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Mystery Man

Bateman

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Extract

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1

There aren't many private eyes in Belfast, and now, apparently, there's one fewer. I know this because his shop was right next to mine. His name was Malcolm Carlyle and he seemed a decent sort. He would call in for a chat and a browse now and again when business was slow. *His* business, that is. His business was called Private Eye, big yellow letters on a black background. Then one day he didn't open up, and I never saw him again, and that was the start of my problems because he was still listed in the Yellow Pages, but when people couldn't get a response on the phone well, they thought, he must be good, he's so busy, he's changed his number, gone ex-directory, so they'd come down to check what was happening with their cases, find the door locked, stand back and take a look at the place and see my shop next door and think

there must be some kind of a connection because you don't have a shop called Private Eye and a shop called No Alibis sitting side by side for no reason at all. So they'd come in and furtively browse through the crime books, all the time eyeing me up behind the counter, trying to work out if I could possibly be connected to the private eye they were looking for and if there was a connecting door between the shops, and whether I did this bookselling thing as a kind of respectable cover for my night-time manoeuvres on the cold, dark streets of Belfast. They'd gotten it wrong of course. Bookselling is more cut-throat than you can possibly imagine.

The first fella who actually approached me was called Robert Geary; he was a civil servant in the Department of Education in Bangor, he was married, he had three children aged from nine to twelve and he supported Manchester United. We all have our crosses to bear. He told me all this while making a meal out of paying for an Agatha Christie novel, so I knew something was up. No one had bought a Christie in years.

He said, 'My wife wears leather trousers.'

I nodded. You meet all types.

'She's forty-two,' he said, and I raised a concerned eyebrow. 'I know, I keep hinting that maybe she's too old for them, but she doesn't get it. The problem is she asked me to get them cleaned at our usual place, it's the only dry-cleaner's she trusts, except I was late

for work and so I took them to this other place, do you know it – it's called Pressed for Time on the Castlereagh Road? – but they lost them and they were very nice about it and paid me what they cost, except my wife threw a fit anyway and called me all the names of the day. Then a couple of weeks ago I was out shopping and I saw the exact same trousers walking down Royal Avenue, except no sooner had I seen them than I lost them in the crowds, so I went back to the dry-cleaner's and said I'd seen them walking down Royal Avenue but they said there was nothing they could do, so I didn't want to phone the police because they'd tell me to take a run and jump and so I phoned Malcolm Carlyle, Private Eye, and he said he'd see what *he* could do, but then when I didn't hear back from him and he didn't answer his phone, I thought I'd come down and see him. Except he's not there.'

'No, he's not,' I said.

'And now I have to get them back, because as sure as hell the wife's going to be out shopping one day and she'll see them and then there'll be blood on the streets, and some of it's going to be hers, and some of it's going to be the other woman's, and some of it's going to be mine and I can do without that. I'm five years from retirement. We retire early in the Civil Service. We're going to buy a place in Cyprus.'

'Why don't you just get her some new ones?' I asked.

'Because these were a designer pair, I bought them in America, in Texas, near the Alamo, it's my favourite film, there's not another pair like them in Ireland, and possibly continental Europe.'

'I see,' I said, and charged him £4.50 for the Christie.

He left me his number in case the private eye turned up again, and I said it seemed unlikely, but he said keep it anyway, and if there's anything you can do I'd very much appreciate it, and then he hurried out because there was another customer who'd come in and now wanted serving, so I didn't get the chance to ask what he meant by *if there's anything you can do*. The next customer was just looking for directions. He wanted to know where Queen's University was. I said I wasn't sure and sold him a street map. It was only around the corner, but the profit was the difference between burger and steak.

Over the next couple of days I was up to my neck in stock-taking and didn't give the leather trousers another thought, but then I finally got back behind the till and found the note I'd made of his number and seeing as how I'd an average of forty-three minutes to kill between customers I started thinking about the possibilities, and that's how I came to phone Pressed for Time to enquire about the mysterious disappearance and even more mysterious reappearance of Mrs Geary's leather trousers.

