

She sat at the table and rested her hands on the scrubbed pine to stop them from trembling. She glanced at Robert but he seemed unaware of her agitation.

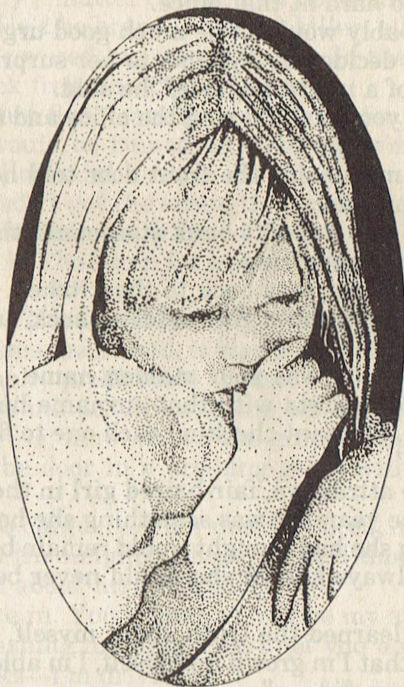
"... finally traced you through your marriage to Robert Smythe ... and now I feel I must meet you ... of course, my adoptive parents will always be 'Mum' and 'Dad' to me but ..."

Blinking back the tears, she heard Robert asking if the letter was bad news.

"Bad? Oh no" Quite the contrary, she thought. But how would her husband take it?

The guilt she had borne all those years suddenly overwhelmed her and she pushed the snapshot across the table.

"Robert, I don't quite know how to ... there's something I've got to tell you ... something that happened before I met you ..."



Freelance editor and writer Claire Caterer hails from Rego Park, New York. For her first paid fiction publication she has created a police detective with a modern voice and placed him in a traditional "cozy," complete with a full cast of characters, clues, and small-town ambiance ...

DEATH ON THE REACH

by **CLAIRE M. CATERER**

A fellow like me stumbles on dead bodies with some regularity; that I will grant you. Comes with the job and I'm not complaining. That doesn't make it any more enjoyable. Oh, there have been some routine ones—old Mrs. Rayburn at the foot of her oak tree, for instance; we all knew she'd fall out of that thing one of these days—or Sam Eaton choking to death on a peach pit; that man never was careful with his fruit. But if there was ever a body I regretted finding, it was that of Gardiner Mallone, face up, mouth open, flat on his back in his velour smoking jacket on his king-size bed, which was, otherwise, nicely made up with hospital corners. Not a pin out of place—even the hole in his forehead as even and clean as you'd find anywhere. Pity to say that almost before I told myself, He's dead!, I thought, damned if the job wasn't neat. About the neatest I'd ever seen.

If I hadn't seen more than my share, being the sheriff of Garth's Reach, then maybe I'd not have such a cause to talk.

The Reach, naturally, is the water, not the island, but some Puritan back in seventeen-something got the idea that he'd make life simpler for himself by calling the two the same damned thing. Garth's is pretty enough, like all these New England islands—it's got the reefs, the reeds, the saltbox houses—but it's anything but peaceful. It's the out-of-towners, islanders will tell you, that make

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it such a deathtrap. They're always dragging their problems into their vacations where they don't belong, and that's why the place reeks of crime every summer. The locals are sure the summer folks will keep all their trouble to themselves, so they're not afraid to walk the beach after ten or venture out to the boathouse when the fog's too thick to spit through. But I know, because I see it every year: This place is full of death, summer folks or no summer folks.

I ended up being sorry I found Gardiner Mallone, but I can't say I got all choked up over his passing. Little New York bastard made all his money in real estate—city real estate, not even the country stuff, which because it's pretty makes it seem kind of genteel-like. He had his fingers in five or six city pies full of dissatisfied tenants. I never saw them, naturally—I don't leave this island except to go into Boston for my favorite tobacco—but I read the papers same as anybody. Man buys firetraps and roach motels and then decides it's nice and cheap to keep them that way. Hell, I wasn't the only one not sniffing over this.

Mrs. Mallone herself didn't seem too broken up about it, which didn't look quite right, even given the S.O.B. he was. She'd been on a bike ride up to the lighthouse, and when she came back all sweaty and flushed and saw my car out front, she came in slow to the bedroom and stopped at the door, taking it all in at once: me, Mr. Mallone's still and gaping mouth, the neat clean hole, Hodges the coroner. And then she looked at each one of us again, just to get it straight, and then finally at me a third time, and crumpled right there. Not fainted, exactly; I took note of that. Just a slow kind of collapse, like a piece of newspaper crinkling up in a flame. Hodges was right there to catch her—always a gentlemanly type, though I think it was as much Mrs. Mallone's red hair and terry-cloth shorts he was concerned with. Not that I'm any judge.

"You don't think it was me," she said to me when the crumpling was done with and the body got rid of and the coffee on the stove. I never had sat in their kitchen before. This was one saltbox that looked more like a salt mansion. The coffeepot perked on one of two stoves, one at each end of a kitchen that was about the size of my whole shack. I stretched out on one plushy chair and propped my bum leg on another. Vivian Mallone cocked one eye at my foot on her chair and handed me a cup. I took the coffee and she smiled at me, one of those polite kind of thin-lipped you-think-I'm-a-killer smiles. As I said, I've seen it before.

