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Think of a Number

Written by John Verdon

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Think of a Number

JOHN VERDON



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Prologue

'Where were you?' said the old woman in the bed. 'I had to pee, and no one came.'

Unruffled by her nasty tone, the young man stood at the foot of the bed, beaming.

'I had to pee,' she repeated, more vaguely, as if she were now unsure what the words meant.

'I have good news, Mother,' said the man. 'Soon everything will be all right. Everything will be taken care of.'

'Where do you go when you leave me?' Her voice again was sharp, querulous.

'Not far, Mother. You know very well I never go far.'

'I don't like to be alone.'

His smile broadened, was almost beatific. 'Very soon everything will be all right. Everything will be the way it was supposed to be. You can trust me, Mother. I found a way to fix everything. What he took he will give, when he gets what he gave.'

'You write such beautiful poetry.'

There were no windows in the room. The sideways light from the bedside lamp – the sole source of illumination – emphasized the thick scar on the woman's throat and the shadows in her son's eyes.

'Will we go dancing?' she asked, staring past him and past the dark wall behind him to a brighter vision.

'Of course, Mother. Everything will be perfect.'

'Where's my little Dickie Duck?'

'Right here, Mother.'

'Will Dickie Duck come to bed?'
'To beddy-bye, to beddy-bye, to beddy-bye.'
'I have to pee,' she said, almost coquettishly.

PART ONE
Fatal Memories

I
Cop art

Jason Strunk was by all accounts an inconsequential fellow, a bland thirty-something, nearly invisible to his neighbors – and apparently inaudible as well, since none could recall a single specific thing he'd ever said. They couldn't even be certain that he'd ever spoken. Perhaps he'd nodded, perhaps said hello, perhaps muttered a word or two. It was hard to say.

All expressed a conventional initial amazement, even a temporary disbelief, at the revelation of Mr. Strunk's obsessive devotion to killing middle-aged men with mustaches and his uniquely disturbing way of disposing of the bodies: cutting them into manageable segments, wrapping them colorfully, and mailing them to local police officers as Christmas presents.

Dave Gurney gazed intently at the colorless, placid face of Jason Strunk – actually, the original Central Booking mug shot of Jason Strunk – that stared back at him from his computer screen. The mug shot had been enlarged to make the face life-size, and it was surrounded at the borders of the screen by the tool icons of a creative photo-retouching program that Gurney was just starting to get the hang of.

He moved one of the brightness-control tools on the screen to the iris of Strunk's right eye, clicked his mouse, and then examined the small highlight he'd created.

Better, but still not right.

The eyes were always the hardest – the eyes and the mouth – but they were the key. Sometimes he had to experiment with the position and intensity of one tiny highlight for hours, and even then he'd end up with something not quite what it should be, not good enough to show to Sonya, and definitely not Madeleine.

The thing about the eyes was that they, more than anything else, captured the tension, the contradiction – the uncommunicative blandness spiked with a hint of cruelty that Gurney had often discerned in the faces of murderers with whom he'd had the opportunity to spend quality time.

He'd gotten the look right with his patient manipulation of the mug shot of Jorge Kunzman (the Walmart stock clerk who always kept the head of his last date in his refrigerator until he could replace it with one more recent). He'd been pleased with the result, which conveyed with disturbing immediacy the deep black emptiness lurking in Mr. Kunzman's bored expression, and Sonya's excited reaction, her gush of praise, had solidified his opinion. It was that reception, plus the unexpected sale of the piece to one of Sonya's collector friends, that motivated him to produce the series of creatively doctored photographs now being featured in a show headlined Portraits of Murderers by the Man Who Caught Them, in Sonya's small but pricey gallery in Ithaca.

How a recently retired NYPD homicide detective with a yawning uninterest in art in general and trendy art in particular, and a deep distaste for personal notoriety, could have ended up as the focus of a chic university-town art

show described by local critics as 'a cutting-edge blend of brutally raw photographs, unflinching psychological insights, and masterful graphic manipulations' was a question with two very different answers: his own and his wife's.

As far as he was concerned, it all began with Madeleine's cajoling him into taking an art-appreciation course with her at the museum in Cooperstown. She was forever trying to get him out – out of his den, out of the house, out of himself, just *out*. He'd learned that the best way to stay in control of his own time was through the strategy of periodic capitulations. The art-appreciation course was one of these strategic moves, and although he dreaded the prospect of sitting through it, he expected it to immunize him against further pressures for at least a month or two. It wasn't that he was a couch potato – far from it. At the age of forty-seven, he could still do fifty push-ups, fifty chin-ups, and fifty sit-ups. He just wasn't very fond of going places.

