

Trinity

A Haydn & Speaker Mystery

Chapter 2



Connie Haydn and Shrug Speaker had been acquaintances for thirty years and comrades for about a decade. Connie had moved to Humboldt in the summer of 1970, still smarting from the ego-shattering blow of failing to get tenure at Stanford. Shrug, a life-long resident of the town, had first met him late that fall at a Thanksgiving Day parade that featured his four-year-old daughter as a little Pilgrim on a float. The two men found they had a common interest in chess—though, as they learned from frequent engagements at the community chess club, their playing styles were very different, Connie savoring the attack possibilities of the Colle system and Shrug preferring the defensive resiliency of Ruy Lopez opening. Through library encounters they learned that they both liked murder mysteries. They were both Democrats in what was (the college excluded) a Republican town, but while both planned to vote for Al Gore in the coming election, they recognized that his

chances would be stronger had Bill Clinton, a man whose morals they both disapproved of, stepped down when confronted with impeachment. As is true with all friendships, there was much they disagreed about, from the legitimacy of religious faith to the legality of gun control legislation to the siting of Humboldt's new public squash courts. But as all who knew them realized, it was neither the interests they held in common, nor (in some paradoxical way) the subjects they disagreed over, that had knit the remarkable bond between the two friends over the years. Rather it was the predispositions they shared.

Above all, they looked at the world in very similar ways—which is to say, they were basically optimistic, cautiously curious, distrustful of mawkishness, and self-reliant. They were under no illusions about the goodness of humankind, and yet they knew that most people most of the time remained faithful to general notions of how one ought to behave. Above all, they shared a belief that wrong should be called by its name and should be punished. Unspoken memories of their own past misdeeds assured that neither man could believe himself to be a notably good person. But this self-knowledge now served a useful purpose. As both knew only too intimately, any human being was capable of doing wrong. What they did not yet know was how limited was their view of humankind's capacity

for wickedness.



On Thursday morning, May 11, the two friends met at the County Historical Museum at half past ten. The sight of the post office flag at half staff was the first indication that Norman Wilkinson had passed away overnight. The goal of the meeting at the historical museum was to begin the process of filling themselves in on the death of Vincent d'Amato and the conviction of Jason Bigelow. Although a full run of The Humboldt Herald and Examiner was also available at the public library, working at the historical museum offered them the added advantage of being able to tap the expertise of Abe Steinberg, curator of the museum, master of Humboldt lore, and purveyor of gossip. They explained their purpose to Abe, and after a very long pause, he said that he thought he might be useful to them.

The newspaper accounts made the matter seem fairly straightforward. Vincent d'Amato, a computer engineer, had died of smoke inhalation when his house caught fire on the evening of Saturday, June 1, 1996. He was alone in the house at the time, for he and his wife Bianca were separated and she was living in Los Angeles. An arson squad investigator had determined

that the fire had started in the basement, and after finding no evidence of criminal activity, she decided that the fire was accidental, probably caused by something—a faulty furnace? an electrical short?—igniting cardboard boxes in the basement. Vincent d’Amato’s body was then cremated. The autopsy had set the time of death at about 7:30 p.m., and since the fire had spread rapidly into the first floor of the house, the coroner concluded that the fire could have begun no earlier than 7:00. The autopsy had also revealed traces of a sedative in d’Amato’s body, but since he had been recovering from a severely sprained ankle and was spending most of his time in bed to allow the swelling to subside, the sedative, which a local doctor had prescribed, was deemed inconsequential. The sprained ankle, however, loomed large, explaining why d’Amato had been unable to come down from his second-storey bedroom to flee the fire.