"No weapon on the premises," I told her. "That's in your favor."

"Certainly more than that is in my favor, Sheriff." She had changed to a velvet dressing gown and her red hair sat kind of nice against the black lapels, and her being that New York kind of thin—well, she was distracting.

"A spouse is the primary suspect in such cases," I said.

"But I was out riding. You saw me come in."

"Anybody see you out riding? You stop anywhere for a tonic?"

She smiled. "A soda? No."

"Mind you, I'm not saying one way or the other." I was trying to be delicate. "But the motive's there. You stand to make out pretty nice."

"You mean this?" She waved a long-fingered hand around the kitchen, by which I took it she meant the whole house. "I've got money of my own, Sheriff. I don't need Gardiner's."

"For some people, there's never enough."

"I'm not some people." She poured the coffee out. "For someone of my means, I live quite modestly. I keep the Manhattan apartment on East Seventy-fifth Street—oh, I know, Sheriff, it sounds lavish, but I assure you, it isn't—and the house here on Garth's. Occasionally we rent a place in East Hampton, if the weather is too cold in New England. The beaches, you know." She shivered.

"That apartment—that's yours, you say?"

"You knew Gardiner, didn't you?"

"Can't say that I did, ma'am."

She gave a little laugh, like a cough. "Well, Sheriff, even to see him around, to meet him in the checkout of Burke & Burke, or just wherever, you could tell—the East Side was no place for Gardiner. No, for him it was Central Park West or nothing." When she took a drink of the coffee, her upper lip curled up like a clam. "He was awfully trendy."

"Are you saying you didn't live together?"

"Oh, not at all. We *lived* together. But I always kept another apartment for—well, special occasions of one kind or another. I'd had it before we were married, you see, and it was very dear to me. I couldn't just give it up." She sucked air in through her teeth. "Gardiner couldn't stand that."

I couldn't stand much more of Vivian Mallone, red hair or no. I let her be, in her grief, I told her, though I didn't think there was much of that. I told her she wasn't to leave Garth's Reach for a while, not till we'd given this one a good run for its money. She just

upped her eyebrows at me and told me she wasn't planning on going anywhere just yet.

Call it sheriff's intuition, if you like, but I can sniff them out just like a bloodhound. That bicycle alibi didn't impress me much, and while I turned the whole thing around in my head I kept seeing her upper lip curl up—the way it might if a snake had slithered over her. Mrs. Mallone wasn't just not mourning—she was downright relieved he was gone.

But I'd never let anybody say MacReady wasn't fair and thorough, instincts or no. I did my asking around. "Yeah," Lloyd Henderson told me, "I seen her bike up my way round ten this morning. She come zooming by like a speedboat. Pedaling not like to get somewhere"—he nodded in that dumb way he has when he thinks he's got one of my crimes licked—"but like she was running *away* from somewhere."

"Don't blow it up past all recognition," I said to him.

I gazed back out to the road. He was halfway up the hill to the lighthouse, set back from the road a good fifty yards among the reeds. His eyes are not what they once were, and he was sitting out on his porch with the paper. Did he really know who he was looking at?

"I know," he snapped at me. "You know anybody else with that red hair? And I'll tell you something else I saw: She had on those little fluffy tennis shorts. Blue. I only noticed her 'cause she shouted out to me while she was going by and waved, real cheery like. So I waved back."

Even the bike he had down to a T. Well, he'd seen her, of that I was convinced. I walked out to the car and looked down the road. Had to be a mile from her house to his. She would've had to leave her place no later than nine-thirty, and Hodges said Mallone was killed around eleven, not half an hour before we found him. I began to think this wouldn't be as easy as I'd thought.

I don't, as a rule, let Riley come with me when I look into the scene of a crime. I tell him someone's got to look after the office, which is the truth, but Hillary's there to watch the place, and maybe a sheriff should be taking his chief deputy along on such things. Still, I like to be by myself with a case for a while, without some loudmouth telling me what's what.

Like it or not, Riley always shows up eventually, though.

"I'll tell you what it is, Mac," he said to me the afternoon of the Mallone murder. He slurped down his cup of coffee in two gulps and scratched one fingernail across his black eyebrows. "She kills the guy, right? Then she gets in her car, stashes the bike in there, and *drives* up to the lighthouse. Then she bikes round the other way, and bikes right by Lloyd, waves at him so he sees her, then—"

"Hang on there. Sit down, can't you?" That's the thing with Riley. Just like a big dumb lab, he can't sit still, always running up to you with his tongue hanging out. "She didn't drive anything. For one thing, the car was sitting right there in the drive when I went in. She came in a few minutes later, on the bike. Besides—" I paused a sec, trying to light my pipe. I keep thinking it'll make me look more classy, but I spend all my time cleaning and tamping the damned thing. "No place to park a car up on that road. No." The tobacco flared a little. "She biked back from the lighthouse, all right."

Riley deflated into his desk chair. "Guess there's more than a few people who'd like to see Gardiner Mallone in a box."

Maybe there were, but nobody more than Vivian, was my guess. And I still had a few cards to play. I suspected something that even my little *Dragnet* deputy Riley didn't know.

When I came by the next day she was making a show of being a naturalist—actually out there in the dirt in gloves and denims and her hair in a scarf, troweling up some flowers with quick, vicious little stabs. She wore the same pointy sunglasses I remembered from the bike trip.

