

Retreat to Babylon

By Gio Iannotti

Music, how catching the sounds ---- the chord spectrum was different than anything the Citizen ever heard.

Sitting near the hanging gardens, looking beyond the Ishtar Gate, the Citizen's attention turned to Nergal who entered the view. His presence was electrifying.

"You are enjoying your retreat," the Ludologist asked?

"Babilu is the Gate of Life."

Nergal rubbed the Citizen's shoulder suggestively. "Your resistance to distraction is increasing. Soon you will receive your name, and then you will come to me."

The Citizen smiled. Once you received a name, you became a god or goddess and your role changed dramatically.

When the invitation to join Babilu was first extended, the Citizen remained aloof. The quarterly, communal experience changed everything when the Citizen realized the players were powerful members of society and they had access to intimate databases others on the planet did not have.

Babilu, the Semitic name for Babylon, was no game. It was a portal to knowledge, friendship, power, and it was the home of Enclave Nine of Dynasty XII ----- a very urgent place to be.

#

Lydia Dulcet was working hard on her story as Cindy, watching hawk-like through the office window, could see. She was bent over her computer, with a trademark pencil looped through her thick black hair.

As usual, Lydia worked through lunch. Most times she ate something to keep her blood sugar level steady. Today was different. It had taken too long to decide on an angle for her lead story and now she was in a bind.

Problem was she disliked the subject. Nothing she could do. Her boss, Wilfred Riegelsberger (people called him Fred to his face and Regal behind his back) handed out assignments in a group setting. He always came armed with public demand statistics, and accolades about a writer's strengths in handling a subject.

In this case, he told Lydia, the piece was vital and once she began, he knew she would get to the heart of the matter.

Regardless of the deadline, Lydia had to stop. Pearls of sweat were trickling down her forehead, dangerously close to her eyes. She knew how eye make-up and sweat could interfere in the last hours before press.

Lydia rose, retrieved a tissue, swiped at her head, and peered out at the team around her. Cindy Nichols glared. Lydia gave the 'thumbs-up' sign which she hoped would get her off her back. Out of the corner of her eye, Lydia caught a flash. She turned, took in the onslaught and said, "Shit" out loud. Then she sat back down.

#

It had been a particularly crappy morning for Michale Armande Verone. To begin with, the tie he thought he asked his live-in, Anna Louise, to set out for him, was nowhere to be found when he got up to dress.

Then, when Michale got to the Donut Shop on Bridgefield, they were out of Bavarian Crème . . . downer times ten. In the Store's behalf, they told him a batch would be out shortly but Michale couldn't wait. Today he might get to see Miss Perfect falter. [Wouldn't it be cool if she didn't make deadline?] He pounded on his keyboard harder than needed, but no one paid any attention.

Michale wrote a column about the Jet Set, or the Beau Monde, as he referred to it. The Column, 'Mores the Better', was one of Wilfred Riegelsberger's first additions ---- his nod to the benefactor's necessary to the Magazine's viability.

'Mores' was Regal's tongue in cheek way of pointing fingers at the hollow protocols the benefactor's stood for. The column was considered to be 'fluff' by those that worked here and newbies were routinely assigned to write it for one year.

After two years, when Michale tried to argue for a different position, he almost lost his job. He turned his chin up, and tried to find something positive about the tea parties and charitable events he covered. One thing he found was Anna Louise.

Something pulled him out of his reverie. He stopped banging on his keyboard, and thinking about soft white gloves. [Holy shit,] he thought inwardly. He stood up.

#

Cindy Nichols saw Officers of the Law penetrating the room where her writers and her editorial staff, were working feverishly to wrap this month's issue. One stood by the main exit door, as she rose from her desk to assume the role of greeter.

“Can I help you,” Cindy asked gritting her teeth.

“I’m Detective Williams,” the tall man said. “Are you the person in charge?”

“I ---- at the moment, am,” Cindy said. “My Regal boss ---- I mean my boss Regal ---- may I start again?”

“Please”.

“The person in charge is Wilfred Riegelsberger. He’s not here yet, so yes, I am presently in charge.”

“Well, that is good to know,” Williams replied sarcastically.

If she could punch something, Cindy knew it would be Detective Williams.

“Where is your boss at the moment?”

Williams hiked his left foot up and placed it on top of Cindy’s antique mahogany chair. He took time retying the lace on his designer shoe.

“Dunno,” Cindy squinted down at the shoe and then up at the man with disdain.

“May I inquire what you and this staff are doing here?” Williams took his foot down slowly.

Cindy wondered whether it was a trick question. Before she could respond, Lydia, who had come up behind her replied, “We’re wrapping a magazine, detective. We do the same thing every month.”

“And your name is?”

“Lydia Dulcet.”

“I’ve read some of your stuff,” Williams added.

“Good for you,” Lydia countered.

“You there,” Detective Williams’ voice grew louder. Everyone looked where he was pointing. Michale had nowhere to turn.

“Come over here. Stop skulking. We don’t bite on first encounter.”

Michale was frozen. He looked at Detective Williams, Miss Perfect Cindy, and lastly at Lydia. Finally, he found his voice. “Are you talking to me?”

“Get over here, man, and that means yes!”

