

Where There's a Will There's a Murder

"an artful concoction
of corporate intrigue
and homicidal mayhem"



Gerald M Weinberg

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Gerald M. Weinberg

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Speed

My life's passion is math. To most people, my passion is a puzzle. What puzzles me, though, is *their* interest in anything *besides* math.

For me, every other human interest is a distant second—except for my fascination with whatever fascinates other people. In other words, I'm curious about anything that people love to do. Cooking, climbing, crocheting, camel breeding—why would anyone care?

The more foreign an activity is to me, the stronger my curiosity. That's why I agreed to allow my friend Raj introduce me to the sport of auto racing. Why would Rajesh Ramachandra, an upper-class mathematical genius from India, be able to sit all day watching a flock of machines circle one stretch of pavement? Hundreds of times? I made the mistake of asking him, "Isn't once around the track boring enough?"

I must have hurt his feelings. In retaliation, he made me promise him my undivided attention for one whole day. If I'd known the slightest thing about auto racing, I would have predicted he'd choose Memorial Day—the Indy 500, the mother of all races.

I do some of my best math in the hours after midnight, so I favor remaining in bed until after noon, but Raj insisted

we watch all the goings on before the race itself. He did arrange a catered vegetarian brunch buffet for me, to help me endure the long, tedious ceremonies. It was a typical thoughtful Raj gesture—expensive, but he could afford it. And it did help pass the time as the strange-looking cars went round and round—and round again.

Based on Raj's excitement, I suppose somebody must have won the race, but the driver's name meant nothing to me. I was, however, slightly interested to learn that Indy racing wasn't totally a man's sport. Raj tried to make the most of my minor show of interest: "You would make a terrific driver. It's not all physical. You have to make dozens of calculations in your head while going around the track at more than two-hundred miles per."

I yawned. I know that was rude, but it just happened naturally. True, I didn't try to suppress it, or even hide it behind my hand. My bad, but the view of my tonsils didn't squelch Raj's enthusiasm. He said, "I realize you may not know enough yet to fully appreciate the race itself, but now we'll go behind the scenes. That will fascinate you."

For a moment, I feared he wanted me to go to Indianapolis, but he was referring to one of our two local tracks, the Indian Fork Motor Speedway. When Raj first came from India to Hurlburg, for graduate school and to work with our mentor, Josh Rosemont, he didn't know anybody outside of our little group. Of course, I wasn't in the Residue Class then. I wasn't even in Hurlburg yet.

The rest of us in the Residue Class are rather introverted,

but Raj needs friends the way Heathcliff needs doggie treats. Josh told me that less than three days after Raj arrived, he was hanging out at the Indian Fork Motor Speedway. I don't think he was attracted by the name, but he could have gone to that Meriwether Motor Track, yet he didn't.

At first the local boys were aloof. Maybe because they were all "good ol' white boys" and classified him by his skin color. I suspect they'd never known anyone from India before. But then he showed them how to do something with their antique car. He explained it to me, but I didn't understand. Now, however, I was going to Indian Fork Speedway with him, so I was determined to understand everything.

Unlike Indy, there was only one car circling the Indian Fork track. That seemed even less interesting than thirty-three cars at once, so why was Raj, stopwatch in hand, entirely focused on that one car? Without taking his eyes off the action, he explained, "That's my racing buddy, Tim. He's put a fortune into that Corvette, using every add-on and modification permitted by the rules. I helped him set it up, and this is his first speed trial to see what she can do."

"It doesn't look so fast to me."

Raj clicked his watch as the car passed in front of us. "He's just warming up. He'll push it a little faster with each lap, just to be sure everything's okay before going for the limit. It's like you've just come up with a new notation for non-cyclic simple groups."

“I don’t see any resemblance to my work.”

“Sure you do. It’s new, and you want to see how it holds up, so you present it to the Residue Class.”

I thought I understood. “So, it’s a new technology. Therefore, it must be tested.”

“Right,” he said. “That’s—” He stopped in mid-sentence and pointed toward Tim’s car, now on its fourth or fifth lap. “He’s going too fast into the turn. Slow down, Tim!”

