

Trinity

A Haydn & Speaker Mystery

Chapter 8



Connie Haydn and Shrug Speaker decided to spend Wednesday morning, May 17, giving time to various life-maintenance activities again calling out for their attention. Shrug had a long phone call with his worried daughter Marilyn, during which he tried—without any notable success—to convince her that a decapitated squirrel was just a prank. Connie resumed a long-standing debate with his medical insurer about whether various treatments for sore knees were eligible for coverage. Even at the very end of the twentieth century—and both men were adamant in insisting that 2000 marked the end, not the beginning, of a century—the telephone remained an enormously useful device.

But the requirements and enticements of the investigation could not be kept at bay for long, especially since the two friends now had reason to believe that a murderer was still at large. And so after lunch Connie walked over to Shrug's for another war room meeting.

The determination that Jason Bigelow really had an unexercised alibi and could not have set the fire that killed Vince d'Amato obliged them to define the next steps in their investigation.

Connie arrived to find that Shrug had arranged his living room precisely as he had the previous Saturday evening. Two card tables, each with its pencils and pads, sat in the middle of the room, incongruously at odds with the otherwise rather Victorian puffiness of the house.

After some quiet banter, Shrug turned serious. "Here's my take. We need to look beyond the people who visited the d'Amato homestead on the afternoon of June 1, 1996. Of the three who are still with us, only the Peabodys had reason to be angry with Vince. And in their case, since they wanted money back, he was far more valuable to them alive than dead. Of course, they may just have gotten so angry that they wanted to punish Vince. But that doesn't strike me as likely: Sandra Peabody comes across as calculating, not passionate. As for Tyler Delsin, he had no motive we know of. We haven't dug very deep with him, I know, but if he's the murderer then our investigation really has been poorly handled. And finally, as for Maria Tedesco (or Mary German, as you prefer), she had no obvious motive and in fact, if she's to be believed, she very much wanted Vince to live. I do think her behavior

was and continued to be odd. But a killer? No.” Shrug stopped.

“I agree with all of that,” Connie said. “And when it comes to the Peabodys, I don’t see Bill as being very different from his wife. In fact, despite what some mystery writers would have their readers believe, college professors aren’t murderers.” He paused, but he clearly planned to continue. “A major problem with our method so far has been that we’ve let Rita Grabek call too many of the shots. She’s the one who decided that there was something special about the people who visited Vince on the day of his death, even though she also argued—persuasively to me, at least—that the crucial question was ‘who set the fire that started after 7:00 that evening?’ So who cares then whether someone visited the house in the afternoon?” Connie was beginning to talk to himself, as he sometimes did when he got excited by a line of argument. “It’s the evening we’ve got to worry about. And in that context—I know I’m just repeating what you said: sorry—and in that context there’s no reason for us to confine our thinking to the afternoon visitors.”

“Well, the person with the best motive,” said Shrug almost immediately, “might well have been Bianca d’Amato. She’d moved out of the house and was contemplating divorce. Getting everything they owned sure would beat getting half of what they owned. But

she was in California, and so she's one of the few people who couldn't have done it. Unless she hired someone. And that sounds so complicated, I don't even want to think about it right now." Shrug fell into silence.

"Some of the people we've run into behaved funny," Connie said, picking up Shrug's line of thought, "but nothing we've come across suggests they had a reason to kill Vince. Take George Fielding"—Shrug clearly didn't accept this line of speculation, but remained silent. "He botched the investigation. He didn't understand the meaning of the pen. He let Bianca recover evidence. Just how stupid can we allow a law officer to be before we begin to think his incompetence is a cover?" Connie paused, then continued. "Okay, I don't really see George as the murderer, but it seems to be true that once you move beyond Grabek's magic five (now three), you can probably invent a case against anyone."

"Before you go on," Shrug interrupted, "we need to think about that pen. It strikes me that the pen is very significant." Shrug was going slowly, as he often did while thinking problems through. "If it wasn't accidentally dropped when Jason 'started' the fire"—Connie could hear the inverted commas in Shrug's speech—"and especially if Jason had really lost it several weeks earlier, then it was planted. And that in

turn means that someone wanted Jason to be implicated. And that in turn means, first, that the murderer is calculating and planning, and second, that we can rule out the wandering vagrant theory or any ‘accident’ theory.”

That thought brought silence to the room.