Lydia, who was sweating again and now mildly reeling, latched on to Cindy’s left and then Michale’s right arm. With Lydia in the middle, the three now stood together.

“What is this about, Detective?” Lydia inquired.

“I’m up first. If any one of you knows,” he projected his voice across the room, “where Wilfred Riegelsberger is, it would be wise to tell me now.”

Cindy found her voice. “Fred is hard to keep tabs on. He sometimes stays away for hours during ‘closing’. Feels like his presence, or lack of it, can be compelling or disarming. I’ve been waiting for a call. When it comes, I’ll let you know.”

Lydia blinked at the sound of the word, ‘closing.’ She’d never heard the process they endured to get to deadline described in that moderate of a way.

Lydia said, “Closing, Cindy?”

Cindy whispered, “It’s a stupid term. Don’t worry about it.”

Michale didn’t like how Detective Williams was looking at him. Something sinister was going on here. He wouldn’t have minded his arm intertwined with Lydia’s, if Cindy Perfect’s wasn’t on the other side. They were giving off a three-person aura, when the most it should have been was two. Cindy Perfect never gave Michale the time of day whereas Lydia did come around occasionally with a professional question.

[A three-person aura and a 6 foot 5" detective looking only at me!] Michale's crappy morning was getting worse.

"Since no-one can tell me where Wilfred Riegelsberger is," Williams took his eyes off of Michale and looked around, "why don't I tell you where he is?" Everyone stood in rapt attention.

"Wilfred Riegelsberger is presently with our CSI unit getting ready for a quite personal autopsy, because he has been murdered."

Lydia accepted the fact by fainting dead away. Since she had routed herself between Cindy and Michale, they were able to break the fall.

#

In the afternoon, Hilliard Evans, Director of Operations, and Wilfred Riegelsberger's boss, stood at the podium erected at his request.

"Please everyone, have a seat. This is a sad and horrible day ----," his voice began to crack. He paused before continuing.

"As you know, Fred was not only a pivotal force at this magazine, he was a close friend of mine. He was a hard worker who took his responsibilities seriously. He was also a man of strong opinions. We may not always have agreed with those opinions but they weren't conveyed lightly."

Evans cleared his throat, and wished he'd brought a glass of water up with him.

"What I mean when I say Fred's opinions weren't conveyed lightly, is that he spent time studying a subject before he took a stand on it. Once he took one, he was hard to sway. In all the years I knew him, he only changed his mind once, and that was on his opinion of former President Richard Nixon."

The Director observed that half the room had begun to shift in their seats. Obviously they didn't know where he was going with this.

"I am bringing this point up for good reason."

There was a drop in the body shifting movement.

"Fred might have rubbed some of you the wrong way, at times. The Detectives in charge of the case want to interview all of you."

Everyone's attention was back in full swing.

"When you are interviewed, if Fred ever irritated you, tell them. Don't pull punches that might throw off the investigation. We want this case solved quickly ---- not only for Fred's sake, but also for his relatives, and our family here."

Evans cleared his throat again and pulled lightly on his moustache.

"Fred was unique. He was outspoken but he was a great guy! If he believed in you, or a project you were involved in, he got behind you 110 percent. I know most of you are mourning Fred's loss as much as I am. We have grief counselors here now, in the back of the room, and offices set aside for privacy. I spoke with one myself an hour ago. I recommend their services highly. Now, if there are questions?"

"Work----," A single mother began.

"The office will be shut down for the rest of the week, but you'll receive full pay. Take one of these." He held up a piece of paper. "It has the necessary information."

"Mr. Evans, do we know anything about what happened? Is there a timeframe ---- do we know where the murder occurred?" Cindy Nichols inquired.

"I can't say," Hilliard responded. He'd been asked not to give particulars.

“Regal came into my office at 3:30 yesterday and did a read of my article. He left ten minutes later. So, he was murdered between then and when the Detectives marched in here at 8:45 this morning.” Lydia’s voice, clear enough to carry through the room was tremulous. She hadn’t stopped sweating, and she felt like she might faint again.

[Ever the investigator], Evans thought. [Lydia Dulcet can chip away at a timeline with the best of them.]

“Would it be wise to engage a lawyer, Hilliard?” Lydia managed, slumping down in her chair.

Director Evans got down from the podium quickly. Over the past eighteen months he had gotten to know a different side of Lydia. The young woman, who initially reeked ‘puritanical’, was transforming provocatively.

“Lydia, why are you asking this? Talk to me, please.”

“I didn’t kill Regal. He could be difficult, but I cared for him dearly, and I really don’t feel too great right now.”

“Nurse, we need the nurse ----,” Hilliard waved his arms in the air.

“I just need a cookie or a drink of orange juice, and then, I think some of us, including me might want to hire a lawyer.”

“If you didn’t kill Fred, why would you need a lawyer, Lydia?”

“I left here after Regal got done with his gruesome critique of my story and took work home. I thought a change might help, plus, I wanted a hot shower. I live alone. I didn’t see anyone or talk to anyone. I stayed up and wrote till dawn then came back here. I’ve seen a few cop shows. I’m betting there are others in this room, that don’t have a verifiable alibi.”

The body shifting movement began again ---- but this time it was different.

#

“What do you think, Jerry?” Rich Robbins asked, drawing a relationship tree on the white board the way he did at the start of an investigation.

