advance my horticultural expenditures. Consequently, the delivery of lumber, cast iron fittings and sheets of glass sufficient to construct a charming Edwardian greenhouse took Sparky completely by surprise.

She had the tact to wait until the deliverymen left before laying into me, although judging by the mottling of her complexion the restraint had nearly caused her to burst a vein.

"What the hell is all this, buster! Are you out of your everlovin' mind? Your wife is walking around in rags, and you're blowing through my inheritance like a dipso through free muscatel!"

I tried to divert her anger by joshing. "Oh, come now, dear. You have a sturdy and healthy husband not much older than you yourself. Surely it's premature to be speaking of my unlikely demise and your grieving widowhood."

A look of pure vicious hatred such as I had never before seen on a human visage passed fleetingly across Sparky's beautiful features, to be replaced by a composed mask of indifference. "Oh, too early is it? Maybe -- and maybe not..."

Her words and expression alarmed me to such a degree that I shrugged quickly into my ratty old puttering-about cardigan, murmured something about attending to a fungus problem, and hastened outside.

Kneeling at the base of a large, mistletoe-festooned oak tree, I was delicately aerating the soil around its roots with a small tool when I heard someone approaching. I looked over my shoulder and saw a horrifying sight.

My loving wife Sparky, hoisting high my fine British axe in her gloved hands.

Struck mute, paralyzed, I could only listen helplessly to her insane rehearsal of some future speech for an unknown audience.

"This is an absolutely awful neighborhood, officer. I've noticed tramps and vagrants and petty thieves lurking around our estate ever since my poor dead husband brought me here as his blushing bride. One of them must have finally broken in. I'm sure my husband died defending my virtue."

"No, Sparky, no!" I finally managed to croak.

Too late, for the axe was already descending.

In my fading eyesight, filled totally with a closeup landscape of bark, I watched my own blood jet and pool in a hollow formed by two intersecting oak roots.

Then all went black.

THE ASTONISHING RETURN of my consciousness at first brought with it no sensory data, aside from a sense of well-being and wholeness. For an indefinite leisurely time I basked in the simple absence of the shattering pain that had accompanied Sparky's treacherous assault. The utter blackness and lack of sound in my current environment failed to frighten me. I felt too much at ease, too peaceful. I could only conclude that some good Samaritan had rescued me from my wife's attack in time to save my life, and that now I rested in a cozy hospital bed, guarded by watchful nurses and doctors, my eyes and ears bandaged, my healing body suffused with morphine.

The closest I approached to worrying about my old life was a vague feeling that certainly some drastic changes would have to be engineered in my spousal relations, once I fully recovered. Perhaps even a trial separation.

Then, after this period of idle, happy musing, odd, subliminal sensations began to filter into my consciousness. I seemed to register light striking me, but in a new fashion. Sunlight seemed to be impinging upon my "skin" and "face" in a whole-body manner, as if I were -- horrors! -- utterly unclothed at the beach. Discordant, jagged images swept over me. Likewise, I perceived the ambient soundscape in a novel, jumbled manner. Oddest of all though were fresh tactile impressions. I experienced a contradictory feeling of compression and extension, as if I were stuffed into a closet, yet simultaneously stretched on a not-uncomfortable rack.

Likewise, my sense of time's passage had altered. Objective minutes, gauged by the fragmentary movements of the sun, seemed to drip by like hours.

I used this extended realm of time wisely, and by the end of what must have been a single day, I had thoroughly integrated my new senses so that I could see and hear and feel in a coherent way.

From my new immovable vantage I enjoyed a three-hundred-and-sixty degree omniscient view of some very familiar landscaped grounds. And when I focused my "sight" in one particular direction, I saw my ancestral home standing forlorn and dark. Triangulating my position by landmarks, I could no longer deny the obvious conclusion.

My soul now inhabited the very oak tree at whose foot I had been slaughtered. I was now a male dryad, if such a creature were possible.

Acknowledging this impossible truth, I directed my vision and other senses downward. My human body had been carted away, but my sticky blood still filled the hollow where it had gushed. Alarmingly, I experienced a feeling of oakish satisfaction at this extra-rich watering, as if grateful for my pagan due.

Apparently, the original spirit of the oak still to some degree overlapped mine, offering its old perceptions.

