

Trinity

A Haydn & Speaker Mystery

Chapter 12



At 9:15 on Sunday morning, May 21, Shrug Speaker picked up Eleanor Wilkinson Trout for church, just as he had promised he would. Of course, the world had now changed. Mrs. Trout's father was no longer the underwriter of the investigation; he was now the putative murderer. Of this startling development Shrug said nothing—partly because he shrank from the prospect of disclosing such a story, partly because untidy ends still dangled, and partly because the occasion seemed singularly inopportune. The drive to Trinity Episcopal was largely silent, the service was austere moving, and the post-service conversation with Allen Clark flowed as Shrug had hoped it would, ending with an invitation from the rector for Mrs. Trout to join them again. It was only when Shrug was driving her home that she broke her reticence to say that she had found the service lovely and that she hoped it would not be too great an imposition for Shrug—given the degree of awkwardness she still felt

about church services—to accompany her for one more Sunday before she struck out on her own. Weighing his grammar carefully, Shrug said that he would be delighted to accompany Mrs. Trout to church the following Sunday “if that should be your wish.” After leaving her at the Castle, he drove home, his thoughts and emotions caught up in an untidy combination of guilt, satisfaction, anger, confusion, and eagerness.

Connie Haydn spent the same morning on the phone. Since Rita Grabek lived on the West Coast, he dared not call her until closer to noon. But for Humboldt calls, the relevant reckoning was to decide how to catch people before they left for church but without intrusively waking them up. Tyler Delsin was easily reached. Connie explained that he was trying to confirm that the notes he and Shrug had been taking were faithful to the information they had been given, and without tipping his hand (he hoped), he received confirmation that when Delsin had left Vince d’Amato’s on June 1, 1996, he had met and spoken with Norman Wilkinson. The time, Delsin guessed, was about 1:30—“but I can’t be sure; it’s all kind of vague, and by now my memory is getting further muddled by my telling what I remembered.” He and Connie laughed, and Connie moved to his next call. The Peabodys were getting ready for church, and to

the question of whether Sandra Peabody had met anybody either entering or leaving Vince's house, she was able to give the curt and expected answer of "no."

Because the sun was just coming up on the West Coast, Connie spent the next hour alternating between reading the Sunday paper and trying to figure out how someone might contrive to delay the start of a house fire. He tried to approach the matter logically: one set of possibilities involved the building of devices that would spark a fire at a later hour, while the other set of possibilities involved the confining of an already-lit fire until its bursting forth at a later hour. If the report on the fire in the d'Amato house was accurate—and I have no choice but to trust it, he thought—then no readily identifiable incendiary device had been used. That suggested that the fire had been set in the evening, a conclusion that everyone had come to and that, after Rita Grabek had cleared everyone except Jason Bigelow for the evening, had led to Bigelow's conviction. "Damn," thought Connie. "It sure would be convenient if Norman Wilkinson didn't have an evening alibi. That's the question Rita Grabek can answer. So there's no sense in my bending my brain into headaches until I get an answer from her." This was really a way of permitting himself to return to the newspaper, for he felt dismally confident that Grabek would confirm that Wilkinson had a respectable

evening alibi.

His confidence was well-placed. When he called Grabek at 10:30 eastern time, he interrupted her breakfast. And since she had company, she didn't press him with the counter-questions he had expected. Yes, Wilkinson had had an evening alibi. Yes, it was solid—speaking at a meeting of United Way or Rotary or some other civic organization. Connie realized that he ought to confirm this through back-copies of the Herald and Examiner, but he knew in his bones that Grabek was right: Wilkinson was too shrewd to have left himself without a perfect alibi for the time when the house fire began. And so, when he finished his final phone call, Connie knew that if Wilkinson was to be shown to be the murderer of Vince d'Amato, then it was incumbent on Shrug and him to show how Wilkinson had contrived to have a fire start at, say, 7:15 when he was attending a dinner at which he was a speaker. "Everything else makes sense," he thought, "but if we can't show how he did it, we can't claim to have solved the mystery."