That is how the matter rested until November 1996 when a reporter for the Herald and Examiner, Rita Grabek, had begun re-examining the fire and suggesting that Vincent d’Amato had actually been a victim of murder. At this point, almost six months after the fire, some of the evidence was no longer readily available—pre-eminently Vincent d’Amato’s cremated body, but including some scraps of material evidence that the local sheriff’s office, unaccustomed to dealing with

murder cases, had not secured as well as it might. Grabek's investigation nevertheless gave publicity to some previously obscured facts. The most startling of them was that Vincent d'Amato had had a string of visitors on the day of his death. The list (not necessarily complete) included Maria Tedesco, about whom nothing more seemed to be known; Sandra Peabody, a local realtor; Tyler Delsin, Humboldt's only chiropractor; Norman Wilkinson, who had already represented himself to be a friend of d'Amato's; and—and this had turned out to be the interesting name—Jason Bigelow, manager of the local hardware store. All of the known visitors had left the d'Amato house by late in the afternoon, but since the fire had started in the early evening, Grabek had focused her investigative attention on uncovering the whereabouts of the five visitors at 7:00 p.m. As she then wrote, all except Jason Bigelow had good alibis.

Grabek's story had energized the editors of the Herald and Examiner, and they began calling for the case to be re-opened. The county prosecutor, an elected official, obliged, and early in 1997 the citizens of Humboldt were startled to learn that Jason Bigelow had been arrested on suspicion of murder. The trial soon followed, and Jason Bigelow in effect convicted himself when he refused to say where he had been at the time of the fire. His lawyer, a Columbus defense

attorney named Thomas Kerwin, was not without resources, reminding the jury that Bigelow's refusal to reveal his whereabouts was not proof of guilt, only suggestive of either embarrassment or a desire to shield someone else. But when the prosecutor introduced Bigelow's pen into evidence—a special pen found amid the debris in the basement of the burned house—the jury was not inclined to credit Bigelow's story that he had noticed the pen missing several weeks earlier. The panel needed only one afternoon to find Jason Bigelow guilty of the murder of Vincent d'Amato.

The whole tale had then moved to its sad and abrupt end on August 2, 1997, when Jason Bigelow, who never once retreated from his insistence that he was innocent or from his refusal to supply an alibi, was killed in a prison fight.

“Well, if nothing else, this stuff has given us a bunch of names we need to look into,” Shrug said, as they stretched legs made stiff by several hours of newspaper reading and flexed hands made sore by note-taking.

Connie suggested that they eat lunch, inviting Abe Steinberg, who had been basically silent thus far, to join them. The three men walked to the Bob Evans restaurant just a block from the historical society, chatting about what the death of Norman Wilkinson

meant for the community and saving discussion of the morning's reading until they had ordered their meals.

"First off," said Connie to Abe, after the food had arrived, "is there other information about all of this that you think we should know?"

Never one to commit himself prematurely, Abe began by saying that he really didn't recall all that much about the incidents of 1996 and 1997. But then he began showing that even if he wasn't on top of the case, he was a repository of useful contextual information.

"Bianca d'Amato is living pretty comfortably these days." Abe paused to let the possible implications of this announcement sink in. "Vince was a mid-level engineer in a small Columbus firm—Sprayer Technologies, or something like that—and before Bianca moved west, the two of them lived in a house over on Collins Street." That information marked the residence as an older structure, well-built but modest in size. "In front it had a few trees and an outlandish birdbath, and around the back there was a wooden fence. About a year after his death she came back to Humboldt and moved into one of the new houses near the country club. I'd guess it's twice as big as the old one."

"Maybe Vince had a hefty life insurance policy," Connie speculated.

“That’s sure what Bianca wants people to believe,” Abe replied. “But if Vince was paying a large monthly premium on a life insurance policy, it was uncharacteristic behavior. And remember this: the main reason she had separated from him was his improvidence. I don’t know the real story, obviously, but this is what neighbors are wondering about.”

“Well,” said Shrug, “since she’s back in town, she’ll be easy to contact. I guess we’ll have some questions for her.” Back to Abe: “Anything else?”

“Yes. Gene Simons and Patricia Bigelow—now Simons, but née Collins—had been high school classmates and, I suspect, sweethearts.”

“How in the world could you know that?,” the two friends asked, almost simultaneously.