He shouted, but obviously Tim in the car could not hear him over the noise of the engine. The car showed no sign of slowing. If anything, it seemed to accelerate into the turn.

Raj leapt from his seat and started rushing down the stairs toward the track, continuing his vain shouting. Before he’d taken three steps, the car failed to follow the curve, smacked head-on into the wall, and flipped end-over-end into the mud on the other side of the wall.

Accident?

Raj wanted to examine the car that killed his friend, but the police wouldn't let him anywhere near it. As soon as their medical team removed Tim's body, they impounded the wreck. Raj is a tough guy. He's no superman, but I always feel safe when he's around. Twice, I've seen him break up would-be fights on campus without raising a sweat. Nothing phases him.

Nothing, that is, except the death of his friend.

Raj was the Residue Class's extravert, but for days after the crash, I waited in vain for him to say something about Tim's death. His silence seemed to be contagious, affecting the entire team. In fact, nobody even offered an interesting number game, like finding pandigital Friedman numbers—which was unusual for us.

After Tim's accident, the sky remaining cloudless for three whole days. On the third day, Josh drove to the City for a meeting with some bigwigs. Carmela rounded up the remaining three of us and marched us out into a shady spot on the forested lawn in front of the Student Union cafeteria.

The day was sweltering, at least for Hurlsbury, and she'd lugged a blue-and-white cooler filled with bottles of water for us. I figured the cooler meant we were in for a long session.

Fortunately, Carmela knew how to lead a short meeting. She shoosed Heathcliff—Josh’s German Shepherd Dog—with a “go play” command, then wasted no time getting to the point. “Ever since we solved the Freshman Murder case, our services have been in great demand. Not our mathematical services. Our detective services.”

“What demand?” I interrupted. “I’m not aware of any murders.”

“Quite right,” Carmela said. “The hardest cases are when we don’t even know it was a murder.”

“Not so,” said Helen, who’s our oldest member of the team, and smarter than the rest of us combined. Born to a poor peasant family in Mainland China, she fought her way to America to work with Josh, then turned her math brilliance to shine a light on the capitalist system. Her investment activities provide financial support for our group, or at least back up Josh’s fund-raising efforts.

“Why not?” asked Carmela, the only one of us with the nerve to question one of Helen’s pronouncements.

Helen answered in her characteristic clipped English. “Harder when we do not know anyone is dead.”

Raj squinted as if he was struggling to understand, but I noticed myself nodding vigorously. “You mean just like the best secret messages.”

“I don’t get it,” Raj insisted. “I’ve never met a code I couldn’t break.”

I was glad to hear him opening up a bit, but I thought he was being somewhat arrogant. I tried to think up a decoding example where Raj had failed, but I wasn't getting very far until Helen interrupted my thought. "Very simple. When you do not know there is message, you do not have code to break."

Raj's face softened. "I think I know what you mean. Like trying to find a virus when you don't even suspect there is a virus. Or ..."

"Yes," Helen interrupted. Her tone sounded like she thought it was the logical end of the discussion. Helen doesn't like to waste words. When a proof is finished, it's on to the next problem.

Helen doesn't favor celebrations.

The only way she'll allow me to continue after a proof is if I say, "I have a more elegant proof." But I'd better really have one, or she'll give me that Helen-stare that says "you're not only stupid, but you don't even know how stupid you are." I mean, Helen is really the most kind and generous person I know, as long as you're not bungling some math.

Raj's long groan interrupted my thoughts. If he continued the discussion of hidden messages, I was afraid Helen would skewer him with "the look." Ordinarily, Raj isn't a coward, but he usually defers to Helen. Not this time.

I looked to Carmela to intervene, but she merely smiled at me and shrugged. That was her style with our team, letting us do anything short of killing each other, so we would

learn to work things out.

“What’s wrong, Raj,” I asked quickly, hoping to beat Helen to the punch—that is, to the stare. “You just remembered something you forgot?”

“No, not something I forgot. Something I didn’t even think of, like those secret messages.”

“Hey, tell us about it.” I’m recklessly curious—all right, nosy.

“I have to check it out first. Maybe it’s nothing.”