Connie spun the idea further. “If Jason was framed, it’s possible he was the real target and Vince d’Amato just a means of getting at Jason. If so, then we’ve been asking the wrong set of motive questions: we need to know who might have been out to get Jason.”

“Gene Simons sits at the top of my list,” said Shrug. “With Jason out of the way, he could see his way clear to marrying the childhood sweetheart he had let slip away. I admit I don’t much like the guy, and so my judgment may be a bit corrupted.” The last remark was delivered with a grin.

“And don’t forget the widow Bigelow,” chimed in Connie. “Talk about re-marrying with unbecoming haste! It seems she suspected Jason of having an affair. And then suddenly, with Jason gone, she got a husband she apparently preferred, her late husband’s estate, and—until the insurance company got cautious—a life insurance settlement. That’s almost a trifecta.”

The two friends munched some crackers while they puzzled over the expanding list of suspects and questions.

“It’s hard to see Andy Stonehurst as a suspect,” Shrug remarked after a while. “No motive and no opportunity, so far as we know.”

“And I don’t see Thomas Kerwin as a suspect either,” added Connie, “though if he really were the murderer, what better role to cast himself in than the unsuccessful defense attorney working for the man he’s framed.” On that triumphant thought, Connie subsided into silence.

Shrug got up and walked over to the piano. “You know, one person who clearly gained from the mess was Rita Grabek.” He struck a C triad and listened to it fade. “So far we’ve just assumed she was lucky enough to have a juicy story fall in her lap. Could there be anything more to it than that? Is there any way she could have manipulated the whole series of events?”

“And you mock me for reminding us yesterday that Vince’s death might have been a suicide.” Connie was genuinely amused. “We need to stick with at least the modestly possible. Otherwise we’ll be blaming our local and esteemed clergymen and have to start investigating everyone.”

“Laugh if you want,” replied Shrug, with a tone of gentle scolding in his voice. “But—to take you up on that last point—I’m not willing to forget about Father Gonzalez completely. He may be a friend, but he’d had a run-in with Vince, he behaved improperly when he

learned that a crime had been committed, and Vince in fact seemed to have been using his knowledge of Diego's poor judgment as a way to control him. Diego must have felt angry and confined."

"You don't cut anybody any slack, do you," said Connie softly. "It must be those immersions in the theology of St. Augustine." Shrug was about to correct Connie by saying it was Augustine's anthropology, not his theology, that was relevant, but Connie's line of thinking was already leading him on to other possibilities. "I can't push Beatrice Morrison completely out of my mind. There was something about my mention of Vince at the funeral that unsettled her. I'm pretty sure she knew him, though it's hard to figure out where their paths might have crossed in any significant way."

"Or why he'd be a person to bother her," added Shrug. "Sometimes I wonder if we've made any progress at all."

"Remember the squirrel, my friend. Never forget the squirrel. Somebody is uneasy about what we're doing."

"I know, I know. I just wish I knew whose toes we've stepped on—and where."

The two friends fell silent. Each was looking for a more productive way of proceeding.

Finally Connie said, "Look, maybe we need to be considering questions, not persons. What questions

would we like answers to? What questions seem to be ripest with potential?"

Shrug replied quickly. "One thing I'd like to know about is those drugs in Vince's system. There weren't many, if I recall right, but maybe they're worth following up on. I'll speak with Dr. Sanderson in the next few days and see if I can prize some confidential doctor-patient information out of him. It's just possible, I suppose, that Vince wasn't conscious?"

"While you're at it," said Connie, "see if you can find out anything about that leg injury of his that wasn't healing as promptly it should."

Shrug returned to the question at hand. "I'd also like to know how Vince repaid the embezzled funds so quickly. Assuming Father Gonzalez is telling the truth, Vince came up with the \$10,000 within two years, paying his obligation off steadily. That sounds like he had a source of steady income. Was he pulling another scam? Is it relevant?"

"That's a question for Bianca, I guess. She knew a lot about—and put up with a lot from—her husband." From Connie's voice, Shrug could tell that even as he spoke of Bianca d'Amato, he was moving beyond Bianca and onto new ground. "Here's a more fundamental question. How can we be sure that the authorities had the time of the fire right? Or I guess what I really mean is, is there some way the basis for combus-

tion could have been created earlier in the day, with the actual fire starting later? We need to ask that question because we now think the murderer was cleverer than we once thought.”