The course, however, turned out to be a surprise – in fact, three surprises. First, despite his pre-course assumption that his greatest challenge would be staying awake, he found the instructor, Sonya Reynolds, a gallery owner and artist of regional renown, riveting. She was not conventionally beautiful, not in the archetypal Northern European Catherine Deneuve mode. Her mouth was too pouty, her cheekbones overly prominent, her nose too strong. But somehow the imperfect parts were unified into a uniquely striking whole by large eyes of a deep smoky green and by a manner that was completely relaxed and naturally sensual. There were not many men in the class,

just six of the twenty-six attendees, but she had the absolute attention of all six.

The second surprise was his positive reaction to the subject matter. Because it was a special interest of hers, Sonya devoted considerable time to art derived from photography – photography that had been manipulated to create images that were more powerful or communicative than the originals.

The third surprise came three weeks into the twelve-week course, on the night that she was commenting enthusiastically on a contemporary artist's silk-screen prints derived from solarized photographic portraits. As Gurney gazed at the prints, the idea came to him that he could take advantage of an unusual resource to which he had special access and to which he could bring a special perspective. The notion was strangely exciting. The last thing he'd expected from an art-appreciation course was excitement.

Once this occurred to him – *the concept of enhancing, clarifying, intensifying criminal mug shots*, particularly the mug shots of murderers, in ways that would capture and convey the nature of the beast he had spent his career studying, pursuing, and outwitting – it took hold, and he thought about it more often than he would have been comfortable admitting. He was, after all, a cautious man who could see both sides of every question, the flaw in every conviction, the naïveté in every enthusiasm.

As Gurney worked at the desk in his den that bright October morning on the mug shot of Jason Strunk, the pleasant challenge of the process was interrupted by the sound of something being dropped on the floor behind him.

'I'm leaving these here,' said Madeleine Gurney in a voice that to anyone else might have sounded casual but to her husband was fraught.

He looked over his shoulder, his eyes narrowing at the sight of the small burlap sack leaning against the door. 'Leaving what?' he asked, knowing the answer.

'Tulips,' said Madeleine in the same even tone.

'You mean bulbs?'

It was a silly correction, and they both knew it. It was just a way of expressing his irritation at Madeleine's wanting him to do something he didn't feel like doing.

'What do you want me to do with them in here?'

'Bring them out to the garden. Help me plant them.'

He considered pointing out the illogic of her bringing into the den something for him to bring back out to the garden but thought better of it.

'As soon as I finish with this,' he said a little resentfully. He realized that planting tulip bulbs on a glorious Indian-summer day in a hilltop garden overlooking a rolling panorama of crimson autumn woods and emerald pastures under a cobalt sky was not a particularly onerous assignment. He just hated being interrupted. And this reaction to interruption, he told himself, was a by-product of his greatest strength: the linear, logical mind that had made him such a successful detective – the mind that was jarred by the slightest discontinuity in a suspect's story, that could sense a fissure too tiny for most eyes to see.

Madeleine peered over his shoulder at the computer screen. 'How can you work on something so ugly on a day like this?' she asked.

2
A perfect victim

David and Madeleine Gurney lived in a sturdy nineteenth-century farmhouse, nestled in the corner of a secluded pasture at the end of a dead-end road in the Delaware County hills five miles outside the village of Walnut Crossing. The ten-acre pasture was surrounded by woods of cherry, maple, and oak.

The house retained its original architectural simplicity. During the year they'd owned it, the Gurneys had restored to a more appropriate appearance the previous owner's unfortunate updates – replacing, for example, bleak aluminum windows with wood-framed versions that possessed the divided-light style of an earlier century. They did it not out of a mania for historical authenticity but in recognition that the original aesthetics had somehow been *right*. This matter of how one's home should look and feel was one of the subjects on which Madeleine and David were in complete harmony – a list that, it seemed to him, had lately been shrinking.

This thought had been eating like acid at his mood most of the day, activated by his wife's comment about the ugliness of the portrait he was working on. It was still at the edge of his consciousness that afternoon when, dozing in his favorite Adirondack chair after the tulip-planting activity, he became aware of Madeleine's footsteps brushing toward him through the ankle-high grass. When the

footsteps stopped in front of his chair, he opened one eye.

'Do you think,' she said in her calm, light way, 'it's too late to take the canoe out?' Her voice positioned the words deftly between a question and a challenge.

Madeleine was a slim, athletic forty-five-year-old who could easily be mistaken for thirty-five. Her eyes were frank, steady, appraising. Her long brown hair, with the exception of a few errant strands, was pulled up under her broad-brimmed straw gardening hat.

He responded with a question from his own train of thought. 'Do you really think it's ugly?'