"Absolutely nothing grows in this salt air," she said as she yanked up her roses. "I don't know why I bother."

"You need something a little sturdier. Nasturtium. Sweet Alyssum. Maybe a bayberry bush."

She settled back on her haunches and looked at me. "Well, Sheriff. You're just a wealth of information, aren't you?"

"And I'm about to show off again, I'm afraid. It may be something you don't want to talk about. As you know, we're still working on leads in your husband's murder."

She plunged the trowel into the wet ground again. "Yes, I appreciate your hard work."

"I wonder if you know there's a few rumors going round about your—well—outside activities, if you will. You mentioned that other place you keep in New York."

"I don't know how anyone in Garth's Reach would know anything about what I do or don't do in New York."

"Oh, you know people here. Funny how everybody seems to know lots of people on the mainland, you know? How everyone's got connections." I settled myself into one of her white iron lawn chairs. For something so expensive they were damned uncomfortable. "For instance, my deputy's brother works on Wall Street. Did I tell you that? And his boss happened to know your husband. So things, as they say, get around."

"What are you trying to say, Sheriff? What did you hear about Gardiner?"

I tried to lean forward, but the hip locked and I stayed where I was. "He knew you were having that fling, didn't he?"

Her face went white, which wasn't a bad picture next to the lipstick and the roses. I notice things like colors. "I don't think I understand," she said.

"Mind you, I'm not saying anything for it or against it. But I like to have all the facts laid out in front of me. You were having a fling and Mr. Mallone found out about it, isn't that right?"

"I won't try to pretend we had a perfect marriage, Gardiner and I," she said, picking the petals off one of the roses. "There was someone, and yes, Gardiner found out about him. A younger man, from my office. But I swear to you, that was all over months ago. You can check into it yourself. His name is Jeffrey Madigan."

She started breathing more normally when I pulled out my notebook and licked my pencil. "That was . . . ?"

"Jeff Madigan. But please, Sheriff, there's no reason to get him mixed up in this."

"You'd be better off telling me everything up front. Anything might have a bearing on things." I took down Madigan's number, too, but I didn't think I was going to use it. "Thanks ever so."

As I limped off the property, Mrs. Mallone dug her hands into the dirt. She ripped those roses out, roots and all, just like they were weeds. Apparently she didn't mind the thorns.

Of course, Riley's brother is a lobsterman up in Maine and to my knowledge has never set foot in New York City. But some folks have to be prodded to give up anything at all.

Even so, the Madigan lead was cold. No great businessman, her honey, and he'd been busted back down to office clerk awhile back. It was clear they weren't together anymore.

"But what about Mallone, Mac?" Riley asked me over clam rolls. "Well, what about him?"

"There's more than one islander says he hasn't been exactly faithful himself. Maybe he tried to break it off, you know, and somebody got a little angry. . . ."

"Nah." I squirted some vinegar on my potatoes. Damn but Riley gets under my skin sometimes. I'm usually up on all the local gossip. "I never heard that about Mallone. He was a bastard, all right, but he never got mixed up—not around here, anyway."

Riley leaned back and tightened his greasy ponytail. "I heard something else. You know the Murray family? She's the one."

"Who?"

"Jolene, obviously."

"You're out in left field, Riley. She's just a girl. And a local. She couldn't get mixed up with that character. Her dad used to be a volunteer deputy in the summer. Used to bring her in all the time."

"And when was that? Ten years ago? Fifteen? She's my age, Mac. You haven't seen her lately. She's at the club almost every night."

I grunted. *The club*, as Riley calls it, is just a cheap kind of disco with a big ball hanging from the ceiling and everybody pretending they're dancing to live music. If you can call it music. More trouble has come about since they slapped up that ugly thing than in all the years previous.

"Anyway, the local poop at the Starlight is that Jolene's bike's been seen in the Mallones' garage more than once. I got it from a reliable source."

I hate how Riley knows the younger crowd better than I do. "Well, maybe. I'll check it out." I scooped up my clam crumbs and threw them in the trash.

"Why can't I check it out?"

"You? You've got to stick close to the Starlight and make sure those kids stay out of trouble tonight. You're on duty there, remember? Not partying duty, either."

I wonder sometimes why Riley sticks around, but he seems not to mind being left behind. When I mentioned the Starlight, he grinned and rubbed his hands together. "Don't you worry, Mac. I can keep that crowd in line."

I drove up Seaside Way, the winding road on the east coast of the island—the main drag—all the way to Lighthouse Point. It's the only working lighthouse we have on Garth's Reach. Folks love to go

up there and sit in the reeds, looking down on the sea. There are dangerous currents down there. We've lost a few kids to the undertow. It can pull you in when you're doing nothing but staring at it, those big craggy rocks throwing the sea every which way, the foam curling around the Point. No number of signs keep people from dipping their toes in. They're just going down to collect shells or rocks, they tell me, because the sea grows a pink rock like you'd never see on land—but somehow they get sucked out to the waves, and like as not you never see them again.

It's no fun walking up to the lighthouse, not even once you've gone as far as you can in a car. I parked on the upper reaches of the road, where it turns to sand, and trekked, slowly with my bum leg, up to the lighthouse and knocked.