'And you are, who?' the man at the other end said

with enough suspicion for me to say the first name that came to mind, other than my own, for I had a business and its reputation to protect: 'Lawrence Block.'

'Like the crime writer,' said the man unexpectedly.

'Like the crime writer,' I said. 'Except I'm definitely not in the book business.'

'What business would you be in then?' he asked chirpily. 'You know, I can't go giving out confidential information to just anyone who phones up asking.'

I said, 'I'm representing Mr Geary and Mrs Geary in the matter of their leather trousers, and by the by, what kind of confidential information would a dry-cleaner's have to be worried about giving out anyway?'

'Oh, you'd be surprised,' he said. 'We do police uniforms and prison officers' uniforms and . . .' And then he caught himself on and said, 'But that's confidential. I'll, ah, get the manager.'

After a bit, the manager came on and said gruffly, 'I've had it up to my back teeth with these leather trousers. Even though we don't accept responsibility for lost or damaged items we paid for them. I don't see what his problem is.'

'Well, they had sentimental value,' I said.

'Sentimental leather trousers?' he barked. But then he sighed and his tone lightened a little and he said, 'It takes all sorts. Mr Block, is it?'

'Call me Larry.'

'What are you, a solicitor?'

I cleared my throat in a positive manner and said, 'If you don't accept any responsibility for lost or damaged items, why did you pay Mr Geary for the missing trousers?'

'Well, the fact of the matter is we *didn't* pay Mr Geary, at least not directly. We send our leather items out for specialist cleaning. *They* said they were damaged in the cleaning process, and *they* instructed us to pay Mr Geary and promised to reimburse us. Although I'm still waiting.'

'Well, if they said they were damaged, how come those very same leather trousers were last seen hurrying down Royal Avenue at a great rate of knots?'

'Well, I don't know. You'd have to take it up with them.'

So he gave me their number and said they were on the Newtownards Road and I thanked him for his time and still suitably enthused, or bored, I was about to phone them when the shop door opened and a man came in and asked if I could recommend the new John Grisham and I said, yes, if you're a moron.

2

Well, it turns out John Grisham was on a signing tour of the UK, and not wanting to cause pandemonium wherever he went he was just calling at bookshops unannounced, which struck me as an inefficient way to do things, but each unto their own. His face is right there on the back of his books, so I get to look at him at least six times a day, and of course I recognised you straight off, I said, although in truth, shorn of good lighting and make-up, he looked a lot heavier and his hair was longer and unkempt and his skin was blotchy and he seemed to have some kind of a rash on his neck. It's lucky that I myself was born with an honest kind of a face, as he seemed to accept that my off-the-cuff remark was a typical example of our much-heralded Troubles humour, etc., etc.

I made him a cup of coffee while he signed copies

of his books, and seeing as how he was an American and not wishing to seem overawed by his wealth and celebrity, I related to him the story of Mrs Geary's leather trousers, putting extra emphasis on the fact that they'd originated in Texas, which is somewhere in the general region of where I believe he hails from originally, but he didn't seem very interested and kept trying to steer the conversation back to exactly how many copies of his next novel I planned to order, which wasn't a subject I was keen to explore because people can snap them up for half-price in the supermarkets so there's no point in me bringing in more than a few token copies. When he finished signing his books, he moved on to signing copies of books by other authors, which I thought was a little strange, but there didn't seem any harm in it. In fact, it was quite novel and I thought it might help me to move a lot of dead stock. There probably wouldn't be a huge profit in it, but it could mean the difference between eight slices of cooked ham in a resealable packet and a fresh gammon steak. But after he had gone and I was beginning to put the signed books out on display I realised that he had signed most of his books 'Johnny Grisham' and some of them 'David Grisham' and several 'The Lord God of All Hosts' and one 'How much does your piano weigh?', and I began to reflect on the capacity of the Irish to fall for anyone with an American accent, be they pauper, paranoid or president, and whatever gibberish they might care to spout.