His partner, Jerry Williams, scratched his head. “The fainting thing looked legit.”

“So you’re thinking Dulcet is probably not guilty?”

“I’m thinking she might not be.”

“You still convinced we should concentrate on the Magazine weenies, first?”

“Absolutely. Our ‘Vic’ had dinner plans with Hilliard Evans last evening. He pushed it out half an hour so he could, “quote unquote,” meet with a staffer first. Evans told us Riegelsberger was always punctual. He started calling his cell phone at 9:15 when he didn’t show on the hour.”

“Let’s not give CSI a timeline,” Robbins suggested. “Let’s see what they come up with.”

“Agreed,” Williams opened the door and hailed one of his junior colleagues.

“You getting everyone from the office scheduled for an interview?”

“It’s getting complicated. A lot of them have lawyered up,” the man replied.

“I’ll bet,” Detective Williams responded.

#

“Mr. Verone thanks for being punctual. We appreciate that, because our time is precious, too. You a coffee drinker . . . we have a fresh pot brewing, and regardless of how T.V. conveys it, the stuff here is not half bad.”

“When I was a kid I wanted to be a cop,” Michale blurted. He was thinking of the time his mother’s live-in, had given him half of his Bavarian Crème donut. It was the first time he’d tasted one. There was a Cop show on, and they were eating donuts and drinking coffee, too. Michale felt like he was one of them.

[I should have used the word Detective,] he realized. [These guys might think COP is demeaning.]

“I don’t normally drink coffee,” he stammered. “It inflames my stomach. COP means Constable on Patrol but I should have used the word Detective. On second thought, coffee would be great, thanks.”

Michale wondered how any University had ever seen fit to make him Salutatorian. Clearly he was an imbecile, although perhaps a highly functioning one.

“I’ll get it,” Robbins said. “You stay with Mr. Verone, Jerry.”

#

On the other end of the one-way mirror, Enid Johnson, Dr. of Forensic Psychiatry, was taking notes.

Michale Armand Verone ---- twenty-four, single, writes a column about the privileged class. Arrived at the station 7:00 PM sharp. During his first statement, prior to any real questioning, subject referred to his childhood, & became nervous and apprehensive. Possibility we have begun to witness psychogenic symptoms brought about by traumatic incidences in early family relationships. Need to pursue this line further.

She pushed a button nearby.

Rich Robbins poked his head in, coffee pot and cups in hand. “You rang, Edie?”

“Ask Michale about wanting to be a cop as a kid. Try to find out what his childhood was like, and use the word cop, okay?”

“Will do,” he said, confirming with a nod.

#

“What I’m curious about,” Detective Robbins said setting a cup in front of Michale, “Is what know about cops and Constables on Patrol?”

Jerry studied his partner.

Michale studied Robbins who smiled broadly at him.

After an hour of bantering, and two cups of coffee apiece, the detectives and their expert psychiatrist understood what it was like for Michale growing up. The guy never knew who would be in his mother’s bed on any given night ---- male or female.

Recounts like this always turned Enid’s stomach. [Certain people, should not be allowed to raise children!]

She was now also convinced they were dealing with a paranoid personality --- someone hypersensitive, suspicious of others, rigid, inflexible, who would react poorly to criticism. After all, how could they not be?

“We need to ask some questions about yesterday, when Fred Riegelsberger was murdered,” Williams began. “When did you last see the deceased?”

Michale looked at his watch. He was feeling more comfortable than when he arrived. These guys seemed to be genuinely interested in him.

“I saw him yesterday, about this time ---- 8:15, I would say.”

Jerry Williams’ arm slid off the side of the desk he had it propped up on.

“Mr. Verone,” Williams tried to quell the excitement in his voice, “Fred Riegelsberger left the office around 3:45 yesterday afternoon.”

“Okay,” Michale responded.

“So, where did you see him, and why did you wait until now to tell us about it?”

“I saw him at his house. I didn’t tell you before, because you just now asked.”

Michale did not like the way the detectives were looking at him all of a sudden. Their looks and the effects of two cups of coffee had his insides stirred up. He shifted nervously in his chair.

“Mr. Verone ---- I need to talk to my colleague in the hall for a moment,” Jerry Williams beckoned Rich Robbins to follow him out the door.

When they returned, Detective Williams’ delivery was somber.

“Mr. Verone, you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. Do you understand?”

#

In a room down the hall, Cindy Nichols was speaking with two female detectives, Myzak and Sheehy, about her relationship with her boss, the employee dynamics within the team, and the day he was murdered. Her lawyer was at her side.

“Did you think Wilfred Riegelsberger kept up with the times, or could you have done better? Did you want his position, Miss Nichols?”

Cindy’s lip curled at the question, but since this was one of the topics her lawyer coached her on, she felt comfortable enough to answer.

“Fred had twenty-seven years with the magazine. He told me recently he was thinking of retiring and he’d recommend me for his slot.” Cindy didn’t mention he’d been saying the same thing forever.

It wasn’t lost on the detectives that she hadn’t answered the question.

“What do you think about the staff, let’s take Miss Dulcet, for example.”

“Lydia self-edits and she must be a good writer to maintain such a following.”

Sheehy pounced. “That sounds like you don’t read her work.”