On Sunday afternoon a crowd of over a thousand people filled Ingersoll Auditorium on the Humboldt College campus for the memorial service that celebrat-

ed the life of Beatrice Morrison. As an accommodation to the sensibilities of the traditional folk of the town, the service included some low-key prayers, delivered by various local clergymen. But in general the tone was secular, occasionally defiantly so, and both Father Gonzalez and Father Clark attended only as spectators. Dean Goodwin—who had, indeed, been appointed acting president—greeted everyone with appropriate solemnity and presided over a series of short reminiscences delivered by faculty members, students, staff members, and townspeople. No one would have expected the remarks to be other than laudatory, but Connie, who was sitting fairly near the front, thought that he was hearing more than the instructive remembering standard to such occasions. Speaker after speaker reminded the quiet audience that Beatrice Morrison had been a bigger-than-life figure. A caring person. A wise person. An intelligent person. A leader who combined vision with compassion. A leader who united rather than divided. The kind of president that any college would be fortunate to have. Connie also noticed that many people, including faculty members whom he didn't care for and some members famous for their intransigence in faculty debate, were dabbing at their eyes or otherwise trying to disguise episodes of teariness. Her death, he thought, is proving to be even more traumatic for the college than I had expected.

People really loved or needed Beatrice Morrison.

As the throng was leaving the auditorium, Abe Steinberg approached Connie through the crowd and whispered in his ear that he hoped they might talk for a moment.

“I realize that this is a grotesque moment for passing this information along. There probably couldn’t be a worse occasion. But you said you would appreciate speed, and I’ve discovered what I think is the connection between President Morrison and the six colleges. The discovery came from some web searches yesterday. I don’t think you’re going to like what I learned.”

Connie guided Steinberg over to one of the many nearby benches that dotted the great grass plaza in front of the auditorium. Then, with hopping robins and nibbling sparrows as the only interlopers, he asked Steinberg to tell him what he had discovered.

“The six schools were a fairly motley collection,” Steinberg began. “Some liberal arts, some universities; some small, some big; some prestigious, some (shall we say) less so. But all of them briefly made it into the news at some point in the late 1980s or early 1990s because their libraries had suffered from book theft.” Connie winced: he didn’t like where this story was tending. “In most cases it wasn’t known when the theft had occurred, and so it was possible that the books—and did I mention that all of them were rare, and gen-

erally first editions?—it was possible that the books had been gone for some time. But in two instances college authorities were able to establish a fairly narrow window of opportunity during which the crime must have occurred.” Connie felt the color drain from his face and a tremble enter his hands, but he said nothing. “At the Historical Society we have a large set of clippings detailing the public activities, including the travels, of Humboldt College’s presidents. They are well filed, and so a fairly simple exercise in cross-checking showed that President Morrison visited all six schools prior to the time when the books went missing, and in the two instances when the window of opportunity was narrow, during that window.” He paused, perhaps for effect but probably to steel himself before uttering his final sentence. “I think that Beatrice Morrison stole rare books.”

Connie stared at the crowd fanning out quietly across the grass. He moved his eyes across the vista of fine buildings that outlined the plaza. He looked down at the birds. He recalled the words he had been hearing in the auditorium. And he cried. Abe Steinberg put his arm around Connie’s shoulder, said that he would keep this information to himself unless Connie asked him to disclose it, and then fell silent. The two men sat quietly on the warming but still chilly May afternoon. Although Connie’s brain was home to many raging

thoughts at that moment, the one that tortured him most was the reflection that Norman Wilkinson had contrived to make Connie Haydn the killer of Beatrice Morrison.



Given his theological inclinations, Shrug Speaker found the memorial service a bit wanting in food for the soul. He sat, chiefly among townspeople—isn't informal segregation odd? he thought—on the bench seats, in the balcony, whence he had a good view of immobile pates and moving handkerchiefs. Like Connie, he was impressed by the depth of sentiment that imbued the series of moving reminiscences. Connie always spoke well of her, he thought, and this is confirmation that he wasn't alone in valuing her friendship and work.

When the service was over, he remained seated for a few minutes, knowing that the patterns of egress from the auditorium meant that the balcony crowd would be among the last to leave. As he waited, thinking (as he usually did when he attended events that were frequented by large numbers of college students) about the sheer likeability and astounding ignorance of the young, a man he did not recognize came over to speak with him.