I was not, therefore, in the best of moods when I finally came to phone Stick to Me, the leather goods cleaners, shortly before closing time. I made a point of not identifying myself this time, saying merely that I was phoning on behalf of a client, a Mr Geary, but before I could get on to the substance of my complaint the man at the other end said, 'Is that Mr Block?'

I cleared my throat in a positive manner and demanded to know what had happened to the leather trousers.

'They got torn up by the machinery. They were damaged beyond repair.'

'And yet they were spotted galloping down Royal Avenue.'

'We heard that. We can only presume that somebody rescued them from the skip behind our shop and stitched them back together.'

I immediately pounced on that. 'I thought they were damaged *beyond* repair?'

'Beyond the standard of repair we pride ourselves on. How close was your witness to them? They probably looked like a dog's dinner. Mr Block, Larry, the trousers are gone, we paid up, we paid up above and beyond, I think you should drop this – while you still can.'

It sat in the air for several long moments.

Then I cut the line. I put the receiver down and stood there, quite shocked by this unexpected turn of events. *While you still can*. I was being warned off.

Threatened. It wasn't even a veiled threat. It was explicit, if understated, like a killer in mittens.

The phone rang and I thanked God for the distraction. I said, 'Hello, No Alibis.'

And the same voice said, 'Is that Larry?'

My own voice rose a couple of octaves as I gave him an innocent, 'Larry?'

And he said, 'Larry Block. I was speaking to him a minute ago and I got cut off and I hit caller ID and then I called the number and you answered the phone.'

'Well, I'm sorry, there's no Larry here.'

'What's the name of that place again?'

'What place?'

'You answered the phone and said hello no something.'

'Ah. No. You misheard. I said hello, Noah. Noah Alibees. That's my name. It's French Canadian originally. I design hats. Are you calling about a hat?'

It seemed to do the trick. He quickly apologised and rang off. When I put the phone down I found that my hands were damp, my shirt was sticking to my skin and my heart was beating nineteen to the dozen.

Two days a week I employ a student called Jeff to mind the shop while I sit in the back office trying to make my books balance. He's keen and writes poetry and belongs to Amnesty International, but he'll grow out of all of these things. My office is close enough

to the till so that I can hear what's going on in the store, in particular if Jeff is misusing the phone to call either his girlfriend or some government agency to demand that a political prisoner not be repatriated to Sierra Leone. In light of the previous day's threat I had considered not allowing Jeff to answer the phone at all, but a cursory examination of the books told me I wasn't in any position to turn away potential business, so by way of compromise I instructed him to answer any incoming calls with a French accent, which he managed passably well, and to be as vague as possible until he was able to ascertain the nature of the enquiry. Vagueness for Jeff, truth be told, wasn't going to be a huge stretch. I made him repeat *Noah Alibees* over and over until he got it just right. Then I said that if anyone called and asked for Larry he was to reply, 'There is no Larry here, would you like to buy a hat?'

Towards noon I was just beginning to think that I might have gotten hold of the wrong end of the stick. There had been four phone calls, all of them from either customers or publishers' reps. But then the fifth call came in and my carefully constructed cover story quickly began to unravel. I heard Jeff say, 'Noah Alibees, would you like to buy a hat?' and then, 'Yes, hats, all different types.' And then, 'No there's nobody called Larry Block here.' I moved from my desk in the back to the body of the shop. 'Nope, no Lawrence Block either.' Then with a piece of inspired improvisation Jeff

added, 'You'd have to go to a mystery bookshop to find Lawrence Block.' Jeff saw me; he smiled and gave me the thumbs-up. Then he said, 'No trouble at all,' and hung up. When I approached the till he said, 'You look a little pale, what's the matter?'

I put my hands on the counter to steady myself, took a deep breath and said, 'I'm being intimidated by the owner of a shop that specialises in the cleaning and repair of leather goods.'

Jeff gave this due consideration. Then he said, 'Somebody's scrawled all over the John Grisham books.'