Well, this was a fine fix, I thought. My old life had reached a premature conclusion, and such comforting rituals as milk and common crackers availed naught. But questioning the miracle would be futile, and I would simply have to learn to inhabit my new body and enjoy this mode of existence.

Surprisingly, the transition came quite easily.

By dawn of the next day, approximately forty-eight or seventy-two hours after my murder, I was already happy in my arboreal magnificence.

All my nurturing of this tree had prepared a veritable temple for my spirit. My roots stretched deeply down and out into nutritious, stable soil, while my crown of efficient leaves reared high into the welcoming sky. My inner flesh was strong and healthy, my limbs proud and free of disease. Birds and squirrels nested in my niches, providing gay company, while sun and rain stoked my slow engines. Ants crawling up and down me tickled and massaged and warred with insidious insects that would have harmed me. Like some Hindoo holyman, I experienced an absolute contentment with my condition, free of unsatisfied desires, my mind at one with ancient cosmic imperatives.

But then came a disturbing incident that awoke my human side.

Out of my old house stepped Sparky Flint, my murderous wife.

And with her was a man!

Tall and impressively muscled, clad in a dark suit and crisp fedora, the fellow strolled alongside Sparky with a sober yet irrepressibly jaunty air. I instantly assessed him as ten times the physical specimen I had ever been (although of course compared to my current girth and strength he was pitiful), and I felt complete jealousy toward this new suitor.

But then as the pair approached and I spotted the small mask guarding the stranger's identity, I recognized him and my feelings flipfopped instantly.

This was the Shade! Central City's daring crimefighter, champion of the oppressed and wronged, had come personally to investigate and avenge my murder!

I focused my "hearing" on Sparky and the Shade, a small matter of forming a parabolic cone with certain of my leaves.

"I wish I had returned from my affairs in China a day or two earlier," said the Shade, "before Klink and his boys completely obliterated this lawn. Look at this mess! Those flatfoots might've been playing a duffer's round of golf, the lawn's so hacked up. Ally clues to the identity of your husband's killer are long

gone."

For the first time I noted the terrible condition of the lawn. What the Shade had observed was true. I regretted I would not be able to roll out and reseed in my current state.

Attired in widow's weeds, a veil floating across her devilishly beautiful features, Sparky sniffled with touching, albeit insincere sympathy. "Poor Dottie! He was ever so prideful of his whole garden.

Sometimes in fact I think he loved it more than me...."

Not so! I wanted to shout. Well, perhaps.... honesty instantly forced me to amend.

The Shade regarded Sparky with a natural compassion, tempered, I thought, only by those common suspicions that attach to the spouse of any murdered husband. "There, there, Mrs. Dottle. I know it's small comfort, but we'll eventually catch the fiend who did this."

"That's what I pray for each night before I climb into my lonely empty bed, Mister Shade, where I writhe and squirm feverishly until dawn." Sparky gripped the Shade's right bicep in an overfamiliar manner and fluttered her long lashes at him.

The Shade appeared a trifle flustered. "Ahem, yes. Now, let me just have a look at this tree."

Crouching at my base, the Shade produced a magnifying lens and examined my bark. With one gloved finger he took up a few flakes of my rain-washed and sun-dried blood. He cogitated a moment, then stood.

"I would've thought a man startled by an axe-bearing assailant might have made a dash for his life, or at least clawed at the tree where he kneeled in an attempt to scramble upright. Yet he died without a scuffle right where you earlier saw him working."

Unwisely perhaps, Sparky vented her residual hatred. "Dottie was a meek little shrimp!" Hastily, she recovered. "That is, my husband had a mild disposition. He must've fainted straight away when the awful thug came on him."

"Yes, that's one explanation. Well, Mrs. Dottle, there's not a lot I can do here. I'll be going now."

"Oh, please, Mister Shade, just walk me back to the house. I can't stand to be alone near this tree. There's something creepy about it now, since my husband died."

As the Shade and Sparky retreated, she cast a dire look back at me, almost as if she could see her husband sheltering inside his oaken suit.

Once the pair were out of sight, I found myself sinking down into blissful vegetal somnolence again. The happy sensations of being an oak completely wiped away any mortal cares left over from my prior life.

Why should I trouble myself about human justice? My old life would never be restored through the courts. Let the fleshly ones squabble among themselves. Their little lives had no impact on mine.

My arrogant invulnerability lasted for roughly a year. Through summer, fall and winter I gloried undisturbed in the magnificence of my being, experiencing each turning season with new joy.

