

# The Long and Short of It

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*A John Justin Mallory Story*

John Justin Mallory was having a bad day.

He'd gone out to Jamaica and picked the wrong horse six races in a row, a feat made even more remarkable by the fact that his favorite, Flyaway, who had lost fifty-four consecutive races, wasn't even entered.

When he'd stopped by Joey Chicago's for a drink on the way home, he found out they were all out of Old Peculiar and that some irate mage had hexed the tap on the Old Washensox.

He decided to eat at Morgan the Gorgon's 2-Star Diner and Hardware Store, made what he thought was a funny crack about wanting to eat Can't Miss, who had just missed by sixty-three lengths with Mallory's twenty dollars riding on him, and got a steak so rare that he could still see the jockey's whip marks.

Finally he went back to the office, where with his partner Winnifred Carruthers he plied his trade as a private detective. Winnifred had gone home for the night, and he plopped down wearily in his chair, briefly looked at the Playmate he'd pinned up on the wall (and on which Winnifred had meticulously drawn undergarments), and considered taking a hit from the office bottle, which shared a drawer with his collection of old *Racing Forms* and garish pulp magazines.

"Welcome back," said Perriwinkle, his magic mirror. "How much did you lose today? You *did* lose, didn't you? I mean, I haven't noticed the stars stopping in their courses or anything like that."

"If there's one thing I hate, it's a lippy mirror."

"I have no lips."

"Details, details," muttered Mallory.

"Let me show you something to relax you," suggested the mirror.

"An old Bettie Page striptease might be nice," said Mallory.

"Mundane," said Perriwinkle contemptuously. "But if you must see a stripper, how about Tassle-Twirling Tessie Twinkle, the Lizard Girl? She removes her skin four times a night, and five on Saturdays."

"Please," said Mallory. "I almost just ate."

"Okay, hurt my feelings, spit on my offerings," said the mirror. "See if I care."

It fell silent, and began displaying a 1934 Southwest Association game between the Phoenix Pompadours and the Great Falls Geldings.

"Wonderful," said Mallory. He spent the next half hour opening his mail, which consisted entirely of unpaid bills, except for an ad to eat at Cannibal Joe's new all-night diner, which moved to a new location each day (or oftener if necessary). He finally finished, made a paper plane out of the heating bill, and gently tossed it toward the fireplace on the far wall. It got halfway there when a graceful figure that at first seemed human but was definitely feline launched itself from its perch atop the refrigerator in the next

room and snared the bill in her mouth.

"If you like it, I have a dozen more," said Mallory dryly. "I'll even pour a little mustard on them for you."

"I thought it was a little white bird," said the cat person, spitting the bill onto the floor. "A fat little white bird. A fat helpless little white bird. A delicious fat helpless . . ."

"Spare me the catalog of its virtues."

"All right," she said, hopping lightly onto his desk and lying on her stomach. "Skritch between my shoulder blades."

"I've been meaning to ask you for some time now, Felina," said Mallory. "What exactly is the difference between scratching and skritching?"

Felina reached out a hand, extended her fingers, and suddenly a two-inch claw shot out of each. "I scratch," she said. "You skritch."

He reached out and skritchd her back. Then suddenly she sat up.

"Let me guess," he said. "I did it wrong."

"Shhh!" she hissed. "They're arguing."

Mallory looked around the empty office. "Who's arguing?"

"Them."

"I don't see anyone."

"Me neither," said Perriwinkle, the game vanishing long enough for it to look around the room.

"They're outside the door," said Felina.

"What are they arguing about?" asked Mallory.

"You."

Mallory slid open his desk drawer and made sure his pistol was in it.

"They're arguing about how much they're willing to pay you," continued Felina.

"Are they now?" said Mallory, closing the drawer.

Felina nodded. "One of them is saying that if you cost too much they should just forget about it, and the other says it doesn't matter what you charge because you almost certainly won't survive to collect it."

"So there are two of them," said Perriwinkle.

"You must have been the brightest one in your class," said Mallory sardonically.

"That's it!" snapped Perriwinkle. "No more Rita Hayworth movies for you!"

"Is that a promise?" said Mallory.

"Bah!" said the mirror, reverting to the second inning of the baseball game in a grainy black and white.