Ian Crawford opened up. He almost never pokes his head out, except once in a blue moon to have a drink at the Seahorse Tavern down on the harbor. He's an old seaman, even beyond my years, with watery blue eyes and that way hermits have about them of not looking you quite in the eye. But he likes me.

"Come on in, Sheriff, have some coffee. Just made it. Enough for two."

"Thanks. Don't mind if I do."

His little kitchen's about all there is to his living quarters, except for the cot pushed in a dark alcove to the back. A gull screamed by as he poured. "Expecting any weather tonight?" I asked.

"Sure enough. Big fog's rolling in about eight o'clock, I think. Going to be a late night. Lots of pleasure boats going to be out. You know those people—they'll go out in any kind of weather, don't matter what you tell 'em." He hacked in disgust.

"Lights working?"

"Just had 'em checked." Ian chewed one side of his lip. "This a social call, Mac? I hope." Periodically I've had to consult Ian about some youngster who vanished off his coast.

"Not exactly." I pulled out a photo from my jacket pocket. "Have you seen this girl before?"

He peered closely at the photo for several minutes. It was a snapshot from the summer before of Jolene Murray, a young woman with big eyes and shiny black hair. Pretty, like they all seem to be nowadays.

"Sure," Ian said finally. "She's up here quite a bit. Bike rider. Local girl, ain't she?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"She's not—?"

"No, no. She's fine. Her mom said she might be up here now."

"I saw her just about an hour ago, down on the beach. Her bike's there in the back of the lighthouse."

He took me around to where the bike lay in the sand, a beat-up Schwinn three-speeder girl's bike, almost all the green paint worn off it. "Saw her the other day, too," Crawford added.

"Do you remember when exactly?"

"Yesterday," he said at once. "That's right, 'cause that's the day Beverly found out she was gonna have Joshua's kid. Can you believe that? And her engaged to that nice doctor, too."

"Beverly?"

"Honest to gravy, Mac, don't you ever turn on the TV in that little office of yours? That's my favorite show. It was the first commercial break, and I looked out the window and saw Jolene walking down towards the beach. She looked back up the hill and waved at me, and she shouted out, 'How's Bev?' and I said, 'She's having a baby!' Then I went back to my show."

"What time would that have been?"

He scratched his chin. "Oh, let's see . . . show's on at eleven, the first break's about eleven-fifteen, I'd say."

I checked my notes. Mallone was dead by eleven. "You're sure that was Jolene?"

"Oh yeah. She had this big yellow sundress on. She wears it lots in the summer. And that black hair. She was a little ways off, but it was her, all right."

I wasn't about to argue with Ian Crawford. When he knows something for sure, he's usually right. I left the lighthouse and peered over the edge of the stairs. That yellow dress Ian talked about was pounding the beach like a sentry. I started down—had to be about sixty stairs. I knew going back would be a treat.

I was panting by the time I got there. Jolene was barefoot, skipping rocks out on the water when the waves didn't break over them.

"Hi there, Mac!" She ran right over and I realized it had been awhile since I'd seen her. She was no kid anymore.

"Hey, Jolene. You ought to be careful out here. Current's something nasty."

"Oh, I never swim out here. I know better. Look here, isn't this a beauty?" She picked up a large, flat, purple stone.

"How's your dad doing? Enjoying retirement?"

"He loves it, all right." Jolene gazed out at the waves and said, slowly, "Are you just out for a stroll, Sheriff?"

"Stroll! Down those steps? No kinda leisure for me." I found it hard to look at her straight. I kept seeing the ten-year-old. "Jo, I suppose you heard about that business up at the Mallone place?"

"You mean the killing." She sat down on a rock that jutted out to sea. She drew her knees up under her, and the dress, a big wide thing, covered her so she looked like a gull nesting. "Yeah. I heard about it."

"I've known you some years now, haven't I?"

"Sure, Mac. Sure."

"Well, then, you can be straight with me. Just how well did you know Gardiner Mallone?"

She looked back up at me finally, those violet eyes so full they looked twice their size. She shook her head. "I don't know what you mean."

"Come on now, I think you do." Riley's no crackerjack P.I., but he usually knows who's bedding who. I walked over and put an arm around her. She shivered under the bite of the sea air. "Wasn't there something between you two? Maybe?"

She hid her head against my shoulder. "No, nothing. I swear."

"Here now." I gave her my handkerchief. "You seem pretty broke up about someone you didn't even know, don't you think? All I'm saying is there's been talk."

"They always talk! If you're pretty, they always talk."

"Well, I won't deny you're pretty." I waited till she'd wiped her nose and pretty much ruined any use I'd get out of the handkerchief. "But it's no crime to be taken in by one of those fellows. Happens to a lot of people, Jo. I'm not trying to pry. But I have to know what all was going on with him if I'm to find out who killed him, you see? I won't spread it around." Not that it needed any help from me.

"Okay, Mac. But don't tell Dad, okay?"

"'Course not."

"We did have something—Gardiner and me. It was nothing big. Not to him, anyway." She kept turning the handkerchief over and over to find a dry corner. "I guess it meant more to me. You know, I was stupid. I thought he'd—well—"

"You thought he'd leave Mrs. Mallone for you?"

She turned and threw the rock in her hand as hard as she could. "Pretty stupid."

"No stupider than millions of other folks have been over millions of years," I told her.

"Anyway, he broke up with me. About two weeks ago. Just threw me away, like I threw away that rock there." Suddenly she hugged me tight and I couldn't help thinking what a fool that Gardiner Mallone was.

