

## THE CASE OF THE MIXED METAPHORS

by Barry Stewart Mann, MFA

### Cast of Characters

Nick Sharp, a Private Investigator  
Midge Woolley, his Assistant  
Charlotte Quillenby, a Novelist  
Lavinia Rhapsody, a Millionairess  
J. Bartholomew Hightower III, the Mayor  
Prometha de Nova, an Actress  
Dr. Siegfried Wittschnecker  
'Sticky Mitts' McGuire, an ex-Convict  
Jackie Dash, a Track Star  
Sweetie Framboise, a Confectioner  
Remington Peck, a Reporter

*THE STAGE is set neutrally with specific places for the various characters in the play. Set pieces and backdrop suggest a dark and sultry urban landscape, evocative of the film noir genre. Once the actors enter, they remain on stage throughout the play, unless otherwise noted.*

*IN THE TEXT, the mixed metaphors are followed by a parenthetical phrase (EEZH!) indicating a wince or cringe in response to the mixed metaphors. In the world of the play, mixed metaphors are an affliction; when a character utters a mixed metaphor, it is as if a small jolt of sudden pain is felt. The speaker will wince, and others in the scene may do so as well. The wince or cringe device will signal the mixed metaphors to both actors and audience, as well as allow a brief beat for the audience think about and respond to it. The wincings should be shaped and modulated by the actors and director to find an appropriate balance. They should not be so big as to be annoying, nor so small as to be meaningless.*

*In addition, each of the eight suspects has a quirk or personality oddity which occurs occasionally as he or she speaks. The quirk is defined parenthetically at the character's first appearance and signalled in the text by italics within the speech.*

*PROCESSION. Introductory music, a slow jazzy blues of the 1940's or 1950's, plays as the characters, with the exception of MIDGE and CHARLOTTE, emerge one by one to take their places on the stage. As they move into place, they encounter and assess each other, both suspiciously and suspectingly. Once they are all on stage, they may do some synchronized choreographed movements to the music before taking their seats.*

*SCENE 1. The Case and the Suspects. NICK'S OFFICE. Late in the day. NICK alone. He speaks directly to the audience.*

NICK: It was the end of a long day. The phone had been ringing like a fire alarm in a volcano. I was about to head off to the roller rink for a few spins around the track. Suddenly, my assistant burst in like a freight train with an urgent delivery.

*(MIDGE enters.)*

MIDGE: Nick, you would not believe who is in the office, wanting to see you!

NICK: I could tell from the tone of her voice that I was about to get pulled into some kind of tornado. *(To her.)* Try me, Midge.

MIDGE: It's her. You know those books I read? Those mysteries? Well, she's here! The author! Charlotte Quillenby!

NICK: Calm down. You're hopping like a popcorn popper on overdrive.

MIDGE: I'm just so excited! I'm almost at the end of her latest book. It's called, Death Takes City Hall. It has this cold-blooded killer, Charles Derrumer. It's all about politics and everything. And I hear they're making it into a movie.

NICK: Midge, don't get your hair twisted all in knots. This is a Private Eye's office, not a Hollywood fan club. So put the brakes on.

MIDGE: But, Nick, can't I even ask for her autograph?

NICK: Not until we find out what she wants. Show her in. *(To audience.)* In this game, you've got to be careful not to show your cards too soon. Nick Sharp, Private Investigator. The best in the biz. The cream of the crop. The icing on the cake. The shine on the silver. Choose your metaphor, they all fit.

MIDGE: Mr. Sharp, this is Ms. Charlotte Quillenby!

NICK: I could tell by looking at her, she was one smart bird. Ms. Quillenby, what can we do for you?

CHARLOTTE: Mr. Sharp, you've got to help me! I feel like a wild animal locked in a cage with no hopes of finding my way back to port! *(EEZH!)*

NICK: Hold on a minute, doll! You're not making any sense.

CHARLOTTE: That's just it! I'm a writer. I'm known around the world for my way with words. I can turn a phrase like a key in a lock on a door that has come unhinged (*EEZH!*)

NICK/MIDGE: A door that has come unhinged?

CHARLOTTE: Yes, exactly, unhinged! I mean, I am known as the mistress of metaphors, the sultan of similes, but now I'm the queen of bad writing sitting on a throne of confusion with a scepter that has run out of ink (*EEZH!*)!

NICK: Now calm down. You've got to start talking straight, and cut out all these . . . these . . .

MIDGE: Mixed metaphors! She's talking in mixed metaphors!

CHARLOTTE: That's just it! I'm talking in mixed metaphors! If this doesn't stop, my career is over!

NICK: Listen. Tell me when this started. Just the facts. Don't try anything fancy. Nouns, verbs, that's it.

MIDGE: Yes, Ms. Quillenby, it will be hard, but, whatever you do, no 'like' or 'as.' No images. No figures of speech.

CHARLOTTE (*carefully*): I'll try. I was at a party. A wonderful party. A dear friend of mine just opened a dessert restaurant. It is called Sweetie's Treats. It was a lovely group of people. Some of my closest friends. And some new acquaintances. Well, there I was, talking about this and that. Suddenly, I realized, I could no longer, you know, turn a phrase.

NICK: Careful, Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE: I was terrified. You see, I'm working on my next book. I'm way behind, and it's due on my editor's desk next week. But there I was, mixing metaphors right and left. I had to get out of there. So I made up some quick excuse. I said, "I've got to kick off, punch out and hit the road (*EEZH!*)," or something just as dreadful. And I left as quickly as I could.

NICK: Do you have any idea how this happened?

CHARLOTTE: No, none at all. I was having a delightful evening. The people there were so interesting and engaging.

NICK: Looks to me like you've been blinded by some pretty bright light.

CHARLOTTE: What do you mean?