

Trinity

A Haydn & Speaker Mystery

Chapter 9



“Good morning, Mr. Speaker.” The voice was chipper and close by. Shrug opened his eyes at once and realized, amid the pain in his face, that he was lying in a hospital bed, a young nurse standing by his left side.

“Good... morning,” he muttered, pain traversing his jaw as he spoke. His puzzlement lasted only a moment. Even as he became aware that his body had become home to soreness, he also recalled—dimly at first, but then quite vividly—the events of the previous evening. The car crash. The flashing of red and blue lights. The grunts of emergency medical workers. The ambulance trip to the hospital. The ministrations of a doctor and several nurses. The pain. The relief afforded by something they gave him.

“You should take one of these pills,” the nurse said. Her tag identified her as Amy. “It will help the pain.” She eased the head of the bed into a modestly raised position.

Shrug swallowed the pill with the cup of water she

offered him and noticed in the process that his trunk was painfully aware of every move he made. "Have I broken anything?" he asked.

"No," she replied, "but your face was bruised when it hit the air bag, and your chest has a stripe-bruise from the seat belt you were wearing. You were a smart and lucky man." She paused to let that information sink in. "You also bumped your head, but you'll be happy to know that Dr. Cordell doesn't think you need to stay with us very long. In fact, he says that though you'll be sore for a while, you might get home today. He's making his rounds right now, and he'll be in to see you soon. Whether you eat breakfast is up to you, of course, but he has said we should encourage you to take some cream of wheat."

Shrug thought about that suggestion for a moment, and although he didn't feel particularly hungry, he promptly decided that he wanted to behave as if he were healthy rather than an invalid, and so he accepted the offer. Before Amy went off to get the cereal, Shrug got her to let him know that the day was Thursday, May 18, and that it was about 8:30 in the morning.

In her absence Shrug took in his hospital room. It was a double, and the man in the other bed (whom Shrug didn't recognize) was watching the Today Show on Channel 4. He had noted that Amy had spoken of

“the accident,” and he wondered if it was known what had really happened. He thought about the figure in black who had suddenly stepped out from behind the trees in the twilight. “Who was it?” he wondered to himself. “Could I recognize him... or her? Was he tall? short? fat? thin?” Shrug sighed. Apart from the impression that his assailant had been a male—and maybe that judgment was based only on the memory that the figure had been tall—Shrug realized that the unexpectedness and swiftness of the attack had overwhelmed his capacity to process sensory perceptions. “I’ve been spending too much time talking about Hume with Connie,” he thought.

“Oh, Connie.” He actually said it out loud. How could he have forgotten? If anyone needed to know what had happened, it was Connie. He might be in danger. And of course there was Marilyn. He had to get in touch with her and let her know he was all right. Shrug suddenly felt guilty about thinking only of himself for the past few minutes. He offered a quick prayer of remorse and gratitude. At that point Amy returned.

“Maybe you can help me get oriented on how things stand,” he said, even as Amy pulled the rotating table across in front of him and placed the cream of wheat and orange juice before him. “I need to get in touch with my daughter in Iowa and with Connie Haydn. Can you tell me how to do it?”

“Mr. Haydn was here some of last night. He was sitting in that chair when I got in at 5:00 a.m.”—she pointed to a bland chair in the corner—“and soon after that he left with Mr. Fielding. He said he’d be back later this morning.”

So Connie knew. At least that much was okay. “And how can I call Des Moines?”

“There’s a phone by your bed,” said Amy smilingly. Shrug looked at the table to which she had pointed and felt briefly silly. Of course there was a phone by his bed. “Just dial a 9 and then the number. But why not wait til you’ve finished your breakfast.”

Shrug realized that that was good advice, not merely because the breakfast table made movement difficult but also because he wanted Marilyn to have time to get Brandon and Gretchen off to school.

Dr. Christopher Cordell arrived while Shrug was eating his cereal. He and Shrug had been acquaintances for some years. With Dr. Cordell one never knew whether a remark was serious or jocular. “All your praying must do you good, Shrug,” he said with a twitch of fun at the corners of his mouth, “because it’s either that or dumb luck that let you get off so lightly.”