“How do you do, Mr. Speaker. I’m Billy Esterhazy. I think you tried to reach me last week. I know this isn’t an occasion for business transactions, but when I seen you here I decided to come over anyway, ’cuz I’m guessing that you’re trying to contact me as part of your investigation. So yes, I did know Vince d’Amato.”

Shrug’s mind snapped to attention. Esterhazy had come onto his and Connie’s radar screen because he was an acquaintance of Jason Bigelow’s. Neither friend knew that he was an acquaintance of Vince d’Amato’s—much less that he would define himself as such.

“Well, thanks for coming over, Mr. Esterhazy,” Shrug said, making room for the new acquaintance on the bench. “And you’re right that my interest relates to the events of several years ago. If you’ve got a minute, let me ask you a question or two.” Pause. “Can you tell me anything about Vince d’Amato in the days or weeks before he died?” That’s pretty lame, Shrug thought to himself, but maybe his answer will suggest some questions.

“Not really. We seen each other at Kelly’s Tavern occasionally, though neither of us was what you’d call a regular. I’d recently sold him a washer and a dryer, and he called me the day before he died to say the washer needed fixed. So I told him I’d come by on Monday morning to check it out, and I let him know

that the warrantee protected him. He was pissed. Said he'd just have to let his dirty clothes pile up for a day or so. That wasn't the way he usually acted, but I guess his sore leg was giving him trouble. In any case, when I learned of the fire, I felt just awful. Maybe if I'd gone by his house on Friday or Saturday, the fire wouldn't have occurred."

"I wouldn't worry about that, Mr Esterhazy," said Shrug. "The fire wasn't your fault." But Shrug's mind was elsewhere, for he recalled that among the items found in the burnt basement were clothes that had been hanging on the line. Why, he wondered to himself, were there wet clothes on the line when there was no washer to get them wet?

Shrug knew Connie had attended the service, and he now needed to catch him and pass on this interesting bit of information. But not wanting to miss this opportunity, Shrug first asked Esterhazy about Jason Bigelow, and the appliance salesman essentially confirmed the story that the friends had already picked up. The only addition was that Esterhazy had found Jason such a good source of advice—"he was like a minister, only he wasn't trying to pull you into a church"—that he had recommended him to other friends with problems and that Jason had helped them too. The more Shrug learned about Jason Bigelow, the more he liked him and the more unjust his fate seemed.



That evening Connie and Shrug met, as planned, for dinner at Angelo's. Connie was calm again, but Shrug thought he could read in Connie's face a story of a difficult afternoon. The two friends shared the information they had gleaned during the day. They quickly agreed that nothing they had learned undercut the hypothesis that Norman Wilkinson was the mastermind of the slaughter. Which left them with the one remaining dilemma: how had Wilkinson arranged for the fire to start on the evening of June 1?

When Angelo came to the table to greet them, Connie interrupted the train of detective work to inquire about Mary German.

"She resigned her job," Angelo said coolly. "She came by the very next day and said that she was leaving town. She had been a good waitress, probably the best I've ever had, and I gave her a going-away bonus. She thanked me, but she didn't say where she was going." Pause. "Whatever you said to her certainly disrupted her life." Angelo delivered his little speech with a chill, and Connie realized that the restaurant owner had reason to feel aggrieved. This investigation had undone lots of lives.

"I think she'll be happier away from Humboldt," he replied to Angelo, hoping privately that this conversa-

tional filler might turn out to be accurate. “For what it’s worth, you are one of the few men who has provided any stability to her life.” Connie didn’t know whether that was so, but he saw no harm in saying it, since the balance of probabilities in Mary German’s difficult life favored the accuracy of the statement.

Connie then returned to his pork chops, and Shrug let him eat in quiet for a few minutes.

“The trick,” Connie finally said, “is to figure out how Wilkinson started that damn fire. We know he wasn’t at the house when it flared that evening, setting the cardboard ablaze. But we also know he was at the house during the afternoon. At most, I guess, he could have been there about ninety minutes—from 1:30 to 3:00—but even if he was, he couldn’t have spent all that time in the basement. Unless, of course, he came back. In which case, he had even more time.” Pause. “But since we don’t know what he was setting up in the basement, we haven’t any idea how long it would take.” He stopped talking and looked around the restaurant.