"Are they still arguing?" asked Mallory.

Felina shook her head. "No, now they both agree that you'll die a horrible death before they have to pay you." She shot him an innocent, ingratiating smile. "Can I watch?"

Mallory didn't know whether to ignore her or throw something at her. While he was making up his mind, the door opened and a pair of men walked in. Each wore a dark, ill-fitting suit; one was too tight and the sleeves and cuffs were too short, while the other was too loose, with sleeves and cuffs held back by thick rubber bands. The men were each about six feet tall, with wild black hair, clear blue eyes, and shaggy mustaches. Mallory's first thought was that they were twins, or at least brothers. His second was that they needed a good barber and a better haberdasher.

"Mr. Mallory?" said the one on the left.

"That's right."

"We are in desperate need of your services," said the one on the right. "Mallory and Carruthers is said to be the best detective agency in all New York."

Mallory decided not to mention that it was the only one in New York, gestured for them to sit down, and simply waited for them to explain the nature of their problem.

"Have you ever gone to the circus, Mr. Mallory?" asked the one on the left.

"Not since I was a kid."

"Then you probably don't remember us," said the one on the right.

"Probably not," agreed Mallory. "Are you jugglers?"

"Certainly not!" they said in unison.

"Trapeze artists?"

"No!"

"I could sit here guessing all night, or you could tell me and we could get on with the case," suggested Mallory.

"Have you ever heard of Macro, the ten-foot-tall giant?" asked the one on the left.

"You?" asked Mallory.

The man shook his head. "No," he said, gesturing toward his companion. "*He* is."

"And have you ever read about Micro, the smallest human in the world, the Nineteen-Inch Dynamo?" Macro jerked a thumb toward the one on the left. "Him."

"This is a joke and you guys are here for the heating bill, right?" asked Mallory.

"I assure you this is no joke, Mr. Mallory," said Micro.

"We are in desperate need of your help," added Macro.

"I don't think I provide the kind of help you need," said Mallory.

"Only you *can* provide it!" said Micro desperately. "We have lost what makes us unique!"

"You've lost your grip on reality," observed Mallory. "*That* makes you pretty unique."

"We didn't come here to be insulted!" snapped Macro.

"Fine," said Mallory. "You pick up the tab, and I'll be happy to insult you down the street at the Emerald Isle Pub."

"Why won't you listen to us?"

"Because you're the same size as me, give or take an inch here and a pound there, and even when I've had a snootful I've never thought I was a ten-foot giant or a nineteen-inch midget."

"But that is precisely why we have sought you out!" insisted Macro. "Will you at least hear us out?"

"It's been a long, hard day," said Mallory.

"Would two thousand dollars suffice as a retainer?" asked Micro, pulling out the money and laying it on the detective's desk.

"On the other hand, the night's a pup," said Mallory. Suddenly Felina hissed. "Or a kitten, anyway."

"It began about two weeks ago," said Macro. "At first I thought I was losing a little weight, because my clothes were just a bit loose. I didn't mention it to anyone, because, to be honest, I could do with a little less weight."

"And at the same time," chimed in Micro, "I noticed that my shoes were getting tight, and that my pants seemed a little shorter."

"It took us almost a week to understand the full magnitude of what was happening," said Macro. "Some fiend has been making me shrink down to normal size . . ."

". . . and me grow up to it," said Micro.

"You have to help us, Mallory!" Macro implored the detective. "All we've ever been is a giant and a midget. We have no other skills. What do I know about tightrope walking or lion taming?"

"There *are* other occupations," noted Mallory.

"We don't want any other occupations!" shouted Micro. "We want you to find the bastard who did this to us and make him restore us to our former glory."

"We'll pay you a thousand dollars a day and a bonus if you succeed," said Macro.

"Of course," added Micro, "you'll have to succeed in four days or less. We're just about tapped out, what with buying new clothes every day."

"I'll do what I can," said Mallory. "Now, who do you think might have a grudge against you?"

"We're the salt of the earth," replied Macro. "You could look far and wide and not find two more lovable souls. Everybody knows that."

"So no one you know has any reason to do this to the pair of you?"

"Well, there's Atlas, the Strong Man," said Micro. "He found out that we were having a little fun with his

wife."