Shrug thanked him for all he had done (though Shrug wasn’t quite sure yet what that “all” might have encompassed) and asked for the details of his situation. After taking Shrug’s blood pressure and temper-

ature, and checking his eyes, Cordell answered. “You bumped your head hard, and you received lots of bruising over your upper body and on your face. Some of it is from the seat belt you were wearing and the air bag, which deployed. Fortunately, you were driving pretty slowly in a residential neighborhood, and so speed didn’t complicate your situation.” Cordell proceeded to provide fuller detail, and Shrug realized, somewhat ashamedly, that the subject of one’s own health really did make for interesting conversation.

“Now here’s what I think you should do,” Cordell finally said, by way of signaling that he needed to move onto his next patient. “If you continue to feel okay this morning and through the early afternoon, and if you don’t get a headache, you can go home before this evening. You’re going to be sore for days, and people your age don’t get to feeling better as quickly as the young. I’ll give you pills for the discomfort”—(wonderful word, discomfort, Shrug thought; so much less jarring than pain)—“and you can cope in the congenial surroundings of your home.”

Dr. Cordell turned to leave, but Shrug had a last request. “If Dr. Sanderson is in the hospital today, could you ask him to come by to see me?” Shrug was now feeling sufficiently alert that he wanted to use his unexpected visit to a site thick with physicians to find out what he could about the medical issues related to

Vince d'Amato's death.

Dr. Cordell signaled that he would speak to Dr. Sanderson and left.

Since the cereal was now cold and the clock registered 9:05—a bit after 8:00 a.m. in Iowa—Shrug dialed his daughter. There was no way to sugar-coat his story, and so he plowed straight ahead, moving past the initial gasp of “Oh, daddy!” to let her know that, though bruised, he was feeling good and would soon be going home. She said she'd come right away—the last thing Shrug wanted (“I'm going to put off being a troublesome elderly parent as long as I can” was his operative motto for situations like this)—and Shrug was able to dissuade her only by promising that Connie would be looking after him. Shrug didn't really think that was an accurate statement, at least in any nursing sense, but he knew that Marilyn trusted Connie, and he felt that Marilyn would understand that Connie would tell her the truth.

The tougher part of the conversation came next. Marilyn tried to persuade her father to abandon the investigation, and Shrug had already resolved that he would continue with it. He finally won in the logical arena—though scarcely in the psychological arena—with the observation that backing off probably wouldn't make him safer, since whoever was after him had probably targeted him for something he already knew.

“Now there’s a chilling thought,” he said to himself, even as he tried to couch it in the most comforting tones he could muster. After promising to phone her again that evening, Shrug hung up, congratulating himself (as he so often did after talking with Marilyn) on having raised a splendid daughter.

But by now his mind had shifted into high gear. What he had told Marilyn was right: he and Connie were in danger. They needed to get to the bottom of this investigation quickly. That’s why he was ready when Dr. Sanderson walked into the room, curious about why Shrug had wanted to see him. Ordinarily Shrug might have sought more privacy for his questions, but since his roommate seemed absorbed in the chatter of some morning talk show on the screen, Shrug moved immediately to the point.

“Bianca d’Amato has told me that you were the d’Amato family’s physician. I’m hoping you’ll be willing to answer a few questions about Vince.”

Dr. Sanderson looked puzzled. It turned out that he may have been the only person in Humboldt who hadn’t heard of the investigation. Even when Shrug explained his interest to Sanderson, the physician seemed disinclined to believe the tale—it wasn’t Shrug’s business, it had happened long ago, Vince d’Amato deserved his posthumous privacy, and so on. Dr. Sanderson was getting prickly. Shrug hadn’t

expected this resistance and was about to break off the discussion when George Fielding entered the room. He had been standing out of sight in the hallway, listening to the conversation. His entrance allowed him to intervene decisively.

“Tell Shrug what he wants to know, Lionel.”

“Lionel,” thought Shrug to himself. Poor man.

“Well, there’s one thing I can tell you right off,” Dr. Sanderson snapped petulantly. “Smoke inhalation is an unpleasant way to die, but Vince d’Amato had cancer and wasn’t going to live much longer in any case.”

Without missing a step, Shrug pushed ahead. “Is that why you were giving him drugs? We know he had drugs in his body when he died. We just didn’t know why.” Shrug was once again observing—and admiring—himself in action. When the spirit moves me, I can assume almost any role I’ve seen in a movie.