"Okay, I know he wasn't anybody's honor boy. But just think a minute for me. What exactly did you do yesterday? Do you remember?"

She wiped her face with the back of one hand, leaving a smear of red lipstick. "Sure. Yeah. I had a date." She smiled at me a little sheepishly. "Rebound, I guess."

"That's all right. No business of mine. When was the date?"

"Well, let's see. I rode my bike up here. I guess I left about nine o'clock in the morning."

"Yeah? How long does it take to get here, usually?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . uphill, I guess about two hours."

"Did you stop anywhere?"

"Yeah. That's a tough ride, you know. I stopped at Mindy's Mufins, on Garth Drive, for some juice. Probably about ten."

"You take it with you?"

"Yeah. I stopped a second to chat with Mindy."

"You were riding up the west coast of the island, on Garth's Drive, the whole way?"

"That's right. I don't think I stopped again, not for a while."

"Pretty busy road," I said, taking out my notebook. "Should've taken a side street."

"I passed by lots of houses, Mac," she added quickly. "I saw the Creightons getting in their car to go out someplace. Mrs. Billimer waved to me while she was weeding her garden. Then I saw one of the summer people on West Lighthouse Road, when I turned up there. I'm not sure who it was—a tall guy, blond, maybe thirty. I remember thinking he was cute, so I asked him what time it was. He said about ten till eleven."

The leg itched and I shifted my weight. A memory as good as Jolene's always makes me nervous. I took it down as she told it. "That blond fella—must be that Olsen. He has a place up there on West Lighthouse."

"I guess so."

"Now what about this date?"

"Well, just past the blond guy's house is the end of the road, so I left my bike and went down to the beach. I had some time. I wasn't supposed to meet Tom until eleven-thirty. I came down here and picked up some shells, and then I went back up to the lighthouse."

"Did you see anybody else? Was anyone on the beach?"

"It was pretty cool still in the morning. Not many people were around, no one I knew, except . . ."

"Except?"

She started tearing up again. "Except Mrs. Mallone. I remember seeing her and thinking I just wanted to be somewhere else, anywhere else. I hid behind the lighthouse until she left, but she saw me. I know she did. She gave me this look, like she knew who I was and what happened with me and Gar—Mr. Mallone."

"You saw Mrs. Mallone? Are you sure about that?"

She rubbed her eyes. "Oh yeah, Mac. It was her. I know it."

"And that was—when?"

"I don't know. It must've been around eleven or so."

"Do you remember what she was wearing? What she was doing?"

"She had that fancy bike of hers—you know, the twelve-speeder. I guess she rode up. I remember thinking she didn't look so good, you know, all sweaty, and I liked seeing her not so made up like she always is. She had on these pointy sunglasses and some kind of jumper—a blue jumper." Jo leaned over and picked up another rock and worried it between her thumb and forefinger.

"And you hid behind the lighthouse?"

"Yeah. I heard her say something to Mr. Crawford on her way out. She didn't stick around long. She rode back off down West Lighthouse. Then I came out and started back down to the beach. Mr. Crawford saw me and waved, and I said something to him. Then I went back down to the beach to wait for Tom."

"Your date?"

"Yeah. He showed up late—about twelve, I guess—and we had a picnic. I'm not sure how long we stayed. Till about two o'clock, three, I guess."

My notebook was filling up fast. "And then how'd you get home? You rode your bike back?"

Jo nodded.

I looked out to the water. Way out north I could see the fog Crawford had predicted getting set to roll in. "Okay, Jo. I appreciate your putting the whole day together like that for me. Now you think

hard: Is there anybody else that you know of might like to see Mr. Mallone dead? Or even just hurt?"

"No, Mac. Nobody I know about."

I checked through the notes. "And you're sure that was Mrs. Mallone you saw up here, talking to Ian Crawford?"

"I'd know her anywhere."

I patted her hand absently and picked my way through the rocks. The salt air was hitting my arthritis pretty bad, but when I looked up the cliff to the stairs, I knew there was nothing for it but to climb them, so up I started.

Ian's coffee was still hot. "I don't know this Vivian," he said as he poured. "Never met her or her husband."

"Supposed to be real athletic—she's into bike riding. She's been coming to Garth's Reach a few summers now. She never rode here before?"

"Maybe. I never seen her—never met her by name, I ought to say. I did see a stranger, though, yesterday—same day I saw Jolene."

I took another snapshot out of my pocket. "Was this the stranger you saw, Ian?"

"Hmmm. Yeah, might've been. Hard to say." He set out some bread and cheese. "Help yourself, Sheriff."

"Don't mind if I do. Maybe you could tell me who you did see."

He stood at the window, gazing out at the ocean. "Fog's coming in, like I said." He was lost out on the water a moment, and I waited. "What's that you were saying? Oh, the lady I saw. Yeah, she looked something like that picture all right. Bright red hair like that. Young. Twenties, I guess. Had on these sunglasses, real pricey ones, with kinda silvery points on 'em, like they used to wear back years ago. Looked like they had wings."

I nodded.

"She had her hair done up in a scarf, a blue scarf, but lots of hair coming back down behind, red, like I say. And a nice bicycle. You could tell she was no local folk—that's one nice machine she had. And bright lip color, like to blind a man."