"Both of you?" asked Mallory.

"We're a team."

"So I should start by questioning the strong man?"

"And the lion tamer," added Macro. "And the tightrope walker. Oh, and two of the bareback riders."

"Don't forget the clowns," said Micro.

"How could they know?" asked Macro. "After all, we were wearing clown make-up the whole time."

"There aren't a lot of ten-foot clowns in the circus," said Micro. He turned back to Mallory. "And probably you should ask two of the jugglers. Don't bother with the one in the middle; he's a bachelor."

"I think what you're telling me is that if it works for the circus and has a wife or a girlfriend, it has a grudge against you," said Mallory.

"In essence," admitted Macro.

"What about the sideshow acts?"

"Well," said Micro, "there's the sword swallower. And of course the fire eater. And the contortionist's husband."

"Oh my goodness yes!" said Macro, a blissful smile. "The contortionist!"

"I'm surprised you guys had time to go on display," said Mallory dryly.

"We never missed a show," said Macro.

"Or a woman," added Micro.

"Anyone not connected with the circus got a grudge against you?" asked Mallory. "After all, there are probably three or four million husbands wandering around Manhattan."

"No, we always keep it in the family."

"I can't tell you how many filthy puns spring to mind," replied Mallory.

"If you'll tell them to me as soon as these two leave, I'll tell you the one about the explorer and the three belly dancers," said Perriwinkle.

"What was that?" ask Macro.

"My magic mirror," said Mallory. "Say hello to the gentlemen, Perriwinkle."

"Hi, guys," said Perriwinkle.

"It talks!" exclaimed Micro.

"Of course I talk."

"I don't think I ever saw a talking mirror before," said Micro.

"That's your loss," said Perriwinkle. "I come from a long line of magic mirrors, so don't you go acting as if I'm a mere *object*. I have hopes and fears and sexual needs, just like anyone else."

"Not like these two, I hope," interjected Mallory.

"How did you get such a wondrous thing?" asked Macro.

"I kind of inherited it," said Mallory.

"He gave me to the army, but I was bored there," added Perriwinkle. "All they wanted were battle scenes, so I came back here. At least John Justin enjoys black-and-white movies and baseball games."

"Isn't that amazing!" said Micro, still staring at the mirror. "A talking mirror! Why, the next thing you know, that catlike statue will speak."

"Skritch my back," said the catlike statue.

"Not now, Felina," said Mallory.

"This place is getting a little weird for us," said Macro. "Maybe we should think about going and letting Mr. Mallory get to work."

"It's weirder for me," said Mallory. "At least you two were born here."

"Weren't you?" asked Macro.

Mallory shook his head. "No, I've only been here a couple of years."

"Where are you from?"

"Manhattan."

"But *this* is Manhattan."

"This is the Manhattan that people in *my* Manhattan can sometimes see out of the corner of their eye, but when they turn to face it it's not there."

"So how did you get here?"

"It's a long story.\* I assume I can contact you at the circus?"

Macro shook his head unhappily. "We've been fired. You can find us at Joyful Jessie's Bulgarian Pizzeria and Flophouse."

"Third room on the right," added Micro. "Knock first."

"Why bother?" said Macro unhappily. "There's no door."

"It kind of makes up for all the boards over the window," said Micro.

"It's on the corner of Sloth and Despair," said Macro.

"I'm sure I can find it," said Mallory. "I'll be in touch as soon as I learn anything."

"*Almost* anything," said Perriwinkle. Mallory turned to the mirror. "After all," it continued, "you're going to learn the story of the explorer and the three belly dancers. I'm sure that these gentlemen couldn't care

less about it."

"I don't know about that," said Macro, stopping at the door. "Is it dirty?"

"Filthy."

Macro slipped another five dollars to Mallory. "Remember to tell it to me next time we meet," he said, and then he and Micro walked out into the night.

"So what do you think?" said Mallory as he finished explaining the case to his partner.

Winnifred Carruthers brushed a wisp of gray hair back from her pudgy face. "The circus is clearly the place to start," she replied. "Our clients seem to have been so busy making enemies there I wouldn't think they've had time to make them anywhere else." She looked at him suspiciously. "Why do you have that strange expression on your face, John Justin?"

