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Cafe Society

I won a house in a lottery. It was a raffle in aid of homeless children. It was run by a church. For God's sake, was the pitch, get our kids off the streets. I bought my ticket in the mall by the supermarket. It cost two dollars. A book of twenty-five is what was being urged. I said one ticket was enough, thank you, and it was. It was a substantial house, en suite spa bath, granite kitchen, gazebo on the landscaped lawn,. Triple garage. The fifth bedroom doubled as a den.

A priest came to see me, a fellow of careful mouth, parchmenty skin, the cleanest nails I've ever seen on a man. I tell you, they gleamed. I didn't exactly invite him in. We stood in the hall. He hinted, then enlarged, and finally said it outright. I was to donate the house back to the church to raffle again. That was the protocol. It was known. It was understood. "There's a lot o' hungry kids out there," he said, "we can't be killin' the milk cow,

now can we?" He showed me his teeth in a certain sort of smile.

I went past him to the hallway closet, took out my father's Purdy, broke it open, let him see both barrels were loaded, snapped it shut. A lovely sound.

"Get off my property," I said.

His eyes showed me he was looking, if not at his Maker, then certainly his Taker.

"You'll –" he began.

The end of my right boot helped his haemorrhoids down the front marble steps.

A girl of long blonde hair in free fall down her back slips her thumbs under, fingers in holding cradle above, slides them, guides them, the left, the right, in flowing movement over her crown and down, her body in simultaneous upward arch, in invitation or exhibition or unconscious purest pleasure, perhaps all three, her pretty ears now to hold back her hair, neat, tidy, tucked in place, as her body relaxes too, falls back, done. How old is she? Twenty? Twenty-five? Who can tell these days? She is wearing a slim soft grey woollen dress, a design of spaced horizontal stripes or bands.

But look, she's doing it again, the same, the hands, the body, the ears. And again. Once more. Incessantly. Over and over. Again and again.

Actually, not exactly blonde. The lightest auburn, rather, Just that shade stronger than honey.

It's three of them this time, the original and two others, a young one of obvious brawn, curly red hair like wood shavings over the broad bone of hard skull, fearless eyes of depthless blue, hams for hands, the third the frailest ancient, a substanceless tissue, a whisper, a sneeze away from actual ghost, meanwhile propped and trembling on a supporting stick, this calibrated trio in calculated tableau on my marble doorstep unnecessary of uttered word, the purpose of their presence beyond plain. But words are said, or anyway attempted. "If ya would be sparin' us the slimmest moment," begins the original, the ancient obviously too elderly, the red head no doubt unencumbered by the necessary mechanism of brain.

The silver whistle I am never without, day or night, hail or shine, on sea and land, fair weather or foul, whips to my lips as though of its own volition, a simple tug on its supporting silver chain more than sufficient, the briefest exhalation, my four hounds in instant appearance, red eyed and ready, skip the breed, each the size of a Shetland or larger, a fortune in grooming and feed.

The sounds of despatch are positively musical.

Though the cleaning of rinds and remnants driven into their teeth takes some doing, I can tell you.

Her companion is Asian, of probably, possibly the same sort of age, twenty, twenty-five, certainly no older than that, her hair a black helmet, a stylish cap of close-

cut coiffure, and yet, and yet, now she's inserting her thumbs too, the fingers above, the glide, the sweep, the flowing movement to the back and down, and yes, the same upward arching of body (somewhat muffled by a jacket in her case, a businessy business, buttoned to the neck), and because of that or something else, known to or by her or not, no difference, just that little bit more careful, contained, almost self-conscious, even aware, an appearance of – oops, did this slip out? – a guise of outward modesty taken by innocent surprise.

And why?

With her hair?

Involuntary emulation?

Not to be outdone?

Is there no stopping him? What will it take? I grab a dressing gown. O it's him again all right, pressing my bell with a heavy hound-damaged hand, his shape and outline recognised and regrettable through the pebbled panels of my not-even-opened-yet security-glass front door.

And beside him, who is this?

“Allow me ta introduce ya ta Timmy,” the battered priest unrolls his flannel tongue. “He was sleeping’ in a viaduct when we found ’im, eaten’, when he was eaten’ at all, outta a skip. An’ he’s one o’ the lucky ones, I can tell ya that. It’s the ones we don’t rescue that bleeds the heart, the ones that lack o’ mere money prohibits us

extendin' our ever-available helpin' hand. Do ya fouler? I'm not standin' here t' preach t' ya, understand me on that if nothin' else. I'm here merely ta illustrate, t' paint ya the realest picture of how in this rollin' world the Good Lord has given us, some of us through no personal failin' or fault has to live."

And well may he have gone on in this fashion, his gaudy paintbox barely touched, I'm sure, a whole host of hues and horrors all lined up and ready to deliver into the pinkness of my unprotected ears, when lo, who should appear beside me but naked Bettina, my doxy of the day, the smell of interrupted sex coming off her like a towel fresh from the autoclave, a palpable scream of steam.

The boy stands, shall we say rooted, his eyes of a protuberance (other body parts best unremarked) to do a gargoyle proud.

And would be there yet, I dare say, a Lot's wife of frozen immobility, but for his outraged owner, jealous keeper, take your pick, looker-after of little boys, seizing him by the scruff, wheeling, retreating, over the horizon and beyond ere the reek reach their souls through ready nostrils, gone, vanished, to be seen no more.

A fellow sits with the girls, the two young women, but his back only visible, a black coat of thick cloth, no way of gauging reaction, whether participant, cause or effect.

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Hergesheimer finishes his coffee, pats his lips with the provided paper napkin, gathers together his brought-in belongings – his cap, his sunglasses, his package of just-purchased book – pushes back his chair, stands up, goes over to the counter to pay.