“Not logical,” Helen said, the slightest hint of annoyance hiding there behind her Chinese accent. “If nothing, you can tell us. If not nothing, you must tell us. It is Residue Class way to solve problems.”

Raj sighed, then yielded, as usual, to Helen’s logic. “It’s about Tim.”

“Tim Rivera?” I asked. “The one who had ...” I hesitated. I didn’t want to hurt Raj by bringing up the crash that killed his friend. I knew he was hurting, badly, but I also knew he wouldn’t want us to see it. After the rain, the track had been open for practice runs for one day—a day cut short by Tim’s fatality.

Helen had no reluctance, maybe because she’d seen lots of dead people when she was growing up. “The one killed in the accident.”

“That’s just it,” Raj said. “Maybe it wasn’t an accident, and I never thought of that. Like a secret message. Tim’s too good a driver to miss a turn like that.”

“Are you saying he was murdered?” As soon as I heard my own voice, I regretted my hasty words. Lately, I’ve gotten super sensitive on the subject of murder since Sonia and I were kidnapped by Nemid, the serial killer in our first big crime case. And after Josh put me in charge of writing up any more sleuthing by our Residue Class.

“No, I’m saying I have to check it out. Maybe it was a flaw in my work on the car. Or maybe it’s nothing.”

Just then, Heathcliff ran up to Raj and offered him an orange frisbee. He took it from the fearsome German Shepherd jaws, only to be confronted by a frat boy asking him to return it. “He won’t give it back,” the boy complained.

“He wants you to chase him,” Raj said, skimming the orange disk about fifty yards along the lawn. Heathcliff and the boy raced after it.

Helen looked satisfied that Raj had been distracted from the argument. She clicked on her pad and started typing, but I was still interested. “How are you going to do that? Check it out, I mean.”

“I’ll let you know when I’m finished. It’s probably nothing. Don’t you have something better to do than follow me around like Heath chasing the frisbee?”

“No, I don’t. If it’s some mistake you made in working on the car, I need to be your friend. If it’s really a murder, I need to be your assistant detective.”

Raj held up both hands, as if sending me away by pushing

air. “No, really. I’m all broken up about Tim, so I’m likely to be making things up.”

“In that case, you can use another pair of eyes looking over your shoulder.” I’m not known for giving up easily.

“All right, Ms. Bulldog. It’s your own time you’re wasting.”

“Thanks, Raj. I don’t even care if you keep calling me a dog. I won’t give up, but I won’t get in your way.” I figured he was afraid I’d interfere. I’m good at that. “Where do we start? No, don’t tell me. Let me guess. We look at the wreck and check to see if the brakes have been tampered with.”

Raj giggled in his squeaky way. “Sorry, Ms. Bulldog, you’ve been watching too much TV.”

“I never watch TV.”

He raised one eyebrow. I envied his ability to do that. I’ve practiced in the mirror, but when I’m concentrating on my eyebrow, I can’t look in the mirror or I lose it.

“Okay,” I confessed. “Maybe I’ve watched Jeremy Brett’s Sherlock Holmes ... But it wasn’t on TV, it was a boxed set of recordings. Anyway, what’s wrong with that?”

“What’s wrong is that Mr. Holmes had no computers to contend with.”

Helen looked up from her notepad and, in a surprisingly realistic British accent, said, “Computers? I say, Rajesh, the game is afoot.”

It's Not a Game

Before I go any further, I'd better explain why I agreed to follow Raj around while he investigated Tim's accident—if it really was an accident. In the first place, the Residue Class needed to keep better records of the work we did, especially on criminal cases. That may sound altruistic, but the truth is that I had personal reasons for volunteering myself as a kind of historian. Carmela says I'm naive. I need to learn about the rest of the world. What she means by “the rest of the world” is everything besides mathematics. Josh wouldn't agree, because he says mathematics is behind everything in the world, or perhaps underneath.

Josh is my math mentor, but Carmela is sort of my life mentor. Taking my cue from her, I'm supposed to learn about things that don't seem logical, like why I'm called a “redhead,” when obviously my head isn't red, and it's only my hair anyway, not my whole head. And not red, but orange. I compared it with color charts from the internet, and there's nothing red about it. To see what I mean, take a look at “light salmon,” which has a hex code of #FFA07A. Definitely not red.