“You’re a logician, Connie,” said Shrug. “What does logic tell you?”

Connie leaned back, a forkful of mashed potatoes hovering over his plate. “Well, let’s say that Wilkinson left something burning in the basement during his afternoon visit—that candle, for example. That’s why

there was candle wax! Of course! He did leave a candle burning!”

“But unless something else happened,” Shrug noted, trying to provide the cues for Connie to keep his train of thought going, “the candle would just have burned out. So what else happened?”

“Let’s see. If he left the candle upright in its holder, but sitting on top of the cardboard, could that do it? I mean, wouldn’t the candle fall over and set the cardboard afire?”

The two friends thought about that for a moment and then concluded, given their experiences with candles when the electrical power failed, that counting on a candle to tip over on its own was an unlikely scenario for an arsonist.

“Well, if it probably won’t tip on its own,” said Shrug, “we need to figure out what might have tipped it.” Again there was thoughtful silence.

“Do you think it was important to get the fire to start at a particular exact moment,” Shrug wondered, “or do you think Wilkinson could have allowed for a wide margin of error?”

“It’s hard to see why precision would be needed, either for him or for Vince,” Connie said after some thought. “After all, since he went home to the Castle when he finished speaking, where his daughter presumably saw him, he was covered for the rest of the

night. So whether the fire started at 7:00 p.m. or 10:00 p.m. or 2:00 a.m. was probably immaterial. He had an alibi. And Vince wasn't going anywhere. But what are you getting at?"

"I don't know for sure. But I agree with your reasoning. And that in turn suggests that whatever mechanism he set up in the basement didn't have to be fine-tuned."

The two friends struggled with these foggy thoughts through their dessert and coffee, feeling that they weren't quite casting the question correctly. Finally Connie put his coffee saucer in the middle of the table, rolled the dessert menu into a rod, and held it upright over the center of the saucer. "Let's visualize. If this menu is a burning candle, and if the saucer sits atop a pile of cardboard, what is needed to upset the candle out of the holder and send it down into the cardboard?"

"Or maybe," said Shrug, "to tip the holder over."

"Something must have pulled the holder, toppling the candle," said Connie. "But what? Even if a string had been tied to it, what would have pulled the string? A roving mouse? Too unpredictable. Something falling on it? That would be adding epicycles to an already complicated machine."

The magic word was 'machine.' It reminded Connie of what Shrug had told him about the broken washing

machine. “Wait...” he said. He brought his tongue out between his lips as he tended to do when contemplating the implications of a crisis on the chessboard. “Here’s how it could have been done. I don’t know if this is how it was done, but here is how it could have been done.” His tone was exultant. Shrug waited for him to explain.

Connie tore a loose piece of thread from his shirt sleeve. “Imagine this is a piece of string.” He tied one end of the ‘string’ to the ‘candle.’ He asked Shrug to imagine that it was longer than it really was, and then he held the other end above the ‘candle.’ “Imagine that my hand is the clothesline. What happens as the damp clothes on the line dry? They get lighter. And as a result the weight on the line is slowly reduced and the line slowly rises.” His voice was triumphant—and loud enough to begin to draw attention from nearby tables. Realizing that he was beginning to make a scene, he lowered his voice but not the excitement. “At some point—and as we’ve just said, it really doesn’t matter very much when—the line will pull the string so taut that it will tip over the candle, and...” He clapped his hands. “The cardboard ignites, and, if things go as planned, the house catches fire.”

“It sounds plausible,” said Shrug reflectively, “but wasn’t it risky? What if it didn’t work?”

“But where’s the risk? If things don’t work out as

planned, who's to know? With his leg injury, Vince was unlikely to go to his basement. If he did, he was unlikely to poke about. And whenever Wilkinson learned, presumably the next day, that the house hadn't caught fire, he could pay another benevolent visit to Vince and remove the evidence. For all we know, Wilkinson had already made unsuccessful attempts on Vince's life. If this one had failed too, he would have waited until he could concoct another opportunity. He was a patient, cunning, and wicked man."