"There's a circus filled to overflowing with suspects, and we've only got four days," he replied. "I was thinking that we might enlist a little outside help."

"Who did you—?" Suddenly Winnifred frowned. "Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "Not the Grundy!"

"He'd be able to tell us who knows enough magic to pull this off," said Mallory.

"He's the most powerful demon on the East Coast—and in case it's slipped your mind, he's your mortal enemy!"

"Maybe he doesn't like someone else practicing magic," suggested Mallory. "Maybe we can make a deal. He may be Evil Incarnate, but he's got his own sense of honor. He's never broken his word to me."

"His last word was that he was going to disembowel you slowly and painfully," she reminded him.

Mallory shrugged. "A poetic metaphor."

"From a demon who never breaks his word?"

"All right," he said with a sigh. "I won't talk to the Grundy. What do you suggest?"

"Our obvious first step is to go to the circus and look around," said Winnifred. "I'm not without my contacts there."

"You have contacts at the circus?" said Mallory, surprised.

"I was a white hunter for forty years before I retired and you saved me from a life of boredom," she reminded him. "I'm the one who captured half the beasts in the circus."

"I don't suppose any of them practice magic?"

"Don't be silly, John Justin," she said. "They're just dumb brutes."

"Lions and tigers and the like?" asked Mallory.

"Nothing so mundane," she said. "I brought back every gorgon, gryphon, dragon and harpy you'll see there, as well as some of the more exotic creatures."

Mallory stared at her with open admiration. "I'm suddenly remembering why I wouldn't let you say No when I offered to make you my partner." He got to his feet. "We might as well get started."

Ninety pounds of feminine muscle and fur launched itself through the air and landed on his back.

"I'm going too!" said Felina.

"I don't think so," said Mallory. "We'll probably be there more than five minutes, and I've never seen you behave yourself for five minutes at a time."

"But I'm your friend, John Justin."

"Only when you're hungry," said Mallory. "You'll just be a nuisance."

"No, I won't," Felina assured him. "Oh, I'll desert you when the going gets rough—but in the meantime I'm your devoted friend."

"I don't suppose you could devote yourself to getting off my back," said Mallory.

"Yes, John Justin," she purred, leaping lightly to the floor.

"You're going to listen to orders and do exactly as I say, right?"

"Yes, John Justin," she purred.

"And you'll behave yourself?"

"Yes, John Justin," she purred.

"Why don't I believe you?" he said.

"Yes, John Justin," she purred.

Mallory and Winnifred exchanged looks. "Okay," he said, "let's get this show on the road."

Winnifred walked through the doorway. Mallory was about to follow her when Felina leaped onto his back again.

"Prove your love," she purred. "Carry me."

The Ringling & Bailey Barnum Brothers Circus was ensconced in an abandoned hockey stadium. Here and there were small crosses commemorating where various hockey players had died in fights, or from minor infractions like high-sticking, knifing, mugging, or shooting with an unregistered handgun.

The main arena now housed three rings, plus rigging for all the high-wire and trapeze acts. It was midmorning, and some of the performers were running through their routines. Winnifred seemed to know her way around, so Mallory fell into step behind her. Finally, after greeting a number of old friends, she stopped and turned to him.

"I think we can cover a lot more ground if we split up, John Justin," she said. "I'll start interviewing the performers, and you can concentrate on the sideshow."

"Sounds good to me," said Mallory. "Come along, Felina."



"Look at those juicy birds!" whispered Felina, pointing above the center ring.

"Those are trapeze artists," said Mallory. "Come on now."

He reached out, grabbed her hand, and began walking off toward the sideshow.

"I wonder how much white meat they have?" mused Felina.

"I never knew you to be that fussy about what you ate before," noted Mallory.

She pointed to the three flyers and the catcher. "I never had that many to choose from before."

They walked out of the main area and into the broad corridor, some sixty feet wide, that circled it. The corridor was lined with sideshow attractions and kiosks offering everything from beer to protection against deadly spells. One man was selling nothing except umbrellas guaranteed to protect the buyer from rains of toads.

"The all-seeing all-knowing Madame Nadine will guess your time of death for a dollar," offered a woman in glowing robes as Mallory and Felina passed by.

"I'm still alive," said Mallory.