Or why is my skin called “white,” when it's pinkish yellow and covered with orange freckles? Why not call it “polkadot”?

So, I started investigating this skin-color business, and the

deeper I dug, the worse it got. Like Lieutenant Jameel Brown, who people say is "Black," but Raj's skin is way blacker than the lieutenant's, and nobody calls him "Black." Raj is so black, you can't see the grease on his face when he comes back from the racetrack. But nobody calls him anything, not even Hindu.

Logically, he'd be an Indian, but you can't call him that, because that's what the rednecks call our Native Americans. Except my friend Marna says she doesn't like to be called Native American. She'd like to be called "Navajo," even though only her mother is Navajo. And I can't possibly describe what I'm supposed to call her father. He's from New Mexico, and I've seen Marna's t-shirt that says "It's not New, and it's not Mexico."

Speaking of illogical, there's all this sex business. I've read about it, and it doesn't appeal to me. Not at all. So why do I keep thinking about it? And dreaming about it? Definitely not logical.

Apparently, it's got a lot in common with gymnastics—I read Carmela's copy of the Kama Sutra. I did gymnastics in high school, and I think I'm flexible enough to do all those positions except maybe the one called *Arc de Triomph*. But why? Gym class is bad enough, but it's required for all Freshmen, even fresh women. Maybe we're supposed to be preparing for when we're old enough for sex. Carmela won't explain, but just says that when I'm older than sixteen, it will all become clear to me.

But why am I not old enough now? I have boobs. They're

bigger than Sonia's, but not as big as Helen's, of course. But Helen seems interested only in math and money, not sex. Sonia's interested. Before she went away, we talked about sex all the time, but like me, she hasn't done anything—nothing important, anyway, even though she's old enough.

Sonia says you have to be married first. In my opinion, that's her Christian father talking. But maybe it's just her bad experiences with that creep from Nebraska. But how are we supposed to learn, if that's the only kind of experience we've had?

I'm pretty sure Raj could teach us things. He's always got at least three girlfriends at any time, but when I ask one of them about what it's like doing sex with him, they only smile. So he must know what he's doing. Probably his teachers in India used the Kama Sutra as a kindergarten textbook, but he won't talk about it.

And he'd never do anything about it. Not with us, for sure. The Residue Class is like a family, and he's our brother. So doing it with him would be incest, and Carmela says that's not a good thing. Me, I never had a brother, so I don't know.

Carmela sure seems to like sex. When I lived with her and Josh, I could hear her through the walls, even though the walls in that house are as thick as a fort's.

Okay, Carmela, if you're reading this, I'm not going to make it my own Kama Sutra—but you said I had to learn to notice everything. If I want to be a problem-solver, that is. I'm already a problem-solver in math, but I'm supposed

to learn that there's more to life than math.

Of course, her first and last example is my behavior in the so-called Freshman Murders case. I put myself at risk trying to save Sonia, and Carmela says that wasn't necessary. I tried to argue that we solved the case, but Carmela just says I need to know more about the world.

So, maybe I do need to know more, but since that case, Lieutenant Brown has called on us for help in four other cases. He calls us "Rosemont's Rescue Class" It's his version of our real name, "Rosemont's *Residue* Class." I tried to explain residue classes to him, but he just rolled his brown eyes up to the sky and snorted.

I can see, though, why he calls us "*Rescue* Class." Two of the cases we helped with were search and rescue, where we worked out mathematically correct search patterns. One was for a father who kidnapped his baby son, and the other was for a two-year-old who wandered off from her parents' picnic in the woods behind the campus. Of course, it was ultimately Heathcliff's nose that found each of them.

Mostly it's been fun playing detective, but in these four cases, we weren't looking for dangerous people like that serial killer, Nemid. Now Raj suspects we might have a murder on our hands, because Tim was too good a driver for that crash.

Carmela says being a detective is not a game, so we must be extra cautious. But Josh always says math *is* a game, and if we play cautiously, we'll never prove anything important.