But then in the spring came my comeuppance. I had been much too cavalier in dismissing Sparky's ability to do me further harm.

One day near the anniversary of my murder, a second set of killers arrived to slay me once again.

I witnessed the truck from Resneis Arborists pass through the gates of my small estate and down the drive. Improbably and most uncivilly, it actually continued up onto my prize lawn, the turf now looking admittedly less than perfect due to lack of attention. Rough-handed workers tumbled out, and a foreman began to shout orders.

"Okay, you jokers, get a move on! We've got to take down every tree on this property plenty pronto, if we want that bonus. And the big oak goes first!"

Horrified, I watched two men pull a huge saw from their truck and start toward me.

I could feel the big sharp teeth placed harshly against my barky skin.

The first rasping cut produced a dull agony. The second, deeper stroke sent fiery alarm signals down my every fiber.

I could feel my consciousness pulling instinctively back from the pain. I had an impulse to gather myself into the deepest core of my being, to escape the torture.

But before I lost touch with the outer world, I caught the arrival of Sparky and a brutish-looking stranger dressed in a suit with roguishly wide lapels. I forced myself to focus on their sotto voce dialogue, as they

conversed in what they deemed utter secrecy.

"I gotta hand it to ya, Sparky baby," said the thug. "This land is gonna make a swell spot for Central City's new casino. But ain't'cha being a bit, well, pre-ma-tour with the choppin' an' the bulldozin' an' all? The permits an' licenses from City Hall ain't exactly a shoe-in. Mayor Nolan ain't too keen on gamblin'. And her copper daddy will bust a gasket if he learns who your backers are.'

"You just leave Commissioner Nolan and his brat in City Hall to me, big boy, and concentrate on what you do best.'

"Lovin' and killin', right?"

"Right, Jules."

The conniving pair went into a clinch that violated every element of the Hays Code, but I could spare no further attention for their reprehensible licentiousness.

Loud creakings and groanings were issuing from my numb nether regions, which either I or the oak had protectively desensitized. With grave misgivings, I noticed that I was beginning to cant and tip.

My ultimate downfall followed swiftly. The final fibers holding me upright parted, and I crashed toward the ground. The thundering impact was titanic, and I lost consciousness for some time. When I came to, I could feel my proud branches being lopped. In short time I was hoisted by a newly arrived crane onto an accompanying flatbed truck and carted off.

Huddling deep inside myself, I realized then that my fate most likely involved a quick trip to the sawmill and a swift transition into planks.

But such was not the case. Apparently I was destined for stranger ends.

Whether subconsciously or not, Sparky had chosen a fate for my wooden corpse meant to humiliate.

Even in death I would be denied utilitarian dignity.

When I felt a cessation of motion, I pooled my dwindling organic energies and tried to apprehend my destination. I saw a sign that read CENTRAL CITY SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN, and quickly intuited my ignominious lot: to become practice billets for budding, ham-fisted sculptors. The best I could hope for was to grace a tobacco shop as a clumsy wooden Indian.

Sure enough, I was trundled into the school's carpentry shop and, once callously stripped of my bark, rapidly dismembered into several largish sections of trunk. With each cut I pulled my ectoplasmic bits of mental being out of the severed section, retreating and retreating, until finally, with the last slice, I found all my fading identity concentrated in one portion of trunk.

For a long time I existed only in a state resembling hibernation, as I cured in a storeroom. What became of my nonsentient bits I cannot tell. After an unguessable duration, the portion housing my ghostly self, roused by motion, eventually rode a dolly to the atelier of a youth possessed of handsome Mediterranean looks and clad in leather apron and work gloves. I heard him addressed as "Gino" by the delivery men. Gino wrestled me upright into position on a platform, then stepped back to survey me. "Hmm, I see hidden in this dumb wood a straining heroic figure, fighting against injustice. Perhaps I'll call this masterpiece 'Samson Rages Against the Philistines.'"

Much as I appreciated Gino's noble goals for my dessicated flesh, I still cringed to imagine the first blow of his chisel. Trying to avoid his blow, I concentrated my essence far away from his anticipated strike.

But then, at the last moment, he shifted position and cleaved off that very block of matter containing all my soul!

I fell to the floor, ignored in the white heat of artistic creation.

But at day's end, to my surprise, Gino picked me up and carried me home.

