

Mysteriously

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An unshaven man in a damp and tattered overcoat pulls his collar up around his neck. The rain had begun when most people were safe and dry in their homes finishing warm stew and steamy cornbread. It had been a week since the man had eaten his last hot meal at St. Bart's with other men down and out and forced onto the streets. As he hugs a bulge under his coat, the man thinks about his wife and kid who had both died nearly a year ago. The city undertaker had written "Malnutrition" as the cause of death on each death certificate, for Mayor James McCluskey would not have any "Starvation" in his berg. The unshaven man backs into an alley and leans against a wet brick wall forming a dark silhouette barely visible to the driver of a '41 Hudson rolling by. The man tries to stay dry, and he waits.

Up above, a battered Underwood Number 5 clacks as Philip Casey hammers letters, words, and sentences onto a fresh sheet of onionskin paper. This sound has gone on and off continually for eight hours, since one in the afternoon, when the shamus began his assault on the opening paragraph of his first book:

Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack.

It was a dark and stormy night – a night when women and weak men would read trashy novels while curled up in front of warm fires. Hawthorne stared

blankly out the 6th floor window onto Olive Street. The obscene red neon glow of the Alhambra Theater flashed on the wet sidewalk. Hawthorne thought about Ted Seymour, his partner, the partner who was killed on a case while tailing a suspect in the Parson's jewelry heist. The desk across from Hawthorne's still sat empty after fourteen weeks. He saw no need to fill it anytime soon: business had not been good, and it had not been bad.

“Aah, this is garbage!” Casey shouts as he pushes his heavy oak-wood chair away from his heavy oak-wood desk. His book agent, Robby Epstein, needs a sample chapter by morning when he will pitch Casey's work to a publisher of cheap dime novels. Casey sweats underneath his clammy shirt and his hands shake ever so slightly as he thinks about the critical deadline that would rush toward him through the rest of the night.

Della opens the door to the inner office, her alabaster hand gently grasping the worn brass doorknob. “What's the matter, boss? Can I get you anything?”

Casey barks, “If I want anything, I'll tell you! Now get the hell out of here and leave me alone!”

“You don't have to snap a girl's head off, you know.”

“I'll snap at you whenever I want for fifteen fifty a week. Now get out!”

The secretary retreats to the outer reception area with a soft pout on her face, the kind of pout a man wants to take into his arms and kiss slowly. Casey flips open the lid of the tin cigarette case on his desk and glances at the inscription inside:

“For meritorious service above and beyond the call of duty.”

Casey shakes his head slowly and thinks, “This is what I have to show for 15 years on the force.” He places a Fatima in his mouth and lights it with the Zippo lighter he had taken off a tough guy when Casey was just 14. He puffs. Milky smoke floats and swirls under the heat of the incandescent desk lamp casting ghostly shadows on the

Underwood. "I gotta get out of here to think." Casey stands. His chair rolls violently into the middle of the room and tips over. He grabs his trench coat and Fedora off the leather over-sized chair in the corner and bursts into the reception area. As Casey charges through to the hallway, he grumbles something to Della sitting at her desk going over last month's receipts. She barely has a chance to look up.

No one but the downtrodden inhabits the streets on a night like this. The only sound is a fast "ka-slap, ka-slap, ka-slap" as Casey's shoes make angry splashes on the sidewalk. The unshaven man in the tattered overcoat emerges from the alley and blocks Casey's path.

"Say, mister, can you stake a meal?" asks the unshaven man.

"Get the hell out of my way!"

"Sorry, all I meant was..."

"Get out of my way!"

The unshaven man pulls a lead pipe out from under his coat and "pow". He lets Casey have it. Casey's left cheek starts bleeding before he hits the pavement.

When he wakes, Casey slowly rises, reels his head twice, and puts out his arm to lean against the dripping brick wall. He frisks himself. His wallet is gone, and worse, his 38-caliber detective special is missing from its usual place on the P.I.'s right hip. For years, the gun had been Casey's back-up weapon used only once in the line of duty. Casey knows he would have to report this to his old buddies on the force to avoid any future misunderstandings.

Casey turns to get oriented and begins walking. The only sound is the slow "slop, slop, slop" as he struggles back to his building. Casey ascends the seven steps from the

sidewalk and pushes the front door. “Got... to get... to the office.” He spots the elevator on the far side of the black-and-white tiled lobby. Casey can see his face in the gilt mirror as he stumbles by, and he does not like what he sees. The gumshoe reaches the elevator and gets in almost tripping over the transom. He presses the black, Bakelite button marked “6” and steps back. The cold, steel grate closes in front of the somber look on Casey’s face casting a shadow of X’s across it.

When the grate opens, Casey takes a deep breath, winces at the pain, and begins dragging one leg after the other. 30 feet, 20 feet, 10 feet, 2 feet. As Casey leans against the office door, his blood smears the opaque glass and a swath of red paints over the words “Casey & Thatcher, Private Investigations”.

Della hears a bump from outside the office door and reaches into her top drawer for the 25 automatic she keeps secret from her boss.

“Who’s there?”

“Angel, it’s me.” Casey turns the brass doorknob adding a layer of blood to the 28-year old patina. The door swings open, and Casey collapses.

“What have you gotten yourself into this time?” Della returns the 25 to the top drawer and reaches for the bottom one on the right. It slides out quickly. Della reaches in. Gauze pads. Iodine. Bourbon.

Della sits down next to Casey at the door and puts his head on her lap. The wound oozes. Della fills a gauze pad with iodine and her boss with bourbon.

“Angel, I..., I...”

“I know, boss. I know.” Della dabs Casey’s left cheek and smiles mysteriously.

Photo credit: “The Third Man”, Orson Wells, 1949.