"Do you remember what she was wearing?"

"Well . . . I don't know, exactly. Some kinda shorts and top. Real short, like they wear 'em now. I didn't get too close a look. She was pushing her bike down the hill, and she just turned around and waved and smiled. I said hello just to be friendly. Saw her just before my show started, or believe me, I wouldn't've noticed."

I stood up and stretched. "Thanks ever so, Ian. I won't be bothering you again, I hope."

But his eyes were on the window. "You can see it comin' in," he murmured to nobody in particular. "It rolls in just like a blanket, and before you know it, the air turns into water. You stay wrapped up here, there's nobody knows where you are. Might as well be hiding in a grave, covered with a shroud."

I couldn't say I liked the way the Mallone murder was shaping up. I like a clean murder, if you'll pardon the expression, the kind of thing that's cut and dried. I stayed at the station late that evening and drank a couple of pots of coffee. I wasn't going to sleep anyway.

Riley stopped in about ten. "I thought you were off keeping the Starlight gang in line," I said.

"Just thought I'd let you know I looked into Jolene's story, and it checks out. Mindy at Mindy's Muffins said Jo stopped in about a quarter to ten and stayed a few minutes. Mrs. Billimer said she saw Jo somewhere between ten and eleven. The Creightons back her up, too. Even Greg Olsen, up on West Lighthouse."

I shrugged. "Figures."

Riley poured the dregs from my percolator into one of the stained mugs. "It just doesn't follow that Jo did it."

"Who says she did? I don't think Jolene had anything to do with it. I just wish she could've told me she never saw Vivian Mallone up at the Point, but both her and Crawford did."

"She was pretty upset about being dumped like that."

"Nah. Oh, maybe she was, but a young girl like her—she doesn't *kill* for something like that. She still loves him. She thought he'd leave his wife."

"I think we ought to check into that boyfriend. Maybe Vivian got him to do it for her."

"Lead's cold. I checked it out."

"But I didn't." Riley grinned. "How about it? I could go to New York, do a stakeout near the little snoutnose's office—"

"Forget it. Take your vacation on your own time." I stood up and the knee cracked good.

"Where are you going now?"

"I don't know. Somewhere to think."

Riley looked at me a minute with as much sympathy as a young fellow like him can muster. "Have you had dinner? We could catch a late supper at the Seahorse. Good fish and chips."

It didn't sound half bad, and I knew the kid meant well, but I wasn't up to it. "Maybe tomorrow. Shouldn't be driving too much in this stuff anyway." I pointed out the window at the solid white sheet that engulfed the station house.

"Yeah, well, take it easy, okay?"

"Thanks, Riley."

The place I usually go to think is the Point, but I didn't need Riley telling me I shouldn't go with the fog as thick as the phlegm in my throat. I've been driving these island roads so long I don't need to look at them anymore. They just take me.

It gave me a little comfort to follow the route I thought Vivian Mallone had taken. Up from her place past Henderson's was straight along Seaside, shrouded to the point that I couldn't see five feet in front of me. Lloyd's place was hidden from the roadside. A little ways past, on an impulse, I left Seaside and turned west, on a little road creatively named West Fork. It curves around some quarter mile or so before meeting up with Garth's Drive on the west side of the island. It gets tricky up there; a second fork, Sandy Hook, will take you back onto Seaside if you're not careful. But as I say, I know the roads.

In the murk up on West Lighthouse I could make out a yellow blot of light, like a bit of paint, that I realized must be Greg Olsen's place. I stopped the car.

I flashed my badge up to his peephole and he stood aside to let me in. "You're the sheriff?"

"That's right. I guess you're Greg Olsen, though I don't think I've ever had the pleasure."

He led me into his living room, a cramped, dark little space cluttered with fishing gear and cheered a little by the fireplace crackling at one end. "I'm a little bit of a hermit when I come out to the island," he admitted, and cleared a chair for me. "I talked to your deputy earlier, about that murder."

"Yeah, I know. I'm not trying to harass you or anything." I shook my head when he held up a can of coffee. "This thing's been bugging me, is all. Riley says the girl's story checks out—that you saw her biking up here yesterday morning."

"That's right. Dark-haired girl, nineteen or twenty. Nice looking."

"Yeah. I was just wondering if you happened to see anybody else come by your way."

He thought a minute, crossing his fingers over his knees. "Well . . . yeah, now that you mention it. Just for a minute, through

the window after I went in. The woman who lives down there on Seaside—I think she's the wife of the man who was killed, isn't she?"

My heart did a quick little gallop. "Yeah. That's her, all right."

"I just glanced out the window, trying to see if that dark-haired girl was still out there. She was gone, but I caught a glimpse of the redhead up the road from here a little ways, turning her bike around. She'd got it stuck somewhere, it looked like. It's muddy up there. It was one of those bulky, awkward sort of bikes—I think that was the problem. Looked like it had seen better days. And I remember thinking she didn't look too good, either."

The fire snapped in the quiet. "What do you mean? Was she sick?"

"Not exactly. She just looked kind of grubby. You know, no makeup on. My ex-wife's a redhead like her, and it's the same thing: Without their makeup, they look like they don't have any features—no eyelashes, no eyebrows, no lips, nothing. Everything's washed out and pale. Tell you the truth, she looks a lot like my ex-wife. She gave me a start there for a minute."