Haughtily, Cindy Nichols replied, “I didn’t have to because Fred ---- the reason we’re here ---- read Lydia’s stuff thoroughly, and I had other fish to fry.”

Sheehy glanced at Myzak. Neither of them liked Cindy Nichols.

“Did Lydia Dulcet and Wilfred Riegelsberger get along?” Sheehy continued. “Is there any reason she might have wanted him dead?”

“Can’t imagine.”

“How about Michale Verone? Did I pronounce his name correctly?” Myzak asked.

“ME-Kell-EE,” Cindy sounded it out, “You got close.” She shivered thinking about the day the scum flirted with her.

“You, okay?” Myzak offered a glass of water.

“Not necessary,” Cindy resumed her arrogant pose.

“Tell me about ME-Kell-EE,” Sheehy parroted. “What’s he like?”

Cindy looked at her lawyer. He nodded for her to continue.

“He writes a bullshit column about nothing. Fred insisted on it.”

The psychiatric representative on the other side of this room's one-way mirror was a degreed Doctor, the same as Enid Johnson. He was just new to the field of forensics, and had no experience working at this precinct.

He was disturbed by Cindy's body language, and also by the glimpses of satisfaction her recounts were giving her.

[Subject enjoys playing games,] he wrote.

[Likely to embellish facts to gain desired reaction].

The Doctor took detailed notes, but unlike his counterpart, he didn't buzz in suggestions for specific lines of questioning.

"Know why your boss kept that column going?"

"He said writing was grease for the mind and sometimes had to also be grease for the wheels. Our patrons were periodically highlighted in that column."

"Does Mr. Verone sense some of you think his work is a joke?"

"This is circumstantial, personal, opinion, only," Cindy's lawyer interceded. "My client can't know how another person feels."

"I was there when Michale asked Fred for a new assignment," Cindy stared into her lawyer's eyes without blinking.

"Of course, there can be exceptions," her lawyer recanted.

"Can you tell us anything about that conversation," Miss Nichols, Myzak asked?

"Michale was in a bad mood, which he is regularly. He told Fred he wasn't being taken seriously. He said he thought two years was long enough in the trenches."

"So, Mr. Verone felt his peers were looking down on him?"

"Sure."

“Do you know how Wilfred Riegelsberger responded?”

“Yeah.”

“Please elaborate.”

“Fred said Michale had to learn to make bullshit interesting before he got meat.”

“Isn’t that an incendiary thing to say to a writer,” Detective Sheehy asked?

“Could that have made Michale angry?”

“Personal opinion,” Cindy’s lawyer intervened.

“Okay,” Sheehy placated. “I have one more question for your client.”

The lawyer nodded.

Cindy sat tall. She liked this important witness role.

“It sounds like Wilfred Riegelsberger wasn’t happy with Mr. Verone’s work, but he kept him on. That’s odd. Normally a poor performer would be axed. Any idea why he would keep Michale Verone in the job for so long?”

“He might have been his son,” Cindy replied.

#

Lydia’s interview was scheduled for the morning. With the magazine shut down, her apartment felt oppressive. The piles of reference material heaped on every flat surface made her claustrophobic. Since the library she frequented was nearby and was open late most weeknights, she decided to return the data she was through with.

As Lydia pulled the little cart she used to transport media down the sidewalk, she thought about Regal, such a shame ---- such a crying shame. She wanted to throw up thinking about it, but her stomach had nothing left to offer.

Upon entering the library, she made her way to returns and began offering up documents. “Psychology of An Innocent Mind,” was first. When she was done, she surveyed the place that normally gave her solace. Tonight it left her cold.

Lydia took her cart and trudged back the four lonely blocks it took to get home. She stared at her computer, but some things needed to be set-aside for a respectable while. She didn’t watch T.V. or listen to music. When her phone rang, she didn’t answer. She listened to the beat of her heart, pounding heavy in her chest, and mourned Regal.

#

“Lydia Dulcet,” the detective beckoned.

She recognized him as the man she had responded to curtly the previous morning.

“Are you going to be joined by anyone else,” he asked?

“I thought about engaging a lawyer,” she answered, “but I’m not guilty, so I figured ‘what the hey?’”

She knew law-officers were in the room when she raised her alibi concerns in front of Director Evans. She expected this guy had been put on lawyer-alert because her lack of one registered surprise.

“I’m Jerry Williams,” the man said reaching out to shake her hand. “We will be joining my partner, Rich Robbins, if you will follow me.”

Jerry Williams was shocked at how frail Lydia Dulcet appeared. Her large dark eyes were beginning to hollow and it looked like she hadn’t slept in days.

When Detective Robbins asked about coffee, Lydia said, “Now that would be appreciated. I take mine black.”

In her spot behind the mirror, Enid Johnson was relieved to hear a normal reply.

“I’ve worked for the magazine for six years, since I graduated college,” Lydia explained. “For all but the first 5-months, Regal was my immediate boss.”

She noticed a grimace crossing Williams’ face and guessed why.

“I’ve only ever called my boss by one name, detectives. The day we were introduced, I said, ‘can I just call you Regal instead of Mr. Riegelsberger?’ Etiquette says the polite thing is to ask for permission. Regal said, ‘can I call you Liddy?’ I said never. He said, okay.”