And with that remark the glow of celebration that had enveloped the conversation disappeared. For what Connie and Shrug had really done, they realized, was reconstruct the way in which Norman Wilkinson had choreographed the destruction of three human beings and had made the two friends complicit in the conclusion of the slow and deadly dance. Norman Wilkinson had even won the final victory: from his grave he had laughingly allowed the marvels of his scheme to be revealed to an astonished world. Connie and Shrug were not only his accomplices, they were his publicists.



George Fielding welcomed the two investigators to his office that evening. "You're right on time," he

smiled, his eyes on the digitized reading of 8:30 p.m. on the wall clock. They weren't able to smile back. The sun had not yet set, but the shadows of the trees and buildings, visible through the window of Fielding's waiting area, were long. A late spring evening would ordinarily have been a time of day that both friends would have liked, but neither was feeling responsive to meteorological messages. They had asked Fielding if they might meet with him because they had finished their work and had a grim story to tell.

"So that there are no pretenses of suspense to this story," Connie began, "you need to know right up front that we think Norman Wilkinson masterminded the series of events we've been looking into."

George Fielding looked hard at Connie, saying "But he..."

"Yes, we know," said Shrug quickly. "He's the one who effectively hired us to look into the conviction of Jason Bigelow. We'll get back to the question of motive later. For now, please, just hear us out."

Fielding nodded his assent, mumbling "Okay."

"The central fact about Norman Wilkinson," Connie continued, "was that he loved his daughter Eleanor. Loved her with a force so overwhelming that it blinded him to her faults and ultimately eclipsed whatever sense of right and wrong he had once had."

"We don't know," said Shrug, as if on cue, "how to

account for the strength of this feeling—his being a single parent, perhaps, his great wealth, his loneliness; who knows?—but the starting point of our conclusion is that he was prepared to do anything for Eleanor, and, more to the point, to do anything to avenge Eleanor.”

“We’ve discovered,” Connie said, “that three local people took actions that, in Norman’s eyes, ruined Eleanor’s life. The first was Vince d’Amato, who embezzled funds about eighteen or so years ago from a musical production that Our Lady of the Sorrows was planning and who thereby brought a shattering disappointment upon Eleanor. The second was Beatrice Morrison, who refused to exercise her presidential power to overlook Eleanor’s poor academic record at Humboldt High and admit her to Humboldt College. The third was Jason Bigelow, who helped Eleanor get in touch with an abortion-provider that summer after high school graduation. As a result of the abortion, Eleanor cannot have children.”

“It was for these reasons,” Shrug explained, thinking perhaps explanation was unnecessary, “that these three people became Norman’s targets.”

George Fielding’s face revealed no reaction, except perhaps incomprehension.

Shrug took up the relation of the story. “We don’t know when Norman decided that these three needed

to be punished. As you'll see, because his plot was so complex, and might have failed—in fact, in some ways did fail—we can't be sure that Norman had not been trying for some time before 1996 to exact his revenge. All we can be pretty sure of is that in 1996 he began to succeed.”

George Fielding shifted his position in his chair. Connie and Shrug were not surprised.

They had realized that this part of the story would be the toughest to relate, because it might be taken to imply that Fielding had mishandled an investigation.

“The plan,” Shrug continued, “was to kill Vince in a house fire and to frame either Jason or Beatrice for the arson. There were, as we've found out, several different ways in which the events might have played themselves out—and from Norman's point of view, any would have been fine—but they all rested on evidence that Norman needed to plant at the house: the pen that Jason Bigelow had lost (we don't know how Norman got it), a hint that Vince d'Amato had committed suicide, and a set of cards that implicated Beatrice Morrison in the theft of books.”

George Fielding started, for this was a lot to take in. “Are you saying that President Morrison was a book thief? That doesn't sound right.”

“Unhappily, that's what we think,” said Shrug. “We'll show you why we think it later. Right now,

what's important is that Norman Wilkinson had somehow found out about the thefts. He was rich. Maybe after targeting President Morrison, he hired a private investigator. Or maybe he just discovered something during one of his frequent visits to 'the residence.' In any case, he knew. And could be very confident that Beatrice Morrison didn't want the truth to get out."