So, I think it's the same with murders, which is why I followed Raj to the Indian Fork Motor Speedway.

Indian Fork Motor Speedway

Raj told me that nothing else at the track would make sense if I didn't understand about driving. I could accept that, since I didn't even have a driver's license—not unusual for a New York City girl, even if I had been old enough. Of course, I understood driving in a general way, but had no experience. Because I had skipped most of high school, I hadn't even taken driver's Ed.

We had to wait for people Raj wanted to talk to, so we spent time in the arcade—practicing on the driving machines. I was not bad—though not nearly as good as Raj. I'd never been awfully interested in driving, but I came away with a bit more appreciation of the art.

I tried to notice everything, the way Carmela said detectives do. At the Speedway, I noticed the rain. After three gorgeous days, the dry air had been replaced by a light drizzle with gray skies and not a square centimeter of blue in sight. But those were the facts, not the reactions to the facts, which she said was much more important.

So, reactions? None of the cars were speeding around the three-eighths-mile track. According to Raj, the rain made the track dangerously slippery. But otherwise, nobody seemed bothered by the rain. The pits were full of people—

all men, I think, and all busy tinkering with their cars or arguing about something. There were women in the south stands. I counted eleven: two groups of two, one of three, and one of four.

That left most of the seats empty. I counted the rows and columns and computed 8,000 total seats, plus or minus based on counting errors because of my fogged glasses. But Raj wasn't interested in the crowd. I had to run full speed to keep up as he headed for the pits.

As far as I could tell, Raj knew everybody at the Speedway, and everybody knew him. He didn't bother introducing me around, but some of the guys introduced themselves. Three of them tried to get my phone number. I guess that's the kind of thing Carmela wants me to learn to handle, so I told them I didn't answer phone calls. I think Carmela would have advised me to lie, like saying I didn't have a phone. But who doesn't have a phone? Anyone could tell I haven't learned to lie—except when I saved Sonia and me from a kidnapper.

And I truly don't answer phone calls. Why should I interrupt my math work for some idiot with surplus minutes on his cell phone contract?

Raj asked a few questions about Tim's crash, but he seemed already to know all the details. He wanted to see the car, but he learned that the wreck had been taken away by the police for a forensic examination.

When we reached the impound lot, we learned the wreck

had been classified as an accident. It had then been bought and towed away by Harmony Auto Parts, way on the other side of town. It took us fifty-seven minutes to get there. We were driving, but it's still called "legwork."

Harmony Auto Parts was surrounded by a ten-foot high dented metal fence, covered with ads for motor oil, chewing tobacco, and mobile homes. Until we drove inside, I had no idea how huge the car lot was. Several acres were filled with cars of every make, size, color, and condition, but Jude, the attendant took us straight to Tim's ill-fated "Velocity Yellow" Corvette. Dressed in gray bib overalls, and shirtless, he didn't seem troubled by the rain, which was now more drops than drizzle.

As we made our way through the aisles of wrecks, Jude said, "You'll know it right away, even if just be the color: 'Velocity Yellow.' It's the fanciest car on the lot. I thought we'd sell it right away, but now I think it's gonna be a tough sell."

When Raj saw the bright yellow pile of twisted metal, I thought he was going to cry, but he managed to ask, "Why is that?"

"Dunno," said Jude. "You can see how screwed up it is, but still, nowadays, they can fix anything. I think maybe people believe it's jinxed, you know, after that crash that killed—"

"I know," Raj broke in. "I might be interested, but I'd like to inspect it first."

"Sure," Jude waved. "Take your time. Just don't make it

worse than it is. In other words, look but don't touch."

"I'd like to jack it up, at least, so I can see underneath."

Jude shook his head, not in refusal, but as if to question Raj's sanity. "Sure, look all you want, but it's at your own risk." To me, Jude said, "I'm going to fetch a towel. Want one?"

Raj said I could find towels for both of us when I went back to his car to retrieve his tools and rapid-lift race jack. By the time I got back, Raj was sitting on the ground, wet gravel and all, looking into the squashed left front tire well. After he'd looked at the other tire wells, he showed me how the jack worked, and we lifted one side of the hulk so he could roll underneath on a borrowed creeper.