The young sculptor lived in an Italian slum on the far side of Central City. Apparently he shared his dismal cold water flat only with his father, a cheerful old fellow with an aura of deep wisdom about him.

"Poppa, look," Gino called out as soon as he entered. "Some raw material for your hobby."

Gino's father took me in his rough hands. How humiliating, I thought. From Hiram P. Dottle, bookkeeper, botanist, and husband, to mighty oak to hunk of kindling. The old man turned me over and over, examining me with a keen eye before finally speaking.

"It's-a not fine Algerian brier, Gino, like-a what--a we had back in Napoli. But the grain, she's a-fine.

Maybe Mario Deodati can make-a one nice pipe out of this scrap."

"Thataboy, Pop! Go to it!"

Thus began my final metamorphosis, under the magically skilled hands of Mario Deodati. Pared away with patient cunning, the block revealed the shape hiding within it. And amazingly, as Mario lavished attention and craft and even love on me, I felt my identity taking renewed strength.

Holding my still-chunky form at one point, Mario spoke to me, his creation. "I see a face in-a you, Mister Pipe. I'm a-make your bowl into a smiling head."

Good as his word, Mario carved facial features into his creation. I had no mirror to observe myself in, but I could feel from inside that my new visage was perhaps overly jolly and gleeful in the manner of a Toby jug. Mario's sensitivity as to my true nature extended only so far.

One day in late winter, when the winds rattled the loose, rag-stuffed windows in the apartment, Mario and Gino had a terse, painful discussion which I observed and listened to from my perch on a shelf.

"It's no use, Pop. I'm going to have to quit school. We don't even have the money for coal and groceries, never mind my tuition."

Mario banged the table with the hand that had birthed me. "Did me and your sainted Momma teach-a you to be a quitter! You gonna stay in school, boy!" He struggled to his feet and snatched me down off the shelf. "Go sell this! And get-a the best price you can!"

Wrapped in an old piece of flannel, I left my latest home.

I surmised that it was now nearly a year since I had been felled, and my fate once more loomed obscure.

Five stores later, a deal was consummated. I changed hands for the princely sum of one hundred dollars, enough to keep the Deodatis afloat for several months, and I silently bade farewell to Gino.

My new owner was a portly bearded punctilious gentleman in vest and suit. The tip of his tongue protruding absentmindedly from the corner of his compressed lips, he inked a pricetag in the amount of two hundred dollars, tied it to my stem with string, and placed me on a velvet cushion in a display case.

That night, when the shop lights clicked off and only stray glints from street lamps illuminated my new home, I tried to communicate somehow with my new neighbors. But they failed to respond to the most vigorous of my psychic efforts, and I realized I was the only sensate pipe amongst them. Internally, I shed a self-pitying tear or two as I contemplated my sad lot.

The next few weeks established a boring routine of shop-opening, commercial traffic, shop-closing and a long night of despair. I was handled and admired several times, but never purchased.

But one day my salvation arrived, in the form of two famous customers.

The well-dressed and decorously glamorous woman with her twin rolls of blonde hair pinned high atop her head appeared first in my field of vision. Lowering her half-familiar happy face to the glass separating us, she spoke. "Oh, Shade, look! Isn't that model with the carved face just darling?"

The masked visage of the Shade manifested next to the woman's. In context, I recognized her now as Mayor Ellen Nolan. The Shade did not seem to share all of Ellen Nolan's enthusiasm. His manly features wrinkled in quizzical bemusement.

"Gee, Ellen, I've seen better mugs on plug-uglies from the Gasworks Gang! And two hundred dollars! Do you realize how many orphans we could feed with that money?"

"Don't be such a wet blanket, Shade. Spending a little extra of my personal money on Daddy's birthday won't send any orphans to bed hungry."

The Shade lifted his hat and skritchd his scalp. "Are you sure this is a good idea, Ellen ? How are you going to get Nolan to give up his favorite old stinkpot in favor of this one anyhow?"

"Simple. I'll hide it."

A whistle of admiration escaped the Shade's lips. "And the newspapers say I've got guts! Well, I leave it all up to you."

"A wise decision. Sir, we'll take this one. And wrap it nicely, please." Into a dark box I went. The crinkle of folding giftpaper and the zip of cellotape from a dispenser was followed by careful placement into what I presume was a handled shopping bag. I guessed by the long stride I subsequently shared that the Shade next carried me home to Ellen's house. I heard the smack of a kiss upon a cheek, then felt further lifting movements, ending up, I supposed, hidden in a closet.