Dr. Sanderson accepted the truth of Shrug’s statement. “That, plus his sore ankle, of course.”

“And is cancer why his leg wasn’t healing the way it should have been?”

“Maybe... probably. About something like that, I can’t be sure. You’d need to get a more informed judgment from his oncologist in Columbus, Dr. Mertz. But you’re right about the leg: it wasn’t responding to treatment the way it should.”

“What kind of cancer did he have?”

“It had begun as prostate cancer and had spread to his bones. He didn’t want Bianca to know, and so I didn’t tell her. Whether someone else did, I don’t know.”

“Did he know he was going to die soon?”

“Yes.” Dr. Sanderson let his answer rest there. Shrug understood the import of the silence: there was no useful gloss that could be placed on the fact that someone knew he would soon be dead.

After Dr. Sanderson left the room, George Fielding spoke for only the second time. “You weren’t completely surprised by that information, were you? What’s going on? What does it mean?”

“I don’t know what it means, George, but ever since Tuesday, when Connie and I discovered that Jason had been framed—and cleverly framed—we’ve been forced to come to terms with the truth that something very diabolical happened four years ago. And one possibility is that Vince took his own life—or maybe (and I guess this is more likely) that someone wants us to think that he might have taken his own life.”

George Fielding accepted that statement without comment and then moved to the subject that was currently of greatest interest to him as a law officer: the attack on Shrug Speaker. He questioned Shrug about the event and the assailant. Shrug could only say that the attacker was shrouded in very dark attire, that he

—“I refuse to be p.c. under these circumstances, but yes, the attacker might have been a woman”—was tall, and that he had raised the missile over his head and flung it with both arms at the car. Fielding remarked that since Shrug’s custom of attending Wednesday evening services was well known, almost anyone might have figured that he would be driving home in the dusk. He added the unhappy news that the car had apparently been totaled, and that while the evidence of the attack was unmistakably etched into the windshield—“that’s how I knew you hadn’t just been drunk on communion wine,” he winked—no one had witnessed the crime.

“I brought you something,” Fielding said, just as he was about to leave.

Before Shrug could think “candy,” Fielding pulled a piece of paper from his briefcase. “This note was found in those boxes of Vince’s stuff that Bianca snatched from my office without permission. But because I’d put it aside back then, it wasn’t in its box when she re-appropriated them. It’s actually been in my drawer for over three years now. I came upon it—actually I suddenly remembered how I’d gotten it—earlier this week. I guess it shows that Vince was getting religion in his sickness, though I didn’t look up the Bible verse. Since you’re both the investigator and the religious guy, I thought you’d be able to make sense of it.”

He handed the sheet to Shrug. It read: "Herod VII: 46."

Shrug looked at it with puzzled eyes. No, he couldn't make sense of it. But one thing he did know: there was no book in the Bible named Herod.



It wasn't until after 11:00 that morning that Connie Haydn visited Shrug in the hospital. He had gone home after leaving George Fielding's office at about 6:00 a.m., planning to sleep for only two hours. But his sleep had been deeper than planned, and if Marilyn Speaker hadn't phoned him, he might have slept past noon. "Don't worry," he assured Shrug. "I played along. But I'll make a very poor nurse." They both laughed. Learning that Shrug might be able to leave the hospital late that afternoon, Connie promised to return about 4:30 to take him home. "Right after lunch I've arranged to visit Patricia Bigelow Simons." He held up his hand. "I know. I know. We said we'd do it together. But she needs to be informed right away and you don't need the stress." Shrug didn't resist that reasoning.

Walking back into the hospital parking lot, Connie was able to relax for the first time since George Fielding had called him the previous evening with

news about the attack on Shrug. Less than half an hour later he had met a barely conscious Shrug and a worried Fielding at the hospital. When he had left the hospital around daybreak, Shrug had been sleeping. But what had sleeping meant? maybe he'd be broken in spirit? maybe he was comatose? maybe even he was dying? "Hospitals bring out our worst fears," he reflected, half-grimly. Connie had left Shrug's room in the earliest moments of dawn because he couldn't endure sitting there any longer. But now, with the mid-day sun providing an appropriate backdrop, he knew that Shrug was feeling better... that the attack was unlikely to have enduring consequences... that spunk and liveliness had returned to his eyes and speech... that Shrug was okay. Connie felt a weight being lifted from his whole body, swept upward as if by a gust from below.