'Of course it's ugly,' she said without hesitation. 'Isn't it supposed to be?'

He frowned as he considered her comment. 'You mean the subject matter?' he asked.

'What else would I mean?'

'I don't know.' He shrugged. 'You sounded a bit contemptuous of the whole thing – the execution as well as the subject matter.'

'Sorry.'

She didn't seem sorry. As he teetered on the edge of saying so, she changed the subject.

'Are you looking forward to seeing your old classmate?'

'Not exactly,' he said, adjusting the reclining back of his chair a notch lower. 'I'm not big on recollections of times past.'

'Maybe he's got a murder for you to solve.'

Gurney looked at his wife, studied the ambiguity of her expression. 'You think that's what he wants?' he asked blandly.

'Isn't that what you're famous for?' Anger was beginning to stiffen her voice.

It was something he'd witnessed in her often enough in recent months that he thought he understood what it was about. They had different notions of what his retirement from the job was supposed to mean, what kind of changes it was supposed to make in their lives, and, more specifically, how it was supposed to change *him*. Recently, too, ill feeling had been growing around his new avocation – the portraits-of-murderers project that was absorbing his time. He suspected that Madeleine's negativity in this area might be partly related to Sonya's enthusiasm.

'Did you know he's famous, too?' she asked.

'Who?'

'Your classmate.'

'Not really. He said something on the phone about writing a book, and I checked on it briefly. I wouldn't have thought he was well known.'

'*Two* books,' said Madeleine. 'He's the director of some sort of institute in Peony, and he did a series of lectures that ran on PBS. I printed out copies of the book jackets from the Internet. You might want to take a look at them.'

'I assume he'll tell me all there is to know about himself and his books. He doesn't sound shy.'

'Have it your way. I left the copies on your desk, if you change your mind. By the way, Kyle phoned earlier.'

He stared at her silently.

'I said you'd get back to him.'

'Why didn't you call me?' he asked, more testily than he intended. His son didn't call often.

'I asked him if I should get you. He said he didn't want to disturb you, it wasn't really urgent.'

'Did he say anything else?'

'No.'

She turned and walked across the thick, moist grass toward the house. When she reached the side door and put her hand on the knob, she seemed to remember something else, looked back at him, and spoke with exaggerated bafflement. 'According to the book jacket, your old classmate seems to be a saint, perfect in every way. A guru of good behavior. It's hard to imagine why he'd need to consult a homicide detective.'

'A *retired* homicide detective,' corrected Gurney.

But she'd already gone in and neglected to cushion the slam of the door.

3
Trouble in paradise

The following day was more exquisite than the day before. It was the picture of October in a New England calendar. Gurney rose at 7:00 A.M., showered and shaved, put on jeans and a light cotton sweater, and was having his coffee in a canvas chair on the bluestone patio outside their downstairs bedroom. The patio and the French doors leading to it were additions he'd made to the house at Madeleine's urging.

She was good at that sort of thing, had a sensitive eye for what was possible, what was appropriate. It revealed a lot about her – her positive instincts, her practical imagination, her unfailing taste. But when he got tangled in their areas of contention – the mires and brambles of the expectations each privately cultivated – he found it difficult to focus on her remarkable strengths.

He must remember to return Kyle's call. He would have to wait three hours because of the time difference between Walnut Crossing and Seattle. He settled deeper into his chair, cradling his warm coffee mug in both hands.

He glanced at the slim folder he'd brought out with his coffee and tried to imagine the appearance of the college classmate he hadn't seen for twenty-five years. The photo that appeared on the book jackets that Madeleine printed out from a bookstore website refreshed his recollection not only of the face but of the personality – complete with

the vocal timbre of an Irish tenor and a smile that was improbably charming.

When they were undergraduates at Fordham's Rose Hill campus in the Bronx, Mark Mellery was a wild character whose spurts of humor and truth, energy and ambition were colored by something darker. He had a tendency to walk close to the edge – a sort of careening genius, simultaneously reckless and calculating, always on the brink of a downward spiral.

According to his website bio, the direction of the spiral, which had taken him down rapidly in his twenties, had been reversed in his thirties by some sort of dramatic spiritual transformation.

Balancing his coffee mug on the narrow wooden arm of the chair, Gurney opened the folder on his lap, extracted the e-mail he'd received from Mellery a week earlier, and went over it again, line by line.