The routine of the house for the next day or so quickly became aurally familiar. The gruff yet loving

Commissioner Nolan arrived home and left at odd hours of the day, while the perky but forceful Mayor Nolan held to a more regular schedule. The Shade popped up unpredictably.

Finally one special morning, muffled in my closet I could hear Ellen's father ranting, turning the air blue with his curses.

"Where could that dangblasted, consarned pipe of mine have gotten to! Ellen! Ellen! ELLEN!"

"Yes, Daddy, whatever's the matter?"

"My favorite pipe! I can't find it! I'm certain I left it on the bedstand when I went to sleep, but now it's missing! How can I go to work without it?"

Footsteps approached me, a door creaked open, and I was lifted down in my package. Ellen's sweet voice soothed her father. "Well, I haven't the foggiest notion of where you've mislaid that awful thing. But luckily enough, I have this little gift right here. Happy Birthday, Daddy!"

My wrapping began to rip. "Grmph. Hmph. Frazzleblast it!"

"Let me give you a hand, Daddy dear."

The light of day made me metaphysically squint. I found myself face to face with a choleric, jaw-grinding Commissioner Nolan. The three patches of white hair on his otherwise bald head were mussed and flyaway.

He scowled at me, and I knew we had not hit it off.

"Is this a kid's bubblepipe? What am I supposed to pack it with -- cornsilk?"

Ellen began tenderly to stroke her father's hair into better order. "Come on now, don't be a gruff old bear. This pipe has a hundred times more class than your old one. Won't you at least try it, please -- for me?"

Nolan turned me around so I faced away from him. Then for the first time I felt the curiously intimate sensation of his blunt teeth biting down strongly on my stem. His irritation caused me to waggle furiously up and down almost in time to his thumping, agitated pulse, so much so that I feared for his dangerously high blood pressure.

"Feels strange," Nolan said. "Not like my old one."

"New things take some getting used to. Here's your tobacco pouch. Smoke up a bowl or two and you'll see how lovely it is."

Nolan stuffed my wooden head full of pungent weed, tamping the plug down with a blunt, nicotine-stained thumb. Then I heard a match scrape and felt the small flame singe my crown. The pain was less than if I had tested my human flesh with a match, and I resolved to be stoic in my new role. Puffing furiously, Nolan seemed to relax a trifle. "Draws well enough," he cautiously admitted. "But that simpering little face on the bowl --"

"Shush now! Off to work with you!"

Nolan snatched up a battered old leather satchel and exited. A police car and driver awaited him outside, and we set off.

Well, I cannot begin to describe the tremendous excitement of the subsequent several weeks. I experienced firsthand the glamorous crimefighting life of the Shade and Nolan in a way no one else ever had, not even the Shade's loyal Negro sidekick, Busta! Never absent from Nolan's pitbull-like mandibular embrace, I found myself swept up in innumerable thrilling confrontations with the forces of evil. Shootouts, chases, last-minute rescues! Threats, torture, mysterious clues, exotic locales! Villains, henchmen, mad scientists, femmes fatales! Why, once I remember we slipped quietly through the slimy, drip-popping sewers on the trail of the Crustacean, only to discover the archfiend in his lair with
But I ramble. I'll never reach the end of my personal tale if I recount all the wild adventures I experienced. Suffice it to say that out of my three existences to date, being Commissioner Nolan's trusty pipe proved by far the most invigorating!

Of course, I had to endure many boring meetings as well. Politics played a part in crimefighting, as it did in everything connected with the civic life of Central City. Whenever one of these tedious events was scheduled, I fell into an absentminded reverie. I confess to being in one such fugue at the start of that fatal evening.

The clock in the Mayor's shadowy office struck midnight when the Shade and Ellen walked in, causing

my owner to hastily remove his feet from his daughter's desk and leap up from her ornate office chair. The Shade looked shamefaced. "Sorry we're late. I thought I spotted the wily spy Pola Fleece down by the docks, but it turned out to be only a fashion magazine shoot. It took a while to settle up damages with the photographer and models. Are those slimy business partners here yet?"

Nolan knocked my head on the edge of a trashcan to remove my dead embers, then restuffed me with shag and lit up. I was quite used to the flickering flame by now, and paid it no mind as Nolan began to puff furiously.