Connie was not afraid to say that he loved Shrug. It was not a sexual thing. Rather, it was an appreciation of the truth that Shrug and he shared an understanding of each other's spirit or psyche or soul or consciousness or character—"What is the word I want?" he wondered—that made them perfect friends. To say that they were perfect friends didn't mean that they were alike. In fact, far from it. Shrug was one of William James's once-born—happy within his skin, unvexed by deeper ontological issues, ready to take on

life's challenges with good humor, high spirits, and an almost unfailing optimism. Connie on the other hand was twice-born—forever scrutinizing and questioning himself, forever looking for an unfindable inner peace, a restless and true Kierkegaardian. But somehow these differences provided a foundation for trust, sympathy, and eagerness. Connie had come to the hospital fearing he might be losing the best friend he had ever had; he was leaving confident that the friend would survive. And with the determination to uncover the identity of the person who had done this to Shrug.

But first, with lunch scarfed down, he needed to talk with Patricia Bigelow Simons. When he had called her the previous evening to arrange his visit (and Shrug's too, he had then believed), he had requested that her husband also be present. He probably would be, anyway, he thought to himself, but it's best to play it safe. Patricia was ready to receive him promptly at 1:30, no doubt deeply curious. Her brooding and silent husband stood several feet behind her when Connie came to the front door, and he followed them into the living room, where they sat in exactly the same seats they had occupied on his earlier visit.

"I'll move right to the point, Mrs. Simons... Mr. Simons." Though Connie nodded to Gene Simons occasionally, he essentially addressed Patricia Simons. "Shrug and I are now confident that Jason had noth-

ing to do with the fire that killed Vince d'Amato." He stopped, both to let that information sink in and to watch the reactions. Patricia Simons seemed pleased, smiling at the news. Perhaps she was thinking that she might now be able to collect the insurance money that was owed her. Gene Simons was his usual impassive self—a blank and opaque stone tower.

"But there are some implications that go with that conclusion," Connie said, "and I'd like to alert you to them."

Patricia Simons then interrupted with an unexpected expression of concern about Shrug's accident and an inquiry about his health. Connie wondered if she was trying to change the subject or was just being politely solicitous, but he replied matter-of-factly that Shrug had been feeling quite good when he had visited him in the hospital a few hours earlier. It's unlikely, Connie thought to himself, that Patricia could throw a rock at a car, but I don't know about this strange guy Gene. He then returned to his own script.

"It seems to Shrug and me that Jason was not just accidentally targeted for Vince's death. We think he might have been framed."

"That's awful," said Patricia. "Why would anyone want to hurt Jason in that way?" The sudden appearance of bewilderment in her voice and the hint of tears in her eyes were Gene's cue, and, as at the earlier

meeting, he moved next to his wife to console her.

“There’s one more thing, Mrs Simon. And this is why I thought you should be here, Mr. Simon. The reason Shrug and I are quite confident that Jason didn’t set the fire is that we have very good evidence that he spent the afternoon and evening of the day of the fire in Columbus... with a... Say it! Spit it out!” Connie said to himself as he became aware of his involuntary hesitation... with his gay boy friend.”

Silence.

“I don’t believe you,” said a suddenly angry Patricia Simons. “That’s absurd. That’s ridiculous.”

“I think it’s true,” said Connie quietly.

“But he loved me,” she replied, suddenly personalizing the conversation in a way that Connie hadn’t expected. “He loved me, not a man!”

Connie could boast no special understanding of the complexities of human sexuality and love, but some simple words came into his mind and mouth at this point that struck him, when he later thought back on the conversation, as almost magically apposite. “Yes, Mrs. Simons, he loved you. He loved you very much. You were the center of his life. That much I know.”

Silence.

Then Connie began again. “I’m hoping you’ll let me ask you a few questions, Mrs. Simons. But in case you just want me to leave, there’s one more thing I need to

say. Since Jason was in a relationship with a gay man, there is some possibility that he was HIV-positive. You and Mr. Simons should probably have yourselves tested.”

There. It's all out, thought Connie. I've done my duty. Now if I can just get her to talk a bit, maybe I can pull some information out of this wretched conversation.

Patricia Simons began crying aloud, and Connie couldn't help reflecting that he'd been making lots of people go weepy lately. “Look,” he said. “Everything is probably okay. It's just a precaution.” Then he waited.