Abe smiled. He like surprising people. “Actually, it was simple. We have a run of Humboldt High yearbooks here, and while you two were checking out the newspaper accounts, I checked the yearbooks. It wasn’t hard to find their class year—it turned out to be 1986—and the slogan that’s been attached to Patricia’s picture reads ‘Gene, Gene, he’s my man. If he can’t do it, nobody can.’ I’ll bet that’s a reference to Gene Simons.”

Connie and Shrug looked briefly at each other, for the clear implication of this information was that Gene Simons might have resented the much-older Jason

Bigelow for stealing the woman back in high school who was now his wife. Shrug had an additional thought. His daughter Marilyn had graduated from Humboldt High in 1984. She might have known the current Mr. and Mrs. Simons. “Now, that’s a happy stroke,” thought Shrug. “Maybe she can help us out too.”

“Anything else?,” asked a now-expectant Connie.

“Maybe. The stories in the Herald and Examiner opened up newspaper opportunities for Rita Grabek. She left Humboldt about a year after the trial to work for a newspaper in Texas—Austin or Houston, I think. I’m sure she’ll be glad to talk with you about the story that made her career. But what I don’t know is, what got her to re-examine what had been determined to be an accidental death by fire. Reporter’s instinct? A tip? Dumb luck? There might be something worth exploring with her.”

Shrug had already put Rita Grabek’s name on his list of people to talk to. Now he knew why he wasn’t recognizing her name—she was no longer in town. And he also knew that the death of Vincent d’Amato had been a life-changing incident for more than those people who were unfortunate enough to be immediately involved.

“I’m puzzled about that pen,” said Connie. “If it pointed so clearly to Jason Bigelow, why wasn’t its sig-

nificance recognized immediately?”

On this one Abe was stumped. “You might be able to get an answer from George Fielding. The newspaper said he was the deputy who handled the investigation. If anyone knows, he does. He still works for the county sheriff.”

After that, the conversation drifted. Connie and Shrug were puzzled by other gaps in the story that they were slowly putting together, but, without even consulting each other on the matter, they knew they didn't want to discuss them in Abe's presence. After all, a man who happily shared scuttlebutt about acquaintances with Connie and Shrug would be equally apt to divulge the friends' musings to others. Gossips are useful only so long as you control what they know. And so, after finishing their lunches, Connie and Shrug bid Abe goodbye and walked to the town square, where the statue of a Union soldier stood on a carpet of swiftly-greening grass, to have a private conversation.



In the year 2000 Humboldt, Ohio was a town of about 20,000 people. It sat a bit less than an hour's drive southeast of Columbus, and although it was home to a number of small factories that made such diverse items as pillows and electronic beehives and candy, its

chief industry was farming. But the dominance of agriculture was slowly receding, for since the 1980s Humboldt had been discovering a new vocation for itself as a bedroom community for Ohio's booming capital city. That's why, while it lay but a few miles from some of the deepest pockets of rural poverty resulting from the collapse of coal mining in southeastern Ohio landscape, it was a thriving municipality, participating in the bubbling prosperity that Columbus was generating for its penumbral towns. Like much of the rural Midwest, Humboldt was a churched community—it had Lutherans, Presbyterians, Catholics, Baptists, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Nazarenes, of course—but also Quakers, Mormons, Seventh-Day Adventists, Mennonites, Jehovah's Witnesses, and a small Bahai community. The few Jews in town, like Abe Steinberg, traveled to Columbus for services. There had once been an AME Church as well, but the small African-American community that had lived in Humboldt since Civil War days had gravitated toward the larger churches in the 1960s, and by 2000 there was no longer an identifiable AME congregation in Humboldt. The mayor was Jimmy Proctor, and quite predictably, he was also a deacon in the Lutheran Church.