I scratched the back of my neck, not knowing what to say. Sometimes I feel like I've missed out on some big secret by being a bachelor all these years.

"Is that all, Sheriff?"

"Hmmm? Oh, yeah. I won't take up any more of your evening." I stood up. "You didn't happen to notice which way Mrs. Mallone was heading, did you?"

"No, I'm sorry. She was pulling the bike out of the reeds around toward the road again. I guess she was going up to the lighthouse."

"Thanks," I said, and shook his hand. It looked like I was going up to the lighthouse myself.

I didn't feel like bothering Ian Crawford—he gets in a mood of concentration when the weather gums up the coast—so I wandered along the Point by myself. The air pressed into my skin like a cold, clammy finger. The gimp leg ached in response.

I couldn't see the water, of course, but I heard it crashing below, throwing itself on the rocks. I thought I heard disconnected voices float along the beach, but the fog plays tricks on you. I gazed into the mist; into nothing.

The reeds rustled on my right and my head snapped round, but the air was empty. Then again came the rustling, this time to my left. Or was it the same direction? For a panicky moment, my ears

lost their sense of balance and I couldn't tell what was coming at me or from where. The mist closed in like a noose around my throat. "Hey there!" I barked out. "Who is it? Who's there?"

That cool, pretty face framed by red hair appeared out of the cloud. "Just me, Sheriff," she said. "I didn't mean to startle you." She walked up beside me and looked out over the misty coast. "It's so pretty up here."

I felt like a fool for being scared, even for a minute. "You shouldn't be here, Mrs. Mallone. It's dangerous. You can walk along here and lose your direction, go right over the cliff and be dashed on the rocks before you know it."

"Is that so." She didn't look at me, but kept her eyes toward the water, which I knew she couldn't see. One hand fingered the pricey necklace she wore. "You don't trust me, Sheriff, do you? You think I had something to do with Gardiner's death."

I shrugged. "We don't know anything yet. You say you biked up to the lighthouse that morning. Witnesses back you up."

She didn't answer, but wiped the dampness from her face. "I loved Gardiner."

"Yeah, well. I'm sure you did."

Vivian Mallone held out a careful hand in front of her face and studied her fingernails. I did, too, seeing them there stark against the fog, an almost blinding red.

A gull screamed above us and I looked up, following his call in the direction of the lighthouse.

Like to blind a man.

My eyes flickered back to Mrs. Mallone's face and she gazed back at me, startled, I could see. "What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

That's what was bugging me. That was it all along. I took a step back from the cliff.

"Mr. MacReady, will you please stop staring?" She hugged her sweater around her. "It's getting cold, and I ought to be going home."

"That's some nail polish you've got on," I said.

"Yes? So?"

"Pretty color. Like your lipstick."

"I don't have any lipstick on." She blotted her mouth with one finger.

"No, not tonight. But you must have a color like that at home, don't you? To match it?"

She wavered a little in front of my eyes. "What are you getting at, Sheriff?"

"What I mean is, you must wear it out, don't you, usually? When you're riding?"

She shrugged. "I ride early in the morning. I don't bother with—" And then she froze. Still, like a sparrow, on the edge of the Point.

"You were going to say . . . ?"

She breathed in short little bursts. "Nothing. Nothing."

"Of course, nothing," I said. "You got nothing to say, do you? You might be interested in the fact that Ian Crawford swears he saw you up at the lighthouse around the time your husband was killed yesterday morning."

"That's because I was here," she spat.

"And he said your lipstick was a bright red color. Like your nails there."

She didn't speak.

"And you might also like to know that Greg Olsen, who lives in that little house up on West Lighthouse Road, said he saw you just before that. And he said you were pale as a ghost, not a drop of makeup on your face." She waited. "Just like you looked when you walked in the house after your ride."

Her hand drew up slowly to catch at her throat and the chain of pearls around it.

"And how do you suppose," I went on, "that you rode up to the lighthouse past Lloyd Henderson's place with that fancy twelve-speed bike and then managed to have an old junky bike when you got up to Greg Olsen's? And what were you doing on West Lighthouse, anyway, when you rode up the east coast of the island?"

"Sheriff, you don't—"

"And how"—I was whispering now—"how do you figure you'd gotten your fancy new bike back by the time you saw Ian Crawford at the lighthouse ten minutes later?"

"I . . ." It came out more like a sigh than a word, and she took another step back. I caught at her hand as she slid on the wet reeds and skated backward. She flailed against me, just like people who are drowning sometimes take down their rescuers with them, and we both slid a little farther towards the edge. With one quick yank I dragged us both back to the rocks and pulled her closer to me.

"What are you trying to do, get us both killed?" I hissed at her. "Come on now, admit it. That wasn't you at all up at that lighthouse, was it? Was it?"

She broke into tears and sobbed for a minute, a delayed reaction from the fall she nearly took, and then dried her eyes on my sleeve and pushed me away. "All right, what if it wasn't?" Her hand leaped out and gripped mine. "I could take us both down to the rocks right now, couldn't I?"

I pulled my pistol. "No. I don't think you could."

She stared dully into the barrel. "It wasn't just me," she said in a low voice. "You can't pin it all on me. It was that little bitch he was sleeping with."

"Who? Jolene?"