From time to time, he called out some numbers for me to record in my pad, but when he finally emerged, he didn't look satisfied. I asked him what he'd seen. He said, "Looks ok."

I'm supposed to record my feelings, but I didn't know if I was happy there was no murder, or sad that I didn't get to solve another crime. I said, "So we're going home?"

"No, there were no obvious signs of tampering, but I won't be satisfied until I've examined the control computer."

"There's a computer?"

"Yes, it controls the brakes and the steering, plus a few other things. I need to check it out." Fine with me, I thought. A computer is more my style.

We returned the creeper to the one-room office shack, where Raj told Jude he would like to buy the on-board computer.

“No way,” said Jude. “Without the computer, I could never sell it. And new it’s worth more than a hundred grand.”

Raj laughed. “Well, it’s hardly new now. How much do you want for it?”

Jude scratched his bald head for a moment, sizing up Raj. From the look on his face, I guessed he didn’t think Raj could afford it. “I’d take sixty thou. You haul it away.”

Raj reached in his inside jacket pocket and said, “I’ll give you forty.” He emphasized the offer by waving a checkbook, but I figured he was bluffing. I knew he was good at fixing up wrecks, but where would Raj get forty thousand dollars?”

“Make it fifty, and you have a deal,” Jude offered.

“Forty-five, but that’s my top,” Raj came back.

“At that price, I’d be losing money.”

Raj grabbed my arm and turned toward the door. “Well, sorry then.” He had his hand on the knob when Jude called him back.

“All right. It’s yours for forty-five—plus sales tax. And you have to wait until the check clears before you can take it.”

“Figure the tax, and I’ll be back in an hour with a tow truck and a certified check.”

“If I get a better offer before you do, then I’ll sell it.”

As we were leaving to get the money, I noticed that Jude had changed his wet clothes and now was wearing faded *blue* bib overalls. That may seem like an irrelevant detail, but Carmela says detectives have to learn to notice all details, and she was a detective. A good one, too. Until she was shot in the hip.

Raj took off, but I stayed for a moment. On a shelf next to the counter was a collection of toy racers stamped with “Indian Fork Motor Speedway. I picked one up and looked at it admiringly. “Jude, I just love these cars. How much do they cost?”

“They’re not for sale,” he said gruffly. “They’re gifts for our best customers.”

“Oh, then I can have one, right? \$45,000 makes us a pretty good customer, right?”

“Wrong,” he said, and turned his back on me.

He was rude, but I forgave him. Because he turned his back, so he didn’t see me slip the tiny car into my bra. One more novelty for my collection. Always better when I didn’t have to pay for them.

The Conservator

At the time, I thought Raj had asked Josh for the \$45,000 for the car, but, as Carmela told us later, Josh wasn't even in town. He'd gone to Maryland, visiting an old friend who lay dying.

The friend's name was Antoine Deglisé, but Josh knew him as Handy Andy. He'd known Andy for a long time, since Josh was consulting with a startup, Dymphna Corporation. Andy was their janitor, working at night when everyone else had gone home.

Everyone but Josh, that is. To nobody's surprise, he was working late. That's when Josh met Andy. They often shared tea and sandwiches when working late at night or early in the morning.

So it's now many years later. How many? Josh isn't telling, but I could look it up because Antoine was hired when Dymphna started. He was there at the very beginning. Now Dymphna is thriving, but Andy is dying.

When Josh returned from his visit, he informed us that Andy had designated him to be the conservator of his estate. It was an unusually chilly night for early June, so we ate pizza and hot cider in front of the fireplace in the Rosemont home. I was cuddled with Heathcliff on the carpet, both of us burping from too much pizza, when Josh

told us how he and Andy came to be friends.

“He saw me struggling with a buggy computer and offered to help. That was long before I knew you, Helen, so I underestimated him because he cleaned the toilets.”

I saw Helen trying to suppress a smile. “Did he know programming?”

“Not a bit.”

“So did he help you with the computer?”

“He didn’t just help, he solved the problem.”