“Oh, I like that,” said Shrug, beamingly. “That’s a paradigm-shifting question.” The remark owed its gentle irony to the fact that Connie and Shrug had sometimes discussed their uneasiness with Thomas Kuhn’s famous theory. But it was meant as praise too: Shrug had not considered the possibility that the time of the setting of the fire might have been miscalculated and realized immediately that if the window of opportunity for starting the fire could be widened, then the various afternoon visitors regained some of their suspiciousness.

After another period of silence, Shrug spoke again, his voice deeper and more serious. “You know, there’s one other thing we really have to do.”

“I know, I know,” replied Connie, reading his mind from his tone. “I agree. Patricia Bigelow Simons needs to know that her husband was engaged in a homosexual relationship so she can be tested for HIV. But that’s a conversation I don’t look forward to. Can we do it together?”

“Sounds fair,” said Shrug. Pause. “Now is it time to call George Fielding?”

This was another assignment they had to deal with,

and though it was unlikely to be as difficult as the prospective session with Patricia Simons, the two friends were not looking forward to bringing the deputy—a person they both admitted they couldn't completely trust—into their circle of ideas. But they were neither moral cowards nor fools, and so Shrug dialed the sheriff's office immediately. Then, with both friends on the line, George Fielding was advised of the latest turn the investigation had taken. They didn't provide Andy Stonehurst's name, but they shared enough information with Fielding to allow him to understand that Jason Bigelow had been gay, that he had an alibi, and therefore that the wrong man had been convicted. Fielding took it in with a silence that came down the phone line as opaque. When the call was over, both friends imagined that George Fielding was, at the least, brooding over the outcome of his (and others') mistake. Connie again felt the relief he so often experienced when reflecting that when he made mistakes—about Nietzsche's abyss, for example, or Descartes's vortices—he didn't leave casualties behind. Physicians, lawyers, and law officers were not so lucky.



After supper Connie Haydn turned his attention to

the week-long backlog of SABR communications and then to the puzzle posed by Norman Wilkinson's alphabetical gallery of nineteenth-century baseball stars. Why, he had kept asking himself for almost a week, were Sid Farrar, Arthur Irwin, and George Ulrich on the list? Every other honoree clearly merited distinction. But these three? They were, as far as Connie could recall, non-entities, with undistinguished and essentially forgettable careers. All he could assume was that his memory of the pre-deadball players was inaccurate. To get the facts, Connie pulled down his well-worn Total Baseball and began the leisurely and happy task of re-acquainting himself with the careers of the earliest giants of the game.

Cap Anson—the first player to get 3000 hits. (Connie knew that that claim was disputable—knew too that Anson was a racist. But those considerations were beside the point in this exercise.) Big Dan Brouthers—winner of five batting championships and standing highest on the lifetime batting average list for nineteenth-century players. (Wow! That guy could hit!) John Clarkson—winner of 328 games in a pitching career that lasted only twelve seasons. (Okay... that's, let's see, better than 27 victories per year. Pretty good.) Hugh Duffy—owner of the highest seasonal average (.440) ever. Buck Ewing—the greatest catcher of the nineteenth century.

And Sid Farrar? Let's see. What did he do? Hmmm. Average hitter, average power, average player. Why wasn't Dave Foutz chosen? Or better yet, Duke Farrell? Wilkinson really lost his mind on this one. If Farrar is known for anything at all, it's for sacrificing his career to help his daughter Geraldine become a famous opera singer.

"Well, let's move ahead." Jack Glasscock—an outstanding fielder and one batting championship. Sliding Billy Hamilton—the base stealing leader of the century. Arthur Irwin? (Well, what can you do with the letter I? He was better than Charlie Irwin or John Irwin. The best of a very poor lot.)

Hughie Jennings—a great shortstop on the great Oriole dynasty. Wee Willie Keeler—the dominant player on that dynasty. (And now the trinity of nineteenth-century superstars is complete: Anson, Brouthers, and Keeler.) Bobbie Lowe—mainstay on the great Beaneater dynasty, with four home runs in one game in 1894. John McGraw—yet another Oriole, with an incredible lifetime on-base percentage of .466. (In my mind he's still the greatest manager of all time.) Kid Nichols—the greatest pitcher of the 1890s. (Imagine... a better pitcher than Cy Young across the whole decade.) Tip O'Neill—two batting championships. (I wonder if he's related to the late Massachusetts politician?) Heinie Peitz—Cincinnati's

acclaimed catcher. (Cincinnati was not a powerhouse in those days.) Joe Quinn. (Hmm. Well, what do you do with Q, anyway? A career that lasted seventeen seasons: that's got to mean he was doing something right.)