"Here's what we think happened on June 1, 1996," said Connie, picking up the narrative. "Norman Wilkinson visited Vince d'Amato in the early afternoon, probably on some pretext of mercy. Vince, you'll recall, was in pain with his bum leg. And—and this is important—he couldn't move about easily. Norman met Tyler Delsin at Vince's. He probably would have preferred not to, but it really didn't matter. While at Vince's, Norman found an excuse to go upstairs. While there, he planted the evidence tying Beatrice to the thefts and also suggesting—this is the Herod note you left with Shrug in the hospital—that Vince might have taken his own life."

Fielding interrupted. "Oh yes. What's this about a hint of suicide? You said something about that in the hospital." The last remark was to Shrug.

"I'll explain in a minute," said Connie. "But first, let me set the story out for you." Pause. "After going upstairs, Norman found a reason to go to the base-

ment. It probably wasn't hard for him to move through Vince's house because he could be getting or doing things for the invalid. In any case, all Norman needed to do in the basement was to open the crawl window over the bookcase, for his real work in the basement would take more time, and he needed to give himself a way to enter and leave secretly. Then he went back upstairs, concluded his visit, and left."

Shrug took up the story. "Later in the afternoon he returned and entered the house, secretly—it was easy enough to do, given the wooden fence around the backyard. Remember: he was very agile. He brought with him the famous pen, a candle, some matches, and a small candle-holder—something light and with a handle. He could even have made it himself, from paper. It was to be functional, not decorative. Oh... and he brought a bag of damp clothes."

For the first time George Fielding looked completely bewildered.

It was Connie's turn. "Wait. It makes sense. Norman hung the clothes on the drying line in the basement, placed the candle and its holder on top of the cardboard box material, tied a string with virtually no slack from the clothes line to the candle holder, and then lit the candle. He also left the pen. After that, he exited, just as he had come in, through the crawl window. He couldn't lock it from the outside, and

that's why you found it unlocked."

"Two things were then happening in the basement," said Shrug. "The candle was slowly burning down, and the clothes were slowly drying. At some point, the drying clothes would have become light enough to pull the string between the line and the candle holder taut. And soon after that, a still tauter string would have toppled the candle. If it was still alight, the candle would have set the cardboard afire. If it wasn't—in fact, if anything had gone wrong—Norman could have visited Vince again the next day and contrived a reason to go down to the basement to pack away the evidence of his unsuccessful effort at arson."

"I'll be damned," said Fielding.

"The fire started at about 7:15 that night," said Connie, "when Norman was speaking to a civic organization in Humboldt. It killed Vince, as it was supposed to do. But the evidence that was supposed to direct attention to Jason and/or Beatrice was too subtle"—that was the word that Connie and Shrug had decided upon, though it characterized the music cards far more accurately than the pen—"and not picked up on."

"So after a few months, Norman decided to nudge the investigation forward." Shrug spoke these words quickly, wanting to move ahead before Fielding got immersed in questions of how the initial investigation

might have gone wrong. “He prodded Rita Grabek into writing about the fire, and as you know, Rita’s articles focused attention on the pen and Jason Bigelow.”

Connie now jumped in. “We need to get really speculative here, for there’s a lot we don’t understand about the Bigelows. And their actions didn’t help either of them. Above all, it didn’t help Jason that he said he’d gone to the d’Amato house on the day of the fire when he hadn’t.”

“What!” said a startled Fielding.

“It’s true,” Shrug continued. “Jason was in Columbus with his gay lover. Norman somehow had learned that Jason was homosexual—probably not a hard thing to do for a wealthy and influential man who could hire private investigators—and so he had some leverage with Jason. We figure that’s how he got Jason to say he’d visited Vince when he hadn’t. It would save Jason from Patricia’s suspicions about his whereabouts on June 1—which, for all we know, were triggered or exaggerated by the selfsame and very solicitous Norman Wilkinson. After all, he pretended to be a concerned friend to both Bigelows, all the time leading them by strings. Think Iago. Jason’s conviction gave Norman his second triumph. And Jason’s death in prison was probably just a bonus.”