“We thought he didn’t like people calling him Regal behind his back,” Detective Williams responded.

“He did not like anyone using the nickname in a derogatory reference to omnipotence. I never did that.”

Williams liked the way Lydia’s thick black pony tail reached down to accent the nape of her neck. He noted the simple elastic wrapping it. The lady was not flamboyant.

He studied his notes. “It says here, you saw your boss at 3:30 PM on the day of his demise and had a less than commodious conversation about an article you were writing.”

Lydia, who had taken a small swallow of coffee, almost choked.

Rich Robbins snickered.

“What?”

Lydia cleared her passage way, “Our meeting was less than harmonious, but I wouldn’t call it a conversation. A conversation requires words be spoken by two people. Regal ranted. I listened.”

Rich Robbins turned his notebook in his partner's direction. On it he had written, commodious = spacious, roomy.

Jerry Williams felt himself flush. [What was it about this woman?]

"May we ask what your article was about, and why Fred Riegelsberger ranted over it?" Robbins figured he better take over. Jerry was not acting himself.

"You've heard of a game called Dungeons and Dragons?"

"Yes," both men nodded.

"You can play it as a board game, or on-line. Did you know that, also?"

Again, her question was met with deliberate nods.

"There is a new game out called Retreat to Babylon. Regal was convinced normal people could get crazed over it. During an assignment meeting four months ago, he told me to write an expose about it."

"Isn't this a monthly magazine?" Robbins began.

"Yes, but some topics take time to investigate, document, and write about. I usually have several projects working at any given time ---- each in a different stage of completion. The Babylon piece was due up this month."

"Oh," Detective Williams sputtered, "I see." What he also saw was that the top button on Lydia's long sleeved white blouse had come undone. The result wasn't revealing, but it was unnervingly sensuous.

Robbins poked his partner in the side. "What did you argue about," he asked.

Lydia looked at Robbins askance. "We did not argue," she reminded him. "Regal didn't like my angle. He said it was so far off the mark, he was pulling it from this issue. He directed me to publish my 'filler', instead."

Before they asked, Lydia continued, “A writer always has a backup piece they can use if a deadline is looming and their target story gets rejected. My ‘filler’ was on the E.P.A.’s ability ---- or lack thereof ---- to protect our environment. We are supposed to keep our ‘fillers’ current. I never had a target story rejected, so it was stale. I went home, took a shower, and spent all night refreshing it.”

“Why do you think,” Robbins took the helm again, “Fred rejected your piece so voraciously?”

Jerry Williams’ mind jumped out of its slump.

“Vehemently,” Jerry corrected.

Rich winked at him. Now Ms. Dulcet wouldn’t know if they were slipping up on purpose, and Jerry could get over his embarrassment. Wasn’t that what partners were for?

Lydia shook off the feeling she was dealing with two parts of the three stooges. It was a dangerous thought to have during questioning. These guys were in this line of work for a reason and she figured it was because they were serious about catching criminals.

“I’m an only child,” she said. “I played board games growing up, and computer games once or twice, but they were nothing like this. It wasn’t a good story for me, plus I couldn’t get into it.”

Feeling they had reached an impasse, Robbins changed the subject.

“We understand Fred Riegelsberger was opinionated.”

“He wasn’t racially prejudiced. You need to know that.”

“Can you give us an example of something he felt strongly about? We’d like to get a better feel for the guy.”

“One topic was sex.”

Both men straightened in their chairs. Enid Johnson set her pen down.

“Go on,” Robbins persuaded.

“He always said, ‘Do not have sex if you’re not in love! One time he asked me to swear on a bible.’”

The detectives were silent for a good two minutes. Enid Johnson picked up her pen and began to write again.

“Maybe your boss was hurt by love,” Williams reasoned.

“Either, that,” Lydia responded, “or he was hurt by sex.”

#

“You’re up, CSI.” The Chief of detectives offered the floor.

“Our Vic was hit on the head with a blunt object, possibly a fireplace poker. We mark the time of death between 8:00 and 10:00 PM on the twelfth.”

“You didn’t find the weapon?” Jerry Williams asked.

“No but our Vic had a poker-less fireplace. We found that strange.”

“How about fingerprints,” Robbins inquired?

“Still working it.”

“Was the perp right or left handed,” someone else asked?

“Working it,” the speaker answered.

“So, you don’t have crap,” Robbins interjected.

“You would be right,” CSI loved to spar, “if we didn’t have this.”

It was the bloody trace of a man’s shoe, size 9-1/2 double-wide.

#

The magazine hit the shelves two weeks after it was due out ---- which was several months before the trial.

Lydia did not publish a column in that issue. In its place there was an article about Wilfred Riegelsberger, his life, accomplishments, and untimely passing. No mention was made of his murder.

#

When it was discovered Michale Verone wore 9-1/2 double-wide shoes, he was charged with murder even though no other physical evidence linked him to the crime. During a search of his apartment, a sketchpad was discovered with caricatures of a man drawn with either a spear through the heart, or a rope around the neck and that was the damning nail.

The Trial of Michale Verone

With a stature and voice akin to John Forsythe, District Attorney Karl Porter preened in front of the jury. “State calls Enid Johnson, Doctor of Forensic Psychiatry. Do you agree to tell the truth, the whole truth?”

“Yes.”