Old Hoss Radbourne—59 wins in one season. (Boy, they sure don't make pitchers like that anymore.) Harry Stovey—one of the stars of the American Association. (I'm surprised that S couldn't produce a better player, but he certainly knew how to score runs.) Sam Thompson—one of the great sluggers in Philadelphia's incredible outfield of Delahanty, Hamilton, and Thompson. George Ulrich? (Okay, it's the same problem we have with Arthur Irwin: there's a staggering dearth of competition. In fact, he's not only the right one in the competition, he's the only one.)

George Van Haltren—New York outfielder. (Wow, I hadn't realized what a good hitter he was.) Bobby Wallace—a fine, fine shortstop. (I'll bet Norm was tempted to choose Honus Wagner, even though he's really a twentieth-century player... and I might have chosen Tim Welch). X? Not a chance. The major leagues have never had a player whose last name started with X. Cy Young—who else? Chief Zimmer—Cy Young's splendid battery mate.

At that point, having relished his slow and loving

march through the inexhaustible wealth of Total Baseball, Connie sat back. An incorrigible fan of baseball trivia and memorabilia, Connie basked in the sense of an evening cheerfully wasted. Yes, some of his initial puzzlement had been unwarranted. Arthur Irwin and George Ulrich had been chosen because the competitive pool was so shallow. But Sid Farrar? What can have been in Norm's mind? I guess I'll never know, Connie mused, as he put the reference work back in its favored place on his shelves. Funny man, though, this Norman Wilkinson. Connie went to bed.



Although the day was warm, Shrug Speaker chose to drive rather than walk to evening services at Trinity Episcopal Church, more out of habit than purposefulness. He felt oddly at peace. Even though the charge that he and Connie had accepted—and he regarded the commission as a “charge”—had become indefinite with the evidence that Jason Bigelow was not a murderer, Shrug had the powerful sense that the two friends were doing well in the useful and important job to which they had committed themselves. “We are righting a wrong,” he thought to himself, and that can never be a mistake.

In Shrug's view, Evening Prayer was a service of

subdued and reverential thanksgiving. It was a weekly occasion for him to speak with God. Not that he found speaking with God an easy enterprise. St. Paul had encouraged the pious to pray with both the spirit and the mind—sound advice, Shrug thought, but not always easily followed. Still, he knew from experience that the familiar words of the liturgy would pull his wandering mind back into piety, and he was persuaded that God would not forever leave him without the comfort of counsel. Shrug was one of those happy persons who had never had doubts about God's existence, providence, or grace—one of those happy persons for whom the claims of agnosticism or atheism were totally implausible.

He took a seat in a pew near the front. The usual seven or eight people had turned out—all of them at least fifty and most of them female. “No, wait,” he suddenly thought, “there's a younger and rather pretty woman.” Father Clark began the service with the words from Habakkuk that always seemed apt as the day drew to a close: the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.

But I'm not here to keep silence, thought Shrug. I'm here to ask questions and get help.

Dearly beloved brethren, the priest continued, the Scripture moveth us...

“Oh Lord, please help me to understand scripture. I

know it's supposed to give me glimpses of you, but when I read it, I wind up priding myself on my memory, not seeking wisdom through you." It was Shrug's familiar dilemma—pridefulness.

And although we ought, at all times, humbly to acknowledge our sins before God...

"That's so much easier to do when sins are general and vague rather than specific and frighteningly clear. It's when I'm most in need of God's forgiveness that my embarrassment and shame make me least likely to seek Him out."

The General Confession soon began, moving swiftly to its chilling reminder—for Allen Clark was not disposed to soften the teachings of the church even in an age of feel-good-ism—that there is no health in us. Shrug shuddered at the words.

The moment of relief followed immediately, as the priest sought on behalf of the penitent Absolution and Remission of all your sins, true repentance, amendment of life. For Shrug, the declaration of absolution was the central moment in the great theater of Evening Prayer, and as was usually the case, he felt a weight being lifted from his spirit.