“But that left Beatrice Morrison,” said Connie, “still untouched by any of the investigating. At some point

Norman must have decided that the clue he had planted to implicate her had been too obscure. At some point too he learned he had cancer and would die. So if we conclude that his illness limited his ability to lay the foundation for a new scheme of revenge, then he had no choice but to try to recruit some people who might have the time to re-examine the old evidence—and to point them in some helpful directions. That’s why he turned to me and why he could be pretty sure I’d ask Shrug to join: we were two old farts with a lot of time on our hands—people not pressed by competing claims on our energies.” This phraseology too had been carefully thought through. What Connie left out was that by this time Norman needed people of intelligence to complete his work for him.

“Almost as soon as we began digging,” Shrug said, “we discovered the evidence of the Morrison tie, but we didn’t realize what it meant and told her about it. That’s probably not quite the way Norman thought things would work out, but it played right into his scheme. At the same time, our probing into Vince d’Amato’s finances threatened to raise questions about his widow’s income. And so two vulnerable people tried to stop us. Bianca d’Amato, by stuffing that theatrically killed squirrel into Connie’s Sunday paper. And Beatrice Morrison, by throwing the rock at my car. At first, we took both of these incidents to be

efforts by the murderer to scare us off. And it has really been only in the last two days that the pieces fell together, pointing not to them or to anyone else we've been talking with but to Norman himself. But in the meantime, of course, Beatrice Morrison had killed herself. And so, Norman had gotten his final revenge. All three of the people who he thought had ruined his daughter's life had been made to pay. And Connie and I helped him do it."

Shrug's voice had been fading, and when he finished with the acknowledgment of unintentional complicity in Norman Wilkinson's scheme, he stopped. For a few moments no one spoke.

George Fielding broke the silence. "That's an incredible story. How sure are you you've got it right?"

"We feel pretty confident about the outlines," Connie replied. "Some of the details are guesses—most importantly, for example, how Norman started the fire. And while we're not displeased with our detecting skills, we were also at some points just plain lucky: people confessed to things we didn't know about. I guess the key point is that our construction fits the facts. It accounts for the candle wax, the open window, the absence of an obvious incendiary device. I suppose there might have been other occasions prior to June 1 when he could have planted the false evidence. But it's simpler to suppose he did it on the one visit to the

d'Amato house we know about.”

“What about the man who got Eleanor pregnant?,” Fielding asked. “Why didn’t Norman go after him?”

“We don’t know that he didn’t,” Shrug replied. “Since we don’t know who that father is... don’t even know if he’s still alive... it’s entirely possible that Norman dealt with him long ago. If Eleanor knows who the father of her aborted baby was, she might be willing to help you out here. But it’s possible, given what we’ve heard of her wildly reckless behavior back in 1982, that she doesn’t know who the father was.”

Fielding thought about that answer, and then directed the conversation to what was, for him, the biggest surprise. “I can easily understand why President Morrison wouldn’t want it known she was a book thief,” said Fielding. “But what was it that led you to believe that that’s what she did? It seems so... well, unlikely.”

“Not only unlikely,” said Connie, “but also sad and”—he groped for the word to express his feeling—“distasteful.”

“But it seems true,” said Shrug, recognizing Connie’s continuing discomfort with dealing with the unpleasant fact. “The box of this-and-thats that you found in Vince’s desk contained a set of cards, coded musically (believe it or not), that linked President Morrison to six colleges or universities. Thanks to a

good web search by Abe Steinberg, we were able to show that the libraries at those colleges had experienced thefts of books at about the time President Morrison had visited them. Of course, that evidence alone would not have been sufficient to bring charges, much less convict. But her panicky behavior after she learned that we were moving toward decoding the cards shows that she felt vulnerable to our line of inquiry. And as early as the day of Norman Wilkinson's funeral Connie had thought that she behaved strangely at the mention of Vince's name. It's our guess that Norman had sent her some veiled threat and signed Vince's name. Which probably explains why she invented that lie—and it surely was a lie—about Jason expecting to come into money and wanting to be a trustee. It was the best she could do with the non-specific letter she had in her files. She wanted to push us in a different direction.”

George Fielding let out an audible sigh. But while Shrug had been talking, he had also been consulting his notes from the case. “Do you have any explanation for the missing financial documents?”