Humboldt College was a startling antithesis to the town. The largest employer in the area—when faculty,

administrators, staff, and trade union members were tallied, the college had almost 500 people on its payroll—the college was deliberately and proudly a monument to secularism. Founded in 1850 by a small band of free-thinking German immigrants fleeing the disappointing outcomes of the revolutions of 1848, it took “Die Menschen sind frei” (“Mankind is free”) as its motto and made an education untrammelled by religious mystification its goal. To outsiders, Humboldt College may only have been another of the small colleges that dot the Ohio countryside. What outsiders did not know was that in contrast to Denison and Ohio Wesleyan and Kenyon and Heidelberg—all of them products of the nineteenth-century hope to place a denominational impress on higher education—Humboldt was a product of an anti-clericalism that rarely found fertile soil in mid-nineteenth-century America. Some of its faculty members even wanted—or claimed they wanted—to change the college’s motto to “Écraser l’infâme” (“Crush the infamous thing!”). Connie Haydn hadn’t belonged to this group of young Turks, but in his teaching days he had been happy that, if Stanford hadn’t wanted him, he had at least found a job at a college that did not pretend to find something educationally useful in the confusions of religion.

The president of Humboldt College was Beatrice

Morrison. Now deep into her third decade of service to the college, she ranked second only to Mayor Proctor as an important figure in the life of the town.



Encamped on a bench in the town square, Connie and Shrug used the comfort of the mid-day warmth to begin to decide how they might want to proceed. For the first time Shrug, who just two days earlier had been so enthusiastic for the project, began to register doubts. “What are we going to do?” he asked aloud—and then, to focus his query, “We’re not detectives and we’re probably not very good at playing detectives. In the light of day doesn’t this whole enterprise seem kind of silly?”

Connie had the answer. “You’re sure right on the first point. But we haven’t entered into this project by deceiving anyone. We were quite candid about our lack of qualifications. We’re here because someone thought we might be useful. And let’s face it, that could be true. We’re smart, we’ve got time, we know some of the people involved, we can ask questions. Unless technical skills become necessary, we’ve got the one thing that’s needed to carry out an investigation—curiosity, buttressed by common sense.” Then he smiled. “Okay. That’s two things.”

Shrug nodded. He hadn't really wanted to back out, and so the two friends set about comparing their own thoughts. With respect to the day of the fire itself, they agreed that they needed to learn more about why the visitors had come to Vincent d'Amato's house. "They were probably there to give company to a friend with an injured leg, and perhaps to bring things to him or do things for him," offered Connie. "True, but still, five people wandering in during the afternoon sounds more like a train station than a visitation," Shrug countered. And they needed to know more about the fire itself. "How do fires get started accidentally?" "What inflammable items were lying about in the basement?" With respect to the newspaper articles, they puzzled about Rita Grabek's motive and procedure. "What got her started on this subject?" "How had she made discoveries the police had missed?" Finally, with respect to the trial, they were curious about the pen, about Jason Bigelow's attorney, and about the absence of any indication that Patricia Bigelow had testified.

Then there were the bigger questions. If Jason Bigelow really had a potential alibi, why hadn't he used it? "I'll bet he's covering for someone," said Connie, who always hoped to find humans behaving selflessly. "I'll bet he's embarrassed by something," said Shrug, who knew how reluctant he himself was to

reveal his own flaws. Why had the murderer used arson? “Surely there are easier ways,” Connie said “like lacing someone’s medicine with poison? or fiddling with someone’s car? or simply bludgeoning someone to death?”—though as soon as the words were out Connie realized that he hadn’t the foggiest idea if any of those methods was easier.

Finally, there was the biggest question of all: if not Jason Bigelow, then who? From the little bit that Connie and Shrug knew so far, several people had what might be construed as motives. Bianca d’Amato wanted to shed her husband. “But wouldn’t divorce be an easier and far safer route to the ending of a marriage.” Gene Simons wanted to marry Patricia Bigelow. “So he framed her husband for a murder? That sounds a bit byzantine.” Rita Grabek wanted fame. “But would she murder someone to get it? That seems unlikely.”