"Not yet. I don't like this, Shade -- not one little bit."

Ellen chimed in. "I agree. That Flint woman gives me the willies. What a cold-blooded witch! Only a few months until the second anniversary of her husband's murder, and she's already taking up with another man. Why, I hear she's even carrying his lovechild!"

Ellen blushed charmingly at this remark, and the Shade coughed as if he had swallowed a fly.

Sparky? Were they speaking of Sparky? A old twinge of mixed affection and hatred passed through my wooden frame, and I woke into greater alertness.

"And she hasn't snagged just any beau," the Shade added. "Jules 'The Fife' Reefer has a history of misdeeds as long and bloody as the Carnivore's."

Nolan said, "Still, we've never been able to pin anything on him, and this request of theirs to build a casino seems on the up and up."

"I agree they're following legitimate channels," said the Shade, "but the big question remains. Do we want to let Reefer construct such an efficient money-laundering enterprise for his other rackets?"

"Of course not," Ellen said. "But we've stalled them in every legal way we can. There's no way we can avoid giving them the permits for their casino any longer."

The Shade pushed his hat back on his head and smiled. "That's the purpose of tonight's meeting. We've gotten them so frustrated that they're bound to offer you a bribe. Why else would they schedule such a late-night get-together? I'll be in the next office with the door ajar. Once the money is out in the open, I'll bust in and put the cuffs on them. End of story."

Nolan scowled. "I suppose it's the only way. But I don't like putting Ellen at risk."

Ellen straightened up proudly. "I'm the Mayor, Daddy. Don't I deserve my share of the bribe? In fact, I think you and I will have to split it seventy-thirty."

"Hmph! Sixty-forty," joshed Nolan, "and that's my final offer."

Outside in the empty City Hall corridor the elevator bell chimed, signaling the conveyance's arrival on our floor.

The Shade darted for the connecting door. "Stations, men!"

A few seconds later, my ex-wife and her new lover walked in.

Clutching her purse demurely, Sparky looked more desirable than ever, with her tumbling Titian curls framing her adorable face. Recalling Ellen's catty gossip, I thought to detect a slight swelling of her tummy, heralding the bastard child, substitute for the offspring we had never managed to conceive between us. I felt myself falling in love all over with her again -- until I recalled with a shock the murderously contorted lines of this same visage as she swung the axe at my back.

Her companion -- the identical thuggish man I had seen her with while still a tree -- I paid little attention to, deeming him beneath my mature consideration. Besides, it was hard to consider myself his vigorous rival while wearing the semblance of a pipe.

Reefer hailed us as if meeting buddies at an amusement park. "Howdy, Mayor, Commissioner! Hope we ain't kept you up past your bedtime. But the deal we got in mind needs a little privacy, heh-heh, if you get my drift."

Sparky kicked Reefer's ankle and took over the pitch, her dulcet voice achingly familiar.

"What my partner means is that we intend tonight to have an end to all delays. Twelve months of red tape have left us feeling very antsy. If there's any way we can, um, grease the wheels of progress, we are quite willing to --"

"Just spit it out, baby. We're ready to lay some serious mazuma down to get this project underway.

Whatta we talkin'? Ten thousand? Fifteen thousand?"

I quivered menacingly between Nolan's choppers. If only Sparky and Reefer had been able to read the language of my jiggling, they would have turned tail and run. But they were blind to Nolan's rage.

"Let's see the color of your money, Reefer."

The mobster reached into his suitcoat's inner pocket and hauled out a sheaf of bills weighty as one of my prize cabbages. All eyes except mine were magnetized by the bundle of large denomination bills. Thus only I witnessed the Shade sneak catfootedly up behind Reefer and tap him on the shoulder.

"Jig's up, Reefer. Will you come quietly, or do I have to use force?"

Everyone had forgotten Sparky. Until they heard in the stunned silence the click of the hammer on her .45, loud as my former oaken body crashing to the ground.

Sparky's eyes were hard as her stage name, her face taut with rage. "Jules ain't going nowhere. It's you three that are gonna take a little trip."

Even Reefer seemed stunned by his paramour's steely determination. "Put the rod away, baby. We can beat a little bribery rap. It's just their word against ours."

Sparky swung her gun toward the Shade, but addressed Reefer. "Sometimes I swear you've got less spine than that mousy dirtgrubber I married! Win a case against the Shade? Are you crazy? He's got this town sewed up!"