We wouldn’t have been members of the Residue Class if we could let that statement pass without further detail. “How?” we said in a chorus that brought Heathcliff’s ears to attention.

“I told him the computer was crashing randomly. He said there was no such thing as ‘random.’ I explained that when it crashed, I opened it up and looked for something wrong, but never could find anything. So I would close it up and try something else, which also worked for a while, then crashed randomly.”

I think we were all revving up our brain waves to come up with solutions. At least I know I did, until Josh explained. “Andy explained that opening the computer changes things. ‘It’s a system,’ he told me. And he was right. The mainframe door was pressing against some wires, causing intermittent sparks.”

I suspect we'd all thought about that, but Raj was the one to say, "I knew it. Same thing happened to me."

"Yes, it's rather simple now, but back then, I was a computer novice. Everyone was. But Andy was a problem-solver from way back before computers. We wrote to each other for years, exchanging math problems. And he loved to make up chess problems for me."

Josh went on. "I first thought he was French, but he was Swiss. From the Valais, which is one of the French-speaking cantons. Half of it, anyway. The other half speaks German. For years, Andy refused to tell me why he came to America, but a few years ago, he broke down and told me he left when he was only 16."

Up to that point, I'd been listening to Andy's story, but without my full attention. That all changed when Josh mentioned my age—almost. While listening with renewed interest, I tried to imagine what it would be like to move across the ocean, away forever from my Mom and Dad. Andy must have been a tough kid. And smart, but not educated.

In an delicate way, Josh explained that Andy had knocked up his cousin. In other words, he left in disgrace. "That's why his will insists on 'blood relatives.' As his conservator, my job is to find his 'closest blood relative', the person who inherits his entire estate."

When she heard this story, Helen wondered aloud why Josh was making such a big deal out of being conservator.

“He was a janitor all his life. He can’t have that big an estate.” The way she said it, I knew she’d worked out Andy’s potential cash flow in her head.

“On the contrary,” Josh said. “Clinton Grimes, Dymphna’s founder, was a great inventor, but he didn’t have much money when he started the company. He encouraged employees to put their savings in the company’s stock, at half price. But times were hard back then, and few employees took up his offer—but Andy did.

“He has lived frugally all his life. I saw his apartment recently. It’s one room with a hotplate, a sink, a narrow bed, a table with one chair, and a shared bathroom down the hall.”

“He probably couldn’t afford more,” said Helen. Growing up as an unwanted poor child in China, she was an authority on living within your means.

“Oh, maybe not at first, but over the years, Clinton Grimes kept inventing new cures for mental diseases, and the Dymphna stock doubled—and kept doubling for half a century.”

“How many doublings?” Helen asked.

“At least twenty-five. You could look it up.”

Raj beat me by half a second. “So each dollar he invested would now be worth \$33,554,432—if he never sold the stock.”

Josh nodded his agreement, or maybe it was approval, or

both. “He kept it all. Never paid any taxes because it was never sold, so now, even after taxes, it’s worth several billion dollars.”

Billions?

When Josh uttered the B-word, the whole atmosphere in the room changed. Heathcliff opened his eyes and checked the room. Raj whistled through his teeth. “Did you say ‘billions,’ with a ‘B’?”

“Yes, thousands of millions.”

“And all that goes to one person? Who’s this lucky ‘nearest blood relative’?”

“That’s part of my problem,” Josh said. “Apparently, all the obvious candidates are dead. I’m going to have to search the world for the others, the more distant relatives.” That sounded easy. Showed that Carmela was right about my worldly naiveté ☺.

“You said *part* of your problem,” I said. I’d been practicing careful listening, or I wouldn’t have picked that up. “What’s the other part? Or parts?”

“Andy’s shares give him a controlling interest in Dymphna, between two competitor stockholders. They’re both huge corporations: ArGrowHealth and ZyrcoBalm.”

“Ah,” Helen said. “They dilute their medicines, sell their rejects to free clinics, test dangerous new drugs on poor children. Evil word is weak word. Sonia would know stronger word.”

Josh said, "Try depraved. If either one could control Art's shares, they could wreak several new kinds of evil."