“You know,” said Connie after they talked through their questions. “There’s something else we need to keep in mind. What we’re doing might turn out to be dangerous. As things now stand, if Jason didn’t kill Vince, then there’s someone out there who has gotten away with murder. As we start asking questions”—Shrug noticed that he hadn’t said “If we start asking questions”—“as we start asking questions, and especially if we begin turning up information that might

cast doubt on Jason's conviction, then that someone might decide that the prudent thing to do is to murder us too."

"I know," said Shrug. "I was thinking of that last night." He removed his glasses and wiped them with a shirt corner. "And it's that thought that makes me realize that 'silly' isn't the adjective that describes what we're doing. 'Stupid' maybe. Or even 'courageous.' But never 'silly'."

Realizing that they needed much more information, Connie and Shrug jotted down a preliminary list of people to be interviewed. Bianca d'Amato headed it, followed by Rita Grabek, George Fielding, Sandra Peabody, Maria Tedesco, and Tyler Delsin. And they would have to get back to Patricia Simons. They suspected that the list would grow longer. Additionally, Shrug promised to phone his daughter, to find out if she could shed any light on Mr. and Mrs. Simons. And so that they might make the best use of time, they decided split up and tackle these interviews one-on-one. Connie's assignment for the afternoon was Bianca d'Amato. Shrug's—if he could locate her—was Rita Grabek.



When Connie Haydn phoned Bianca d'Amato at mid-afternoon to ask if he might stop by that very day to ask her some questions about her husband's death, she was curious, and perhaps for that reason she made herself immediately available. Connie arrived at her house about 4:00 p.m., realizing as soon as he turned into her driveway and saw the faux pillars that decorated the façade that Abe Steinberg had been correct in suggesting that the home was rather palatial for someone who had been married to a mid-level technician. Bianca met him at the door, offered him a drink (which he declined), and invited him into a stylish room that was probably used only when guests came to the house. Connie was not ordinarily very observant about people, but Bianca's red hair and eye-catching dirndl—and it took him a moment to recall what such an outfit was called—made a strong impression on him.

In his usual no-nonsense style he moved directly to the point. "Shrug Speaker and I have been asked to look into the conviction of Jason Bigelow for the murder of your husband. It's all quite informal, and so far we have had no contact with, or authorization from, the police. I can understand that you might not want to go through those terrible days again. But I'm hopeful you'll be willing to let me explore some things with

you,” he said, choosing his words carefully.

Bianca replied quickly and quietly. “As far as I know, Jason committed the murder and got what was coming to him. But since I was in L.A. at the time—I guess you know Vince and I were separated—I have no first-hand knowledge of what happened. The sheriff called me and I returned to Humboldt immediately. It was an awful week.”

Connie took advantage of the opening. “Would you tell me about the separation? What had happened to the marriage? (Pause.) Was there another woman?” He knew that he was treading close to the border of the permissible here, but he hoped that Bianca d’Amato was part of the audience for confessional television—Jerry Springer, after all, had been mayor of nearby Cincinnati before finding a new career on the screen—that now found such questions not so much intrusions as opportunities. He was right.

“Vince had a girl friend. Or at least I thought he did. I never caught them together and never knew who she was.”

“But surely you had some idea about her identity?”

“No. I really didn’t. It wasn’t the first time. We’d been married about twenty-five years, and I guess I’d gotten bored with trying to figure out who his latest sweetie was. Anyway, I’d packed up and left sometime the previous February, first living with my sister in

California and then renting an apartment near her. Life in L.A. was different. California's a livelier place than Ohio—no, that's not the right word. It's more electric, zippier... happier."

"Why would Jason Bigelow have wanted to kill your husband?"

"Hell if I know. Actually I don't know why anyone would want to kill him. He had his nasty side, I know, and he sometimes cheated people. That's a terrible thing to say, but it's true. I suppose the husband of one of his girlfriends might have nursed a real grudge. But he was usually good to me, and we got along pretty well. I had a job at the big deli on Crawford Street, and I know that a number of my girl friends have husbands who rank lower than Vince on the 'Mr. Right' scale."