Patricia's crying slowly subsided, as Gene stroked her hair. The silent husband seemed more caring today than he had a week ago. Finally she spoke again to Connie. “Thank you. Of course you're right. Gene and I will be tested.” Her voice was almost a whisper, but it carried a tone of firmness that Connie had not heard before. Then, responding to Connie's expressed hope, she asked, “What do you want to know?”

“I'm curious about several things, Mrs. Simons.” Connie was speaking quickly, lest she change her mind. “Maybe you can help me with them. Maybe you can't. But I need to sound you out.”

“Does this mean you think you know who did this awful thing to Jason?”

“No, I'm afraid it doesn't. But we're determined to

solve the puzzle. For me, it's personal now, since someone tried to kill Shrug Speaker. And I suppose you've heard about the squirrel." She nodded affirmatively. "But I'll be happy to keep you informed, especially since you're wanting to be helpful." Connie knew that there was a non-trivial chance that one or the other of the Simonses was the culprit, but he had no way to get information except to ask questions when the opportunities arose. Besides, he couldn't bring himself to believe that the couple seated before him—the one trying not to cry, the other consoling and embracing her—were really murderers.

"We've heard," Connie began, locking his eyes on Patricia Simons's eyes, "that at some point in late 1996, after Vince d'Amato's death, you became curious about where your husband had been on that evening. This seems odd. Do you feel you can tell me what triggered your worries and your interest in that date?"

Patricia Simons stared back at Connie intensely. Then she conceded the battle and allowed her eyes to drop. "I wondered... oh, oh, oh, Jason, forgive me... I wondered if he was seeing another woman. I guess I sensed something wasn't right with our marriage. But I never thought it was a man he was seeing." She fell silent for a moment, gathering her thoughts and composure. "As for the date, I threw it out because, thanks to the coincidence of the d'Amato fire, it was one pre-

cise day I could confidently remember his not being home. Oh, it was wicked of me.”

Connie was silent while he turned this explanation over in his mind. It was distracted but not implausible. So he changed direction. “Did Jason ever talk to you about wanting to become a trustee of Humboldt College? President Morrison has told me that he had inquired of her about the possibility several months before the fire.”

Patricia Simons looked blank. “No, I’ve never heard of that before. It really doesn’t sound like Jason. But then, it’s clear I didn’t know him as well as I thought. And maybe he believed that getting on the board would be a real feather in the cap of the local hardware store owner.”

“How about this,” said Connie, moving in a different direction. “Did he ever talk about the possibility of coming into a lot of money? The story I’ve heard has him speaking, four years ago, of the getting rich soon. Does that mean anything to you?”

Patricia Simons looked still more perplexed. “No. His parents weren’t wealthy. Neither were mine. We only occasionally bought lottery tickets, and then more as a game than anything else. How else can one come into a lot of money except by inheritance or good luck?”

Connie decided not to mention theft, embezzle-

ment, contract crime, and other similarly nefarious routes to quick wealth.

“Well, as I said, maybe you won’t be able to help me. Here’s another line I want to explore. I’ve been told that Jason liked to help people by extending them good advice. The two examples I was given involved his helping someone decide to put a parent in a rest home and his helping someone decide to get an abortion. Do you know anything about either?”

“Well, here I can be helpful,” Patricia replied, her eyes widening perceptibly. “Jason often talked of his informal counseling successes. He said he had a gift for helping people understand how to deal with their problems. He’d been giving advice long before I knew him and continued doing so until he was arrested. The person who was wondering about whether his father should be in a nursing home was Billy Esterhazy.” The name immediately rang a bell in Connie’s brain, though several seconds passed before he recalled that Rita Grabek had included him on her list of Jason Bigelow’s friends. “He runs the appliance store across the street from the hardware store. I can’t recall any of the details, but Jason helped him get in touch with a nursing home in Newark, and as I remember it, Billy moved his dad then and was happy about how it all turned out.”

“And the abortion?,” asked Connie.

“That was Eleanor Wilkinson.” Connie didn’t have to strain to put that name in its right slot: Norman Wilkinson’s rather wayward daughter had crossed his path already during the investigation. “This was quite awhile ago. Before we were married. One summer she worked in the hardware store. People found Jason easy to talk to, and so one day she told him she was pregnant and didn’t want to bring the baby to term. She asked if he knew where she might turn, and he helped her get in touch with Planned Parenthood or some other organization. Again I can’t recall the details.”