"Evil?" Raj asked. "What kind of evil?"

"Like controlling patents, so they could eliminate competition and raise prices on prescription medicines. That power alone could be worth more than the worth of the Dymphna's stock itself. And that's no sack of chicken feed."

"I don't see the problem," I said, so intrigued by the situation I didn't worry about showing my unworldliness. "With you as conservator, there's no way some evil corporation can gain control."

Josh's eyebrow went up. "Can they?" I asked.

Instead of answering, he turned his eyes to Helen, who as always, knew the answer. "They could make deal with the heir, to persuade a vote their way. Or even sell the stock."

"And those are just the legal ways," Josh added.

"I still don't see the big danger. Buying the stock would cost billions, and if both wanted it, there could be a bidding war that could double or triple the price. Right, Helen?"

Helen didn't have to say anything to agree with me. I could see her tiny smile. I think she was showing me she loved the idea of a bidding war.

But Josh had something entirely different on his mind. "While Andy's still alive, he could improve his condition, so the stock wouldn't be available, possibly until many years from now. And these organizations don't like to wait for

their billions. Their situation makes him a target for an impatient current heir, or someone who made a deal with that heir.”

I was beginning to see what Josh meant, but found it hard to believe. “You’re not saying someone might, uh, harm Andy for the money?”

Carmela spoke up. “The word is murder, Lib. And yes, corporations have often been willing to murder dozens, or even hundreds, for profits. Right, Josh?”

I must have looked upset, because Josh tried to soften the message. “But they don’t need to stoop to murder. They might persuade Andy to change his will.”

Helen looked at me with a pitying stare. “In China, ‘persuade’ usually means ‘torture.’”

Josh’s nod confirmed Helen’s pessimistic definition. Given the history of her abuse as an unwanted girl child, I figured she was justified in her pessimism.

“Oh my,” I heard myself utter. “Then someone has to protect him.”

Josh reached down to touch my forearm. Heathcliff twisted his neck so his ear intercepted his master’s hand for a scratch. “Not to worry, Lib, I’ve arranged 24/7 protection.”

“Isn’t that expensive?”

“We’re talking billions, remember. As conservator, I can spend any or all of that to ensure Andy’s wishes are honored. And right now, I’m sure he wishes to stay alive.

His condition could be fatal at any time, without warning, but for now he's alert and lively."

"Can he be cured?" Raj wanted to know.

"Dymphna has spent a fortune hoping someone will find a cure for his rare condition, so probably not. But he deserves to live until nature calls him, not until some thug murders him. Even so, protecting him is not even my biggest problem. The longer he lives, the bigger my problem becomes."

"How?" Helen asked.

"As long as he's alive, even if he doesn't change his will, his heir might die."

"So what?" Raj asked. "If you have billions to spend, just protect his heir, too."

"You've done it again, Raj. You've underestimated the problem."

Raj's face had his "you're-being-unfair" pout. "I don't think I'm underestimating murder."

"What about murders, plural?"

"Murders?" Raj was now on the defense. "There's only one heir."

"At a time. But we don't even know who that person is. The nearest blood relative could be any one of dozens of people. I don't even have a list of possibilities, and I definitely don't have a solid definition of 'nearest blood relative.'"

“But everyone knows that definition.”

Carmela spoke again, this time as anthropologist, not ex-cop. “Every society has different definitions of types of relationships. Just ask Helen how the Chinese reckon which child is closest, when there are two or more wives.”

That shut off Raj’s defense. We all sat silently contemplating the magnitude of the situation. Heathcliff stood, stretched, and trotted out his doggie door. After a while, he finished his outdoor business and returned to take a new position with his tail draped across Carmela’s feet. While bending over to stroke his back, Carmela broke the silence. “If Andy’s sick, close to dying naturally, what’s the quality of his life?”

“He still loves to play chess with me,” her husband said. “And to solve little math puzzles.”

“I’ve got a whole collection of clever ones,” I volunteered. “Could I meet him, and toss him some goodies?”

“I think he’d love that if he’s still alive when I drive down again next week. Get your puzzles ready.”

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