"I meant your first death," explained Madame Nadine, as if speaking to a child. "For another dollar, I'll guess your height, weight, and political affiliation."

"What if you're wrong?"

"Then you'll feel smug and superior all day long."

"But I'll also feel two dollars poorer," said Mallory.

"What do you want for two dollars, Mac?" she said irritably. "For twenty bucks I'll do an Irish jig and sing 'The Ring Dang Doo,' if that's more to your taste."

Mallory pulled a hundred dollar bill out of his wallet and held it up.

"For *that*," said Madame Nadine, "you get three sexual perversions and a player to be named later."

"Not interested," said Mallory.

"That's odd," she said. "You don't *look* like some kind of sicko."

"This is my cat," said Mallory, indicating Felina.

"You want a threesome, it'll be a hundred and fifty."

"Why don't you just listen to me?" said Mallory in annoyed tones.

"It's two hundred for listening to you talk dirty," she said.

"Do you want to earn this money, or do you want to tell me all the things you won't do for it?"

"You talk, I'll listen," said Madame Nadine.

"Like I said, this is my cat," said Mallory. "I'm moving to a smaller place. I want to find someone who can shrink her down to two or three feet in height. Let me know who can do it and the hundred is yours."

"Just for that?" she asked suspiciously.

"Just for that."

"No sexual perversions, no threesomes with animals, no wild orgies with totally disgusting sex toys?"

"Nope."

"Damn!" said Madame Nadine unhappily. Then: "Okay, the man you want to see is Marvin the Mystic."

"Where do I find him?"

"I seem to remember that the deal was a hundred bucks for his name," she said. "Nobody said anything about telling you where you could find him."

Mallory reached into his pocket and pulled out a ten dollar bill.

Madame Nadine frowned. "Five hundred."

"I already know his name," said Mallory. "I'll just ask one of the others where to find him. Come on, Felina."

"Wait!" said Madame Nadine.

Mallory stopped and turned to her.

"You say ten, I say five hundred," she said. "Let's split the difference. Four hundred seventy-five and I'll tell you."

"Let's split the difference," replied Mallory. "Eleven dollars and I won't ask someone else."

"All right," she said, holding out her hand. Mallory gave her a ten and a one. "If you'll go around the corner you'll come to the Visitors' Locker Room. Marvin has appropriated the coach's office, which is just off to the right."

"Thanks," said Mallory. He studied her face. "You only got eleven dollars. Why do you look so happy?"

"You'll find out," promised Madame Nadine. A maintenance man walked by, carrying a shovel and a pail. "Hey, Mac," she said, all interest in Mallory gone now that the deal was completed, "guess your fourteen favorite Andrews Sisters for a dollar?"

"There were only three," said Mallory.

"Depends which Andrews family you're talking about, doesn't it?" Madame Nadine shot back, never taking her eyes off her new mark.

"Let's go," said Mallory to Felina, heading off toward the locker room and hoping he wouldn't pass anyone rehearsing a trained bird act along the way.

They reached their destination, and Mallory looked around for the coach's office. It took only a moment to locate the door, but a goblin, an elf, a troll and a leprechaun were lounging in front of it.

Mallory took a step toward the door, and suddenly all four of them turned to face him, shoulder to shoulder.

"Take a hike, buddy," said the goblin.

"I want to see your boss," said Mallory.

"Our boss left orders," said the troll. "Nobody disturbs him."

"Right," chimed in the leprechaun. "So just take off before we lose our tempers. I haven't killed anyone since breakfast, and I'm getting restless."

"Right," said the goblin. "You take one more step in this direction and we'll dispatch you with such skill and dexterity that they'll award us both ears and the tail."

"Right," added the elf. "There won't be enough of you left to bury!"

"Uh . . ." said the troll nervously. "I don't want to be presumptuous or anything, but what's the hideous creature behind you?"

"That's Felina," said Mallory. "Say hello to the boys, Felina."

Felina offered them a toothy grin and extended a hand. An instant later shining two-inch claws jutted forth from each finger.

"Now," said Mallory, "you were saying something about not disturbing Marvin the Mystic?"

"Well," said the troll, backing up a step, "when you get right down to it, I don't see how a friendly little visit could actually *disturb* him."