Connie was surprised at the matter-of-fact tone that Bianca d'Amato was adopting. It was disinterested, almost clinical. Was this plausible from a woman whose legal separation from a philandering husband had been abruptly ended by his murder?

"Do you know how he sprained his ankle?"

"He'd been climbing a ladder to replace some light bulbs in our outdoor fixtures. It was a few weeks before he was killed. He said he just fell off the ladder while trying to step down. Dr. Sanderson told him he was lucky the injury wasn't more severe. But he'd never been a person who endured pain well, and I

wasn't surprised to hear that he preferred to recuperate in bed."

Connie moved now—cautiously, he hoped—to the question of the source of Bianca's income. "This is a lovely house. When did you return to Humboldt permanently?"

Bianca blinked. "It was about a year after Vince's death. The trial had just ended, and I felt I could come home."

The opening was too good to pass up. "But you didn't come home. You moved into this handsome house. People have been wondering how you afforded this residence."

Even Connie's effort to soften to the blow by invoking "people" instead of "I" was not enough to forestall an explosion of anger. "So that's what this is all about! You're like everyone else—nosey and envious."

"I'm just confused," Connie said, hoping to rescue the situation. "I didn't mean to pry." ("What a lie!" he thought.)

"Yes you did," Bianca retorted. "And it's none of your damn business. So if that's all you want, I guess it's time for you to leave."

Connie stood without moving for a few seconds, then made a last effort to recover the situation. "There's one other thing, if you don't mind. Did Vince leave anything behind that might provide a hint about what

he'd been doing in the months after you'd left him?"

Surprisingly, Bianca was mollified by this change in the direction of the interview. "He had a drawer full of odds and ends in his desk. The sheriff took them as evidence," she added, a smirk on her face, "and when the trial was over I just went over and took them back."

Connie said nothing about this admission of an unauthorized re-acquisition, but he now knew where some of the evidence that had disappeared from police custody had gone.

Bianca continued. "If you'd like to see the stuff, I've kept it in two shoe boxes upstairs. I'll lend it to you, if you promise to return it." Her tone was stern but no longer angry. Connie took her gesture to mean that, even though he had been rude, she was prepared to assist in this re-examination of her husband's murder.

Connie quickly agreed to this arrangement and soon thereafter left Bianca's house with a neatly-tied-up shoe box under each arm. Although he suspected that the contents of the boxes would be totally useless, he still felt the sense of excitement that he imagined Hercule Poirot felt when the pieces of a puzzle suddenly fell in place.



When Shrug Speaker got home that same afternoon, he immediately began his search for Rita Grabek. A quick call to Barry Imhoven, the editor at the Herald and Examiner, gave him a phone number in Austin.

“And what are you trying to reach Rita for?,” Imhoven asked after supplying the information.

Anticipating such a question, Shrug replied only that he and Connie had been asked by Norman Wilkinson to look into the conviction of Jason Bigelow and that he had to make another call. He hung up.

The call to Austin elicited only the information that Rita Grabek had moved on to a press job in Seattle. But again a phone number was available. “You could try e-mail too,” the Austin editor suggested, but Shrug, though he jotted down the e-mail address, knew that this job required voice-to-voice communication. When he reached Grabek’s desk in Seattle, he had to settle for leaving a voice mail message. He made it concise, saying only that he was looking into the conviction of Jason Bigelow for the murder of Vince d’Amato and that since she was an authority on the crime, he wanted to tap her knowledge. Then he left his phone number and hung up, having no choice but to wait until she chose to call him.

Shrug then walked over to the piano and began play-

ing the first movement of Schubert's B flat piano sonata, a work he loved above all other piano pieces. He was not an accomplished pianist, and parts of the movement lay beyond the dexterity of his fingers. But he had long since accepted the fact that, if he wanted to allow those fingers to savor the kinesthetic pleasure of exploring the keyboard works of Bach, Mozart, Schubert, and Brahms, then his ears would have to accept the aural consequences of digital clumsiness. In any case, Shrug was not paying close attention to his performance on this day. Rather, he was allowing his mind to drift for the half hour or so that would have to pass before he could be confident that his daughter would be home from work in Des Moines.