“Those are the only two incidents that I’ve heard of,” said Connie, “but I’m guessing there were others.”

“Oh, yes. Jason was a good man. He was glad to be helpful. And a local businessman has lots of friends and connections he can turn to, if he needs information or services. Would you like me to try to think of others?”

“Since I’m not sure whether any of this is useful,” Connie replied, “I won’t ask you to waste any more of your time right now. But if you recall other instances of his being helpful, especially to local people, I’d be grateful if you’d jot them down and let me know.”

Because Simons seemed to be warming to the task at hand, Connie moved to what he suspected would be the toughest question. “According to my information,

you didn't speak at Jason's trial. Would you tell me why?"

Patricia's face darkened immediately. "Why is that important?"

"I don't know that it is—and I'm certainly not accusing you of anything. It just struck me as odd that you didn't give testimony, and I tend to ask questions about things that strike me as odd."

Patricia Simons fell completely silent (what new secret is she reluctant to reveal?, Connie wondered), and only after a nudge from Gene Simons did she speak, her voice bathed with despair in its effort to come to terms with the words it was uttering. "It's complicated. Life is complicated. Oooo...." She was crying again, but not uncontrollably. "By the time of the trial Gene and I were seeing each other, very secretly. I'm guessing you already know that we had dated a lot in high school." Connie nodded. "I was afraid that if I testified, then I might be asked about Gene. I didn't want our... our affair"—it was a whisper—"revealed, and I was also afraid—I really was, though it sounds self-serving—that if the affair became known, then somehow it would make Jason look guiltier. Jason thought it was Vince d'Amato I'd been seeing—Lord only knows where Jason got that idea from." Pause. "But it wasn't. It was Gene. And that's why I felt I couldn't testify." She was silent for a few

seconds before uttering her final, bleak words: “God, what a mess I made of things!” A torrent of tears followed.

Though Connie found this explanation even less satisfactory than Patricia’s explanation for her own suspicions, he decided that this interview was effectively over. He got up to leave, awkwardly thanking the Simonses for their help and assuring them that he had not meant to distress them. Only when he opened the front door did a sniffing Patricia Simons ask him if he could give her the name of the man who had been Jason’s lover. Connie had feared this question, but he was also prepared for it, knowing he had to decline the request. Patricia did not persist, and Connie left Gene and Patricia Simons to the indecipherable world they had created for themselves.



After a hamburger lunch that belied the usual tales of the dreariness of hospital cuisine, Shrug Speaker decided that he was fit enough to return to his home late that afternoon. After examining him again, Dr. Cordell agreed. Since Shrug had several hours to spend before Connie arrived to pick him up, he turned his mind to the possible implications of the information passed on by Dr. Sanderson. Why might Vince

d'Amato have chosen to keep his serious illness a secret? There was, of course, the possibility that Vince had fallen prey to the not uncommon human hope that ignoring a disease will make it disappear. But that seemed unlikely, especially since he was anxious (according to Maria Tedesco) about his imperfect recuperation from the leg injury. There was also the possibility that he didn't want to worry Bianca too much. But inasmuch as she wasn't even living with him any more, that too seemed unlikely. And yet, the more Shrug thought about it, the more he realized he didn't have any handle on the nature of the d'Amato marriage. What made it tick? What were its dynamics? How did love and contempt—"those probably aren't the right polarities anyway"—interact in this strange couple? And in the absence of that handle, he could make no confident assumptions about what would lead Vince d'Amato to keep his spouse uninformed about his cancer.

"Let's try the question from a different direction, then," Shrug thought. What might Vince have concluded about his situation, once he learned that the cancer had returned? "If he was gloomy, as many of us are in these circumstances, he might very well have decided that only the pain and debilitation of a slow dying lay ahead." Shrug knew that cancer was a disease that exercised a peculiar dread over those who

brooded about it, and he knew too that most people are more in fear of the pain which might precede death than of death itself. “I wonder if he contemplated suicide?” Shrug could not help chuckling at the thought: no matter how hard they tried, Connie and he could not stop entertaining the notion of suicide. “But I’m not really entertaining it,” he thought, “I’m only letting my mind while away the time by playing games. And I did mention the word when I was talking to George Fielding.”