“Ms. Johnson, were you present when Michale Verone was questioned by detectives?”

“Yes, but he didn’t know I was there. I was taking notes behind the mirror.”

“During questioning, did you hear anything disturbing?”

“Yes. Mr. Verone had a rotten childhood. His mother was an unstable, violent alcoholic. He never knew what transient she would bring home. In cases just like this, the

experience resulted in the inability to respond normally to anxiety and frustration. That failure to cope with emotional swings can result in psychotic, paranoid behavior.”

“Doctor, have you reviewed the sketches we found in Michale Verone’s home?”

“Yes.”

Porter passed them to the jury.

“In your expert opinion, can you tell us what you think they mean?”

“The person who drew them is disturbed.”

“Criminally so?”

In a thin voice, gaunt, sunken-eyed Defense Attorney Frank Allyard rose:

“Object. Subjective.”

Judge Emirl Rosder: “Sustained.”

“What might cause someone to draw pictures like these, doctor?”

“They wanted to lash out at the figure they felt most angry with. Someone they thought ruined their life.”

“For Michale Verone, could that figure have been Wilfred Riegelsberger?”

Allyard: “Object. Subjective.”

Judge Rosder: “Sustained.”

Porter: “What might the reaction be of a paranoid psychotic if they felt rejected by a parent again later in life?”

Allyard: “Object!”

Judge Rosder: “Sustained. The jury will disregard this line of questioning.”

They got the point, anyway.

#

Porter: "State calls Cynthia Lee Nichols."

"Miss Nichols, do you know Michale Verone?"

Cindy had been coached to act less authoritarian. "Yes."

"How long have you known him?"

"Since he came to work for my magazine two years ago."

"Was he happy there?"

"He hated the column he was assigned to."

"How can you be sure?"

"I heard him arguing with Fred Riegelsberger about it."

"Can you tell us what Mr. Verone said?"

"Something like, 'everyone makes fun of me. No one else ever had this column for more than a year.'"

"Do you know how your boss responded?"

"If you want the exact words I'll need to swear," she said.

"Tell us exactly."

"Ya gotta learn to make bullshit interesting before I give you meat."

"Miss Nichols, did you tell the police that Michale Verone might have been Wilfred Riegelsberger's son."

"Yes."

"How did you come to that conclusion?"

"I was carrying galley trays to Fred's office when I heard angry voices and someone shouting something about donuts. I was so surprised, my legs wouldn't move. When I

realized the donut voice was Michale's I began to back away. I wasn't quick enough to miss the question, "Am I your son? Or my boss's reply."

"Which was?"

"It's possible."

[*To hell with Cindy Perfect.*] Michale thought. [*Who cares about her anyway?*]

#

The Prosecution's next witness was the manager of the Donut Shop on Bridgefield.

Porter: Mr. Haake, do you recognize the defendant, Michale Verone?"

"Yes, he comes into our store regularly."

"Define regularly for us in this context."

"Over the last year, he's been in everyday I've been on duty."

"Is it unusual to have regular customers?"

"No, we have plenty of regulars."

Judge Rosder makes a face.

Porter: "Trust me, your honor, this testimony is relevant."

"Mr. Haake, why did you notice Michale Verone?"

"My predecessor pointed him out. Told me all he bought was one doughnut a day ---- Bavarian Crème. It was true whenever I saw him."

"As a doughnut knowledgeable expert, do you consider that strange?"

"Objection," Allyard's voice quavered as he stood again.

No amount of objections would convince the jury Michale wasn't a little bit weird.

#

Allyard: "Defense calls forensic psychiatrist, Doctor Clifford Dalton. Your honor, Dr. Dalton has over thirty years experience in all facets of psychiatry including the diagnosis of neurotic, and psychotic disorders.

Rosder: "Court accepts this expert witness."

"Dr. Dalton, did you perform an independent assessment of Michale Verone?"

"Yes."

"How extensive was that assessment?"

"I met with Michale two to three hours a day for a week."

"Would the time you spent with Michale Verone contribute to a more thorough analysis than a couple hour view behind a two way mirror?"

"Of course."

"Did you determine Michale had a terrible childhood?"

"Yes."

"How did those years affect him?"

"He rarely felt loved or safe and his experiences stayed with him."

"You used the word rarely. Was there a time he felt safe?"

"Yes."

"When was that?"

"A man moved in when he was ten. The man watched T.V. with him sometimes and introduced him to Bavarian Crème donuts."

"Do you know who that man was?"

"It was Wilfred Riegelsberger."

“So Mr. Verone had pleasant memories of that time?”

“Yes.”

“Have you examined the sketches found in Mr. Verone’s apartment?”

“I have.”

“Do you think they were images of the deceased?”

“No.”

“What do you believe they were caricatures of?”

“Michale himself. His lack of self esteem made him want to kill himself in effigy over and over again.”

“No further questions.”

Porter: “Doctor, did you ever ask Mr. Verone why he drew these sketches?”

“I . . . Yes.”

“Did he tell you the subject was himself?”

“Yes.”

“No further questions.”

#

“Defense calls Michale Verone.”

“Mr. Verone, were you salutatorian of your university?”

“Yes.”

“What is your degree in?”

“Criminology.”

“Not Creative Writing?”

“No.”