It was at 6:15 Humboldt time (5:15 in Iowa) when Shrug reached Marilyn Speaker. Father and daughter were always happy to talk with each other, and so conversation flowed readily. Shrug learned of Brandon's triumphs in crosscountry competition and Gretchen's exploits on the tennis court. He learned of a possible promotion at the hospital that Guy was applying for. He learned of Marilyn's class in auto mechanics. Marilyn had enough sense not to bore Shrug with tales of her legal work; Shrug had enough sense not to ask. With news of the Iowa family out of the way, Shrug began to tell Marilyn of what he and Connie Haydn had agreed to do.

“Cool!” said Marilyn. Shrug never knew quite what to make of an expression he associated with youth. It seemed unlikely that Marilyn was mocking him. Her tone of enthusiasm belied that possibility too. But she might be teasing him. Or—and this is what he preferred to believe—she might be forgetting their age difference and simply talking to him as she talked with her friends in Des Moines. That was a comforting thought.

“I’m hoping you can help us,” Shrug said, moving from small talk to business—“in a non-lawyerly way,” he quickly added. “I’m interested in the careers of two people in the high school class two years behind yours—Gene Simons and Patricia Collins. They went together—I think that was the term back then. Do you know anything about their relationship?”

“I faintly remember Patricia Collins. We sang together in the high school choir. I recall her as being flighty, insecure, maybe unstable. But that’s a long time ago. And what do high school girls know of each other anyway?” Shrug heard the tease in her voice.

“I don’t remember Gene Simons at all, and ...” There was a pause and a dropped phone. “Sorry. I was reaching for the high school yearbooks I’ve got and the receiver slipped. Hmm...” Another pause. “No, his sophomore picture isn’t familiar. Sorry.” Suddenly her voice brightened. “But I do know someone else who

might be of interest to you—not as a suspect, I presume, but by way of context.” (How the Speakers valued context!) “That’s Eleanor Wilkinson, the late Mr. Wilkinson’s daughter.”

Shrug was interested.

Marilyn continued. “She was two years ahead of me, and all of us girls admired her, generally for the wrong reasons. She was rich, she drank, she was flamboyant, and—sorry, dad—we wanted to be like her. The boys chased her a lot, probably because her morals were tawdry. Starting in her senior year she got into serious trouble in school, bringing drugs in. Her father doted on her, and I remember us thinking that it was her father’s money that saved her from really serious punishments when she got into trouble. Aren’t I being catty! She later married someone named Trout. But earlier, soon after high school, she had a botched abortion. That’s why she can’t have children.”

“How in the world do you know all this, Marilyn?” Shrug was genuinely surprised—and impressed.

“That’s the sad part, a repentant daughter’s admission to her father.” Shrug could hear the chuckle in her voice. “As I said, I and all of my friends—Gail, Becky, Angie, and the rest—we all admired Eleanor Wilkinson. And so for a while we kept ourselves posted on what she did after she graduated from Humboldt High. She was so poor a student that she

couldn't even get into Humboldt College—don't tell Connie I said that—and so she waited a year and then went to some junior college in the South. Learning of her abortion was the beginning of a wake-up call for all of us. One of my friends' parents—maybe it was Becky's—had preached the maxim that sluts got what sluts deserved, and Eleanor's fate seemed to dramatize the relevance of that lesson. Within a few years we had lost interest in her.”

For the umpteenth time Shrug had an opportunity to inquire about his own daughter's sexual activity in high school, and for the umpteenth time he respected his side of another maxim—learned, he thought, from John Irving: that children sometimes show their love for their parents by not telling them everything.

The conversation continued for another ten or so minutes, until Shrug heard Guy come home. Marilyn promptly said she'd call him soon. Then she ended the phone conversation as she almost always did: “Let me know if you start dating again, daddy. I love you.”