“We have a guess,” said Connie. “Sandra Peabody visited Vince that same afternoon. She believed that Vince had cheated Bill and her financially.” Connie was choosing his words with care here. “She may have thought that by looking through those records she

could find evidence of something that might be useful to her.”

“So you’re saying she lifted them?” asked Fielding dubiously.

“All we’re saying is that that’s a possibility. What’s important, at least from our point of view, is that we don’t think the missing financial records are related to what we’ve been investigating.”

“But why didn’t she see the burning candle while she was in basement?”

“Maybe Norman hadn’t returned yet to set it up. Or maybe he was there, in the back of the basement, hiding and keeping quiet. Since the financial records were at the base of the stairs, she didn’t need to go far into the basement.”

“You haven’t explained the suicide note bit. Where is it?” asked Fielding.

“The reference you supplied us,” replied Connie, “was to Herodotus, an ancient Greek writer. The text it directed us to contains a sentence that speaks of preferring death when life becomes too wearisome. It was, of course, another of Norman’s games. And because we’d made progress in other directions by the time we saw it, it didn’t detain us very long.”

“You talk of ‘games,’” said Fielding, “and yet that strikes the law enforcement officer in me as an odd term. This guy was killing people. Where’s the ‘game’

in that?”

“I’m sorry,” Shrug quickly said. “We didn’t mean to be flippant. Far from it. But we think that for Norman Wilkinson the whole vendetta really was, at one level, a game. He’d concocted a murder that might be a suicide. If it was a murder, he’d planted clues that could lead to suspicions about either of two innocent suspects. So he had three targets and he left us with three possible ways of approaching the crimes. In fact, it’s possible that the outcomes he was hoping for were not necessarily the deaths of his targets. Surely in Beatrice Morrison’s case disgrace would have been adequate, maybe even preferable. And once he knew of Jason Bigelow’s desperate hope to remain in the closet, then outing him might well have been preferable too. Only Vince d’Amato had to die. He couldn’t be shamed, and so no other penalty was possible for him.”

“Remember,” added Connie. “From the very beginning Norman told us that his goal was justice. We assumed he meant justice for the memory of Jason Bigelow. But actually he meant justice for the three people who ruined Eleanor’s life.”

“So in the end Humboldt’s most revered citizen was crazy,” said Fielding.

“At least obsessed,” said Shrug. “That’s for sure. But another reason we used the word ‘game’ is that his obsession involved showing the world how smart he

was. Smarter than you, George. Smarter than Connie and me. If his sole goal had been to avenge himself upon three people, he might have found easier ways to do it. But he wanted more. He wanted to baffle and befuddle, to leave people feeling vulnerable, to surprise. And when—if—the crime was solved, to impress. To stagger people with how clever he was. I should have picked that up when I realized that the book of Amos talks of punishment too. But I didn't."

Shrug's voice was agitated, and he began walking about the room as he spoke. "The sequence of conclusions didn't much matter to him, we're guessing. Beatrice Morrison might have fallen under scrutiny before Jason Bigelow. The possibility of suicide might have jumped out well before any thoughts of arson and murder. That's what made it so devilish. And if the investigations ever faltered—and of course they did—then Norman would be around to play the concerned citizen and prod them forward. And there's even more: he had set up a mechanism by which, if he needed to, he could have nudged an innocent Bianca d'Amato into some future action that might advance the investigation. Who knows? There may have been still other arrows in his quiver that our investigation hasn't uncovered. It's our guess—no slight to you, George—that it was only when Norman realized he was dying that he realized he had to involve people for

whom weird clues like musical notations and references to Herodotus might seem intriguing. And who better to recruit than a retired philosophy professor and his would-be theologian sidekick. He knew we'd pity him. He counted on us pitying him. He was right. And so he won. That's the sad truth. He won."

For several minutes, no one spoke. It was Connie who broke the silence. "What you do with this information, George, I don't know. I'm guessing some people have to be told, but you'll know better than we who they are and what should be disclosed. After all, you're the lawman. Shrug and I are leaving now. It has not been, as you can imagine, a very happy day for us. But you know where to find us, if you need us." With that, the two friends stood up and went out into the night.