The Lord's Prayer followed, and Shrug, who had attended many Episcopal services in many locations, was once again grateful that Father Clark chose to stick with the traditional wording, even though the

precise distinction between being led away from temptation and being delivered from evil was no clearer to him in the seventh decade of his life than it had been in the first.

Shrug hoped that the service would continue with the Magnificat, but Father Clark had chosen instead the ninety-eighth psalm, with its symphonic celebration of God's justice. The aptness of the choice was borne home, however, when the priest intoned the concluding reminder that with righteousness shall he judge the world, and the peoples with equity.

Allen Clark's homily followed, treating the subject of faithfulness, but for the first time in the service Shrug allowed his mind to become inattentive to the words of the service. Now was when he wanted to have his own conversation with God.

"Oh Lord, help Connie and me to untangle the clues that thou has vouchsafed"—Shrug always found himself slipping into scripture-ese when talking to God—"for us to find. Help us to save the innocent and identify the guilty. Help us to do your work of realizing justice without hurting those whom we are obliged to investigate. Help us to understand." He felt that he ought to say more, but he knew that he could not improve on that last petition. What above all else was needed was understanding—or, as Connie would say, "a pattern."

Back in college days, when bull sessions—does that term still exist?, he wondered—were a staple of dorm life, skeptics had liked to challenge Shrug with the taunt that God responds to prayers with silence. Therefore, they concluded, there is no God. The argument hadn't really bothered him then—he knew the story of Elijah—and it had rarely bothered him since. Shrug believed that God spoke to humankind in general, and Shrug Speaker in particular, in His own time and His own way. And because God wanted justice, He would lead the friends to the truth.

But, as he always did (and he knew the unbeliever would see it as an escape clause), he concluded his prayerful conversation with God with the words of submission. Let thy will, not mine, be done.

Shrug's attention shifted back to the homily, which seemed to winding down—or “up,” as was usually the case with Allen Clark's preachings. “...And he who is faithful in small things will be faithful in large things. Allelujah!”

A series of collects followed, all familiar and all resonant. “Whatever else can be said about this ramshackle thing called the Episcopal Church,” Shrug thought, and not for the first time, “there's no doubt that the people who put the Prayer Book together had a good ear for the English language.” Father Clark invited the small congregation to join him in The

General Thanksgiving, and Shrug happily complied. Finally came the prayer of St. Chrysostom, with its apposite hope that God would respond even when only two or three are gathered together in thy name, and the service was over. Shrug felt, as he usually did, refreshed.

Allen Clark spoke to each parishioner exiting through the front door of the church, and when Shrug stepped forward to shake his hand, Clark said that he had heard that Shrug and Connie now knew that Jason Bigelow was innocent.

“News travels fast,” Shrug replied, somewhat surprised.

“I get my information from the African-American mafia,” the priest smiled.

Shrug realized immediately that Allen Clark must have been talking to George Fielding. “I’m not sure where Connie and I will go with our task now, but at least we’ve got this part of the puzzle solved. Poor Jason. He paid a high price for foolishness.” Then, lest Clark misunderstand him, he added, “I’m referring to his decision to keep silence.” Shrug didn’t know how much Clark might know, and so he was already kicking himself for saying more than had been perhaps wise or necessary.

“I also hear,” the clergyman continued, “that you’re checking into Vince d’Amato’s somewhat tattered

past.” Again he smiled, and again Shrug’s face registered surprised.

“In this case, my source is the priestly mafia,” Clark explained. “Father Gonzalez and I often share ideas and experiences.”

“Oh,” replied Shrug, the weakest of replies. This is a town almost without secrets, he thought to himself.

A few minutes later Shrug got into his car for the short drive home in the lowering twilight. The faintly jarring conversation with Allen Clark had taken the edge off his post-service sense of tranquillity, but he was still rehearsing the familiar words of the prayers in his mind as he turned into Palisades Lane. That was why he failed to notice the figure clothed entirely in black emerging from behind a handsome Norwegian spruce until the figure hurled a large object at his wind shield. Instinct took over, and Shrug spun the steering wheel to avoid the projectile. But he had too little time and too little space, and the cracking sound of the rock hitting the window and the crunching sound of the car hitting a tree were almost simultaneous. The horn of his Jetta rang through the neighborhood. But Shrug didn’t hear it.