“Have you been employed by Fact Magazine for the past two years?”

“Yes.”

“How did you come to apply for that position?”

“It was offered to me.”

“Someone walked up to a person with no formal training in writing and said come work for us?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“Fred Riegelsberger approached me at my graduation.”

“He was at your graduation?”

“Yes.”

“Did you invite him?”

“No.”

“Did you know he was there from the beginning?”

“No.”

“Do you hate the column you write?”

“I wouldn’t call it hate.”

“What would you call it then?”

“Boring, and my colleagues think its fluff.”

“Is it fluffy enough to kill over?”

“No.”

“Did you go to Wilfred Riegelsberger’s house on the night of his murder?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I thought he wanted to see me.”

“Go on.”

“Lydia told me he wanted me at his house at 8:15.”

“That would be Lydia Dulcet?”

“Yes.”

“How did he react when he opened the door?”

“He looked surprised to see me.”

“But he invited you in?”

“Yes.”

“What did you talk about?”

“Basically he wanted to know why I was there.”

“What did you say?”

“That Lydia told me he needed me.”

“What did he say then?”

“That it was a cruel mistake. So I left.”

“Mr. Verone, did you murder Wilfred Riegelsberger?”

“No! Why would I?”

“Please clarify what you mean for the court.”

“He might have been my father.”

“No further questions.”

#

D.A. Porter: "Mr. Verone, you testified Fred Riegelsberger moved into your home when you were young."

"Yes."

"And something about that made you think he might be your father?"

"No."

"What triggered the idea?"

"A photo."

"What kind of photo?"

"I saw a picture of him when he was twenty-ish. It looked like something I'd seen on a shelf when I was very small. I kept dreaming about it."

"Why did Ms. Nichols testify you were screaming about a doughnut when she overheard you in Wilfred Riegelsberger's office?"

"He was always eating one in my dream."

"Bavarian Crème?"

"Yes."

"You have a degree in Criminology?"

"Yes."

"What courses does one take to earn that degree?"

"I'm sorry."

"You study horrific crimes, right?"

"Um, Yes, I guess so."

"You were salutatorian?"

"Yes."

“So you’re criminally smart.”

Allyard: “Objection.”

“If someone wanted to commit the perfect crime, Criminology wouldn’t be a bad degree to have, would it, Mr. Verone?”

“Objection.”

“Sustained.”

#

Defense calls Lydia Dulcet.”

“Miss Dulcet, did you tell Michale Verone Fred Riegelsberger wanted to see him?”

“Yes, Michale was not lying about that.”

“When did your boss tell you to send him over?”

“He didn’t, not personally.”

“I’m confused.”

“Some co-workers came to me at different times asking if I knew why Fred wanted Michale at house at 8:15. Fred was gone, so I went to talk to Michael.”

“What did you say to Michale?”

“I said I heard Fred wants you at his house at 8:15 tonight. What’s up? In truth, there was something strange about the whole thing.”

“How so?”

“Each of my co-workers asked me the same question. “Lydia, why do you think Regal wants Michale at his house at 8:15 tonight?”

“What was strange about that?”

“No two people say things in the same way plus the question came with too much information, like a specific time.”

“Are you suggesting a time and a place might have been included so Michale would go to Wilfred Riegelsberger’s home exactly then? Are you thinking he might have been set up?”

“I think both of those facts are possible.”

Prosecution: “Objection, supposition.”

#

Lydia’s co-workers were called to the stand. None could recall where they first heard about the meeting.

“Everyone wanted Michale to be fired,” one blurted. “So, we were only hoping.”

In closing, Allyard argued Michale was not who Wilfred had been waiting for. He argued someone else showed up after him ---- the very same someone who planted a fireplace poker indentation at the back of his head. The problem was Allyard had no other person and no other motive to offer.

Porter’s closing statement was brilliant. He suggested motive: parent who abandons youngster turns up later and casts him in a position of ridicule. He had evidence: sketches of a man being murdered and the bloody footprint of a 9-1/2 double-wide man’s shoe. He had the testimony of two psychiatrists who both considered Michale to be suffering from a psychotic disorder. Lastly, he had Michale himself, brilliant student of Criminology.

Allyard convinced Michale to settle for an insanity plea.

#

So many mental health treatment institutions had been closed over the years, that Michale was sent to the county jail for holding. For his protection, he was placed in a 6 x 9 by 9-1/2 foot high cell, in isolation. Michale could distinguish noises around him, but couldn't see another soul. As his fears and anxiety swelled, he hit on a plan. His shoes had gotten him into trouble. Now they could get him out.

High percentages of jail suicides occur within the first three hours of incarceration ---- a period known as the 'crisis period'. Michale's was no exception . . . his tool of choice . . . braided shoelaces.

For a person with a severe inability to cope with stress, placing them in isolation is criminal. Doctor Johnson could have explained that to Michale's jailers if she had been aware of the circumstance. The Verone murder trial was as far removed from her mind as it could be as she took notes through a one-way mirror.

#

Lawyers! Tiamat had a better appreciation for what good and bad ones could do. Michale's defense never brought up the fact anyone could purchase a pair of men's 9-1/2 inch double-wides . . . in this case, even a woman.