Shrug’s uncertain train of thought carried him from suicide to suicide notes. “Do most people who commit suicide leave notes? I don’t know. Did Vince leave a suicide note? Not that we know of.” His mind hung, suspended over the thought. “Or do we?” The last question—and it was almost an affirmation rather than a question—popped into his mind unexpectedly, as he recalled the morning visit from George Fielding. “Where is that pseudo-biblical citation he left with me?” he thought, shaking his bedclothes. Not finding the paper buried in the folds of his sheets, he turned to his bed table and, after a moment of panic that he had lost it, finally spotted it on the floor. He couldn’t reach it from his bed, but a candy-striper came by about ten minutes later and was happy to secure it for him. The notation still seemed strange: Herod VII:46.

“Hmmm, well Herod plays a big role in the New

Testament, but he didn't get a book named after him. So what is this? A joke? Unlikely. A mistake? Possibly. A reference to something else? Most likely." He played with "Herod" in his mind, rolling it around, treating it anagrammatically, and reorganizing its letters. And then he suddenly realized that it might be an abbreviation—a shorthand notation for... well, for Herodotus. Yes, he thought slowly, that makes sense.

Shrug hadn't read Herodotus in over forty years, but he knew someone who had. He picked up the phone and dialed the office of Agnes Fitzgerald, a young Humboldt classicist whom he had come to know through Connie. When she answered, he asked her if the reference made any sense in the context of the standard editions of Herodotus's histories. He was gratified to hear that the reference was indeed a correct one, and more than gratified—"stunned, bowled over," were terms he used in his mind—when Fitzgerald's reading of the cited passage included the injunction that "when life is so burdensome, death has become for men a sought-after refuge." That sure sounded like a suicide message.

Agnes Fitzgerald was so pleased to have been of use that she didn't even inquire about the reason for Shrug's curiosity. But after he hung up, Shrug was left feeling deeply dissatisfied. It was now possible—just possible—to imagine a scenario in which Vince

d'Amato had decided that, rather than submit to the indignity of a slow and painful death, he would take his own life. It was also possible to see the quotation from Herodotus as an acknowledgment of suicide. But too many problems still existed. How would Vince d'Amato come to know passages from Herodotus? Why would he choose to kill himself by fire rather than by some less agonizing method? Indeed, getting back to the key question, why suicide at all? Even if his cancer had spread, there were treatments available to prolong life and ameliorate discomfort. Most people wind up preferring life—and nursing the hope of a cure—to self-extinction.

Shrug lay back in his bed and stared at the ceiling. He was virtually oblivious to the chatter from an afternoon television program that featured couples with unimaginably complicated marital and sexual lives. “Connie and I have already concluded that some very clever mind lies behind the confusing set of events of 1996 and 1997. I think this ‘suicide’ business is just part of the elaborate charade. Someone wanted us—or wanted the police, or Rita Grabek, or someone—to consider the possibility of suicide. But suicide under these circumstances is just too improbable.” He relaxed and let his mind run over the whole investigation. “I guess we’re making progress,” he mused, “but I sure wish it felt like progress.”

When Connie came in at 4:40, Shrug was dozing. The stress of the previous night and the medications he had been given had overcome the mental excitement of his early afternoon. The two friends didn't discuss the investigation while Connie helped Shrug bundle his few belongings together, but once they reached the privacy of Connie's Buick, each filled the other in on the results of the past few hours. Shrug was surprised by Patricia Simons's confession; Connie was impressed by Shrug's coup with Herodotus. When they reached Shrug's house, Connie helped him in. Then, after agreeing that they would jointly visit Bianca d'Amato the next morning (we've got to test the suicide theory out on her, improbable though it is, they agreed), Connie left and Shrug went to bed. But not before putting a CD of Bach's French Suites on the player and calling Marilyn to let her know that he was feeling strong enough to be at home. She was not impressed. After all, nothing could make her forget that someone had tried to kill her father less than twenty-four hours earlier. As for Connie, he returned home more troubled than ever. The intricacy with which the relationships among the various crimes and hints of crimes had been woven bespoke a cunning of intent and desperation of malevolence that seemed totally beyond the capacity of any of the hapless beings Shrug and he had met. Who lay behind all this? Who

was the puppeteer?