"It's simply a matter of being on the correct side of the law, Miss Flint. Now if you'll just do as your boyfriend advises --"

"Shut up, you! Now, head for the staircase!"

The trio of captives shuffled out -- under two guns now -- while I was still fuming over the insult Sparky had paid my memory. Once in the stairwell we climbed steadily upward, emerging onto the roof. The summer sky hosted an infinity of stars, as likely to offer us useful help as anyone else in the city.

"Go over near the edge," Sparky commanded. "There's gonna be a little accident here tonight. Three clumsy stargazers are gonna take a little dive. Maybe the papers will even figure the Shade was somehow responsible. When our crew takes over City Hall, we won't have a care in the world."

We now stood at the low parapet protecting us from five stories of oblivion. I could see the Shade tensing his muscles for a lunge. But Sparky anticipated just such an action.

"Jules, grab the girl." Once in Reefer's clutches, Ellen suffered the muzzle of the pistol jammed against her stomach. "Try anything funny, and your girlfriend gets gutshot. It's not as easy a death as a broken neck, believe me."

With surprising acrobatic ease, the lumpy Nolan jumped atop the parapet. "Don't shoot her, Flint. I'm going first."

And with that he jumped, taking me of course with him.

Nolan's blunt fingers gripped the ledge and interrupted our fall. I deduced his plan: to lure Sparky and Reefer over for a look, then make a surprising grab at them with one hand, thus breaking the stalemate. But even in the dim light Sparky must have seen his efforts.

"Reefer, he's holding on! Turn the girl loose and go whack the old coot's fingers."

I witnessed Reefer above us hefting his own gun, reversed. He smashed the butt down.

Nolan grunted, fell a foot with uselessly waving arms

--and that was when the protruding spike intercepted my bowl.

Nolan's teeth bit into my stem like a crocodile's.

Reefer called out, "He's hanging on by his damn pipe!"

"Shoot the pipe out of his mouth then!"

Reefer took careful aim.

AND JUST THEN the gunshot rings out, simultaneously with the sound of a scuffle on the rooftop, the thud of fists on flesh, of muffled grunts and screams.

The bullet pierces my stem, severing it completely. The pain of my mortal wound wracks me with titanic agonies. I try to hold onto consciousness, but feel it ebbing swiftly. But in my last seconds of full awareness, even as my two halves tumble into the void, I thankfully witness the Shade lunge three-quarters over the edge of the parapet to grab Nolan by his wrist.

Then a familiar mortal darkness descends.

Curiously, unexpectedly, my soul is not completely extinguished. Although split in two, my human essence remains connected by a dormant thread of ectoplasm. Patiently, able to do nothing else, I await the reinvigorating reunion of my halves, a repair I am somehow confident will arrive in due course.

At last the blessed event comes. Jagged lower stem intersects with upper fragment and bowl, firmly secured with a spot of Elmer's glue. Although certainly unfit to be smoked, I can still exercise thought and perception.

I find myself stapled to a plaque, hanging on a wall beneath an odd circular skylight. Weirdly, the view through the cross-barred aperture reveals not mere sky, but an eerie nighted landscape of canted tombstones.

I am underground! And where else but in the Shade's fabled but never-pinpointed sanctum, its location now disclosed to me alone as the haunted corner of Idlewhile Cemetery!

The Shade himself steps back from hanging me up on his trophy wall. Beside him stands the short, lumpish, wide-eyed figure of Busta, that faithful son of Ham who assists the Shade and drives him about Central City in his yellow cab.

"Well, Busta," confides the Shade, "yet another relic of a case well-solved. Not only did we jail Sparky Flint and Jules Reefer for bribery and multiple attempts at homicide, but, thanks to her confession, we cleared up the old murder of her husband, poor chap." The Shade pats me affectionately. "Unfortunately, Dottle had no lucky talisman such as this pipe to save him, in the manner it saved Nolan."

The Shade turns to a set of blueprints spread out on a table. "But enough of past glories, Busta. Let's direct our attention to this diagram of Fort Knox. I expect the Gasworks Gang will strike next month, during the annual ingot-dusting --"

Safe, protected from the elements, privileged to share a vicarious life of crime-fighting, I settle cozily down on the wall to listen to the Shade's brave scheming.

There are worse fates for a broken pipe. And for a man as well.