Tiamat found the perfect way to slay her dragon. In the ladies room, when others were behind stall doors, she whispered in an altered voice, "Wonder why Fred wants Michale at his home at 8:15 tonight?"

The women, each in their turn, went to Lydia with the question. No one bothered Cindy Nichols. No one trusted her.

Funny how you could put a suggestion into another person's mind, and they would never realize it if you did it properly.

If the message relayed to Michale had been, “Why does Fred want to see you?” He wouldn’t have known where to go and when.

Months earlier she had taken Regal into her confidence, telling him about her new friends and exciting life.

Four months later he approached her, “as a friend,” to warn her that her hobby was becoming an unhealthy obsession.

She never broached the topic again hoping he would be convinced everything was status quo. Then one day he asked her to consult a mental health professional. She was horrified but agreed to give it a try.

After missing four separate appointments, their relationship began to sour.

A few weeks later, Fred handed out the assignment to investigate and expose everything about the game Retreat to Babylon. [Check.]

She took the problem to her family. They came up with a Pawn. [Check Mate.]

Tiamat signed on to her computer and entered the necessary passwords.

“Where have you been?” Nergal, inquired.

“Working Finishing Touches,” his goddess replied.

“What is the status of the Retreat article,” Marduk inquired.

“That article is dead.” she responded.

“Perfect. You know we can no longer communicate with each other.”

“It breaks my heart.”

“We will always love you,” they assured her.

#

Lydia was jumpy. She swore she was being followed.

It was Wednesday evening, and she wanted to get home and lock the door. She collected her mail, and trudged up the stairs. An envelope with familiar writing caught her eye. She opened the letter from Regal carefully.

“Lydia, if you are reading this, I’m dead, and my lawyer, has mailed a copy of this to you, Hilliard Evans and the Chief of Police.”

The few short paragraphs made her shake.

Rap . . . Tap!

The knock on her door made her jump. She peered out the peephole.

“Detective Williams?” Her voice was tremulous.

“I saw your lights, I wanted to see how you were doing.”

She unlocked the door warily. “Come in.”

“What’s wrong,” he asked as tears streamed down her face.

She handed him the letter. “I’m killed an innocent man.”

When he finished reading, Jerry Williams said, “I don’t understand.”

“Jerry, when I heard Regal was murdered, my first thought was it was somehow connected to my project. I should have followed my instinct!”

“Go on.”

“When you questioned me about me story, I said the words, ‘I couldn’t get into it,’ do you remember?”

“Actually, I do, yes.”

“I knew you didn’t understand, and I didn’t elaborate.”

“So, tell me now.”

“You can’t just play Retreat. An enclave has to accept you. None would give me entrée. What little I learned about the game was through bits of published information, historical recounts of Babylon itself, and two pretty close-mouthed interviewees.”

“Here in Regal’s letter he says, ‘if I have been murdered, find Tiamat and you will find my killer.’ Tiamat is a legendary goddess of Babylon. I know that from historical recounts. If I had been forthcoming, we could have tried to find out why someone was blocking me from the game and we would have had another motive for Regal’s death. Michale is dead because of me.”

“Lydia, when you tried to get in, did you use your real name?”

“I changed it every time, hundreds of times.”

“Did you always use the same workstation?”

“Are you thinking they traced my computer’s footprint?”

“Yes.”

“I am so stupid!”

She was anything but, and he didn’t want to let her go.

“Would you like to get coffee? I’d hate to leave you alone now.”

Lydia nodded. “Don’t think I’m forward, but can I have a hug?”

#

The first thing Williams did the next day was to pull the file on Cindy Nichols. He had never read the remarks from her interview. If he had known about Retreat and read what he read now, it would have placed her in the category of ‘Person of Interest.’

Cindy's testimony had done Michale in. If he had to guess Williams would guess she was Tiamat and she'd probably already covered her tracks. That didn't mean he wasn't going to see what he could dig up.

He wished he could hear Lydia's voice. It took all his will power to wait to call until evening.

#

Tiamat was sullen, as she had been from the moment she realized she had to leave her family. Regal had done in death what he couldn't in life. She thought about the ways he tried to block her from being with them. When he couldn't scare her into thinking she was addicted, he attacked her writer's core, just like Nergal had warned.

The plan went off without a hitch. Psychology of an Innocent Mind was the perfect primer.

Skipping dinner, breakfast and lunch made her body react with grief-like symptoms. Her lawyer-up question was right-on. When other people took one and she didn't it cast her in a favorable light. Showing Regal's letter to Williams immediately after receiving it was another stroke of genius. She was nervous ---- who wouldn't be if a dead man's letter showed up unexpectedly? Why not go with a bit of truth, and blame Michale's death on her assignment. Admitting some guilt actually made her feel better. Then, explaining what might have been traceable on her computer as failed attempts to get into the game, made her hard drive activity explainable. Still, when Nergal leased new workstations for the team, and donated the old ones to charity she was relieved.

Poor Michale. The person, he thought was his only hope, was his executioner. No one should have had such a crappy life.

Tiamat showered, and dressed. Her phone rang. She tried to sound upbeat. When the knock came an hour later, she accepted her fate. Once she opened the door her epic experience of adventure, bondage and passion would be gone. The goddess she had become would cease to exist. All she would be left with would be the grim remains of Lydia Patrice Dulcet.