Vivian's shoulders jumped with a little laugh. "Oh, I found out long ago about them. I confronted Gardiner with it and he promised to drop her, but that wasn't really what I wanted." Her lip curled again like a worm. "It was the last straw. She was the last in a very long line and Gardiner told her that. It was the sort of thing he enjoyed telling. He was tired of her anyway—her little teenage passions. But she was different from the others, Sheriff. She broke down. She wanted him dead, wanted a piece of him, and I figured that much out myself. So I contacted her. She's a tramp, but that's not the worst thing to be in the world." Suddenly her voice turned cold and calm, now that it was out. She opened her purse and took out a cigarette. She had some trouble lighting it in the damp air, but finally it took.

"I understand her, Sheriff. She may seem like a sweet little island girl to you, but I assure you she's much more like me than you think. So we worked out a deal. I would bike up to the lighthouse, pass Henderson, and make sure he saw me. Then I'd turn on Sandy Hook and meet Jolene coming up Garth's Drive. It was easy from there. She took my bicycle, dressed identically to me, put on a wig and my scarf and dark glasses. Then she rode up to the lighthouse and showed that old coot"—she threw a hand in the direction of the lighthouse—"that I was there. Then, I suppose, she changed her clothes sometime while she was there. Meanwhile, all I had to do was bike straight back down West Lighthouse to West Fork—I made a circle around Henderson's house so he wouldn't see me on the way back—and back to our place." She took a puff. "So you see, Sheriff, I wasn't at the lighthouse when Gardiner was killed. I was standing right over him. With this."

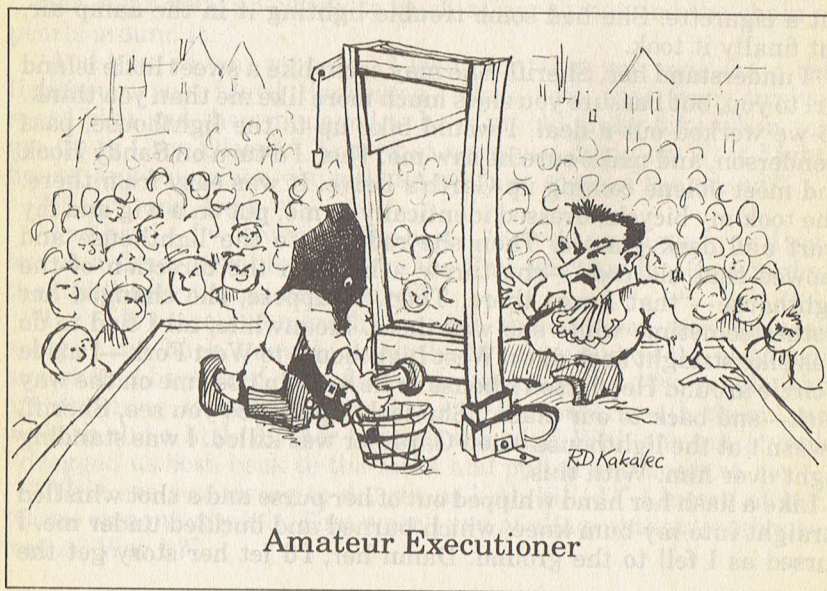
Like a flash her hand whipped out of her purse and a shot whistled straight into my bum knee, which burned and buckled under me. I cursed as I fell to the ground. Damn her, I'd let her story get the

better of me, and let my gun go slack. But I struggled up and fired one of my own.

Even in the fog, I'm a pretty good shot, and she dropped the gun as the bullet found her shooting arm. I took hold of her ankles and wrestled her quickly to the ground. "You can't use that," she jabbered breathlessly. "I'll deny everything."

With some trouble, I got to my feet and pulled her up with me. I kept my revolver close at her back while I slipped the handcuffs on. "You do whatever you think is best," I said and pushed her ahead of me back to the car.

I wasn't worried. Not about proving her story, anyway. I didn't care what kind of fancy city lawyer she was about to hire, I'd see she'd pay for what she did. Silently we rode through the fog back to the station house. There was only one thing bugging me now, and I didn't know a thing I could do about it. Somehow or other, I was going to have to explain to that pipsqueak Riley about the bullet hole in my gimp leg. ●



Amateur Executioner

a **NEW** short story by

MICHAEL Z. LEWIN

This month EQMM presents a case from a relatively new series by author Michael Z. Lewin. Mr. Lewin seems almost to be creating a new genre here, a cross between the family drama and the crime story. Unlike most P.I. stories, which feature a central character and his associates in diminishing order of importance, these "Lunghi" stories by author Lewin revolve around an entire family of investigators who are as likely to crack a case gathered around the family dinner table as on the mean streets of London...

GAINS AND LOSSES

by **MICHAEL Z. LEWIN**

1.

"It's not my case," Walter said. "I mean, she's not one of my clients. I do conveyancing. I don't handle criminal cases for the firm."

"But Walter happened to be there when the woman came out," Rosetta explained. "And she was so upset. Crying, wasn't she, Walter?"

"Copious tears," Walter said.

"He couldn't just walk past her as if she didn't exist," Rosetta said. "That's not your nature, is it, Walter?"

"So what did you do?" Gina asked.

"I said, 'There, there,' and I offered her a cup of tea."

"Even though he was very busy himself," Rosetta said. "Weren't you, dear?" She patted her sort-of fiancé approvingly on the shoulder.

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