Hello, Dave:

I hope you don't find it inappropriate to be contacted by an old classmate after so much time has elapsed. One can never be sure what may be brought to mind by a voice from the past. I've remained in touch with our shared academic past through our alumni association and have been fascinated by the news items published over the years concerning the members of our graduating class. I was happy to note on more than one occasion your own stellar achievements and the recognition you were receiving. (One article in our

Alumni News called you THE MOST DECORATED DETECTIVE IN THE NYPD – which didn't especially surprise me, remembering the Dave Gurney I knew in college!) Then, about a year ago, I saw that you'd retired from the police department – and that you'd moved up here to Delaware County. It got my attention because I happen to be located in the town of Peony – 'just down the road apiece,' as they say. I doubt that you've heard of it, but I now run a kind of retreat house here, called the Institute for Spiritual Renewal – pretty fancy-sounding, I know, but in reality quite down to earth.

Although it has occurred to me many times over the years that I would enjoy seeing you again, a disturbing situation has finally given me the nudge I needed to stop thinking about it and get in touch with you. It's a situation in which I believe that your advice would be most helpful. What I'd love to do is pay you a brief visit. If you could find it possible to spare me half an hour, I'll come to your home in Walnut Crossing – or to any other location that might better suit your convenience.

My recollections of our conversations in the campus center and even longer conversations in the Shamrock Bar – not to mention your remarkable professional experience – tell me that you're the right person to talk to about the perplexing matter before me. It's a weird puzzle that I suspect will interest you. Your ability to put two and two together in ways that elude everyone else was always your great strength. Whenever I

think of you, I always think of your perfect logic and crystal clarity – qualities that I dearly need more of right now. I'll call you within the next few days at the number that appears in the alumni directory – in the hope that it's correct and current.

With many good memories,
Mark Mellery

P.S. Even if you end up as mystified by my problem as I am, and have no advice to offer, it will still be a delight to see you again.

The promised call had come two days later. Gurney had immediately recognized the voice, eerily unchanged except for a distinct tremor of anxiety.

After some self-deprecating remarks about his failure to stay in touch, Mellery got to the point. Could he see Gurney within the next few days? The sooner the better, since the 'situation' was urgent. Another 'development' had occurred. It really was impossible to discuss over the phone, as Gurney would understand when they met. There were things Mellery had to show him. No, it wasn't a matter for the local police, for reasons he'd explain when he came. No, it wasn't a legal matter, not yet, anyway. No crime had been committed, nor was one being specifically threatened – not that he could prove. Lord, it was so difficult to talk about it this way; it would be so much easier in person. Yes, he realized that Gurney was not in the private-investigation business. But just half an hour – could he have half an hour?

With the mixed feelings he'd had from the beginning,

Gurney agreed. His curiosity often got the better of his reticence; in this instance he was curious about the hint of hysteria lurking in the undertone of Mellery's mellifluous voice. And, of course, a puzzle to be deciphered attracted him more powerfully than he cared to admit.

After rereading the e-mail a third time, Gurney put it back in the folder and let his mind wander over the recollections it stirred up from the back bins of his memory: the morning classes in which Mellery had looked hungover and bored, his gradual coming to life in the afternoon, his wild Irish jabs of wit and insight in the wee hours fueled by alcohol. He was a natural actor, undisputed star of the college dramatic society – a young man who, however full of life he might be at the Shamrock Bar, was doubly alive on the stage. He was a man who depended on an audience – a man who was drawn up to his full height only in the nourishing light of admiration.

Gurney opened the folder and glanced through the e-mail yet again. He was bothered by Mellery's depiction of their relationship. The contact between them had been less frequent, less significant, less friendly than Mellery's words suggested. But he got the impression that Mellery had chosen his words carefully – that despite its simplicity, the note had been written and rewritten, pondered and edited – and that the flattery, like everything else in the letter, was purposeful. But what was the purpose? The obvious one was to ensure Gurney's agreement to a face-to-face meeting and to engage him in the solution of whatever 'mystery' had arisen. Beyond that, it was hard to say. The problem was clearly important to Mellery – which would explain the

time and attention he had apparently lavished on getting the flow and feeling of his sentences just right, on conveying a certain mix of warmth and distress.

There was also the small matter of the 'P.S.' In addition to subtly challenging him with the suggestion that he might be defeated by the puzzle, whatever it was, it also appeared to obstruct an easy exit route, to vitiate any claim Gurney might be tempted to make that he was not in the private-investigation business or would not be likely to be helpful. The thrust of its wording was to characterize any reluctance to meet as a rude dismissal of an old friend.

Oh, yes, it was carefully crafted.

Carefulness. That was something new, wasn't it? Definitely not a cornerstone quality of the old Mark Mellery.

This apparent change interested Gurney.

On cue, Madeleine came out through the back door and walked about two-thirds of the way to where Gurney was sitting.

'Your guest has arrived,' she announced flatly.

'Where is he?'

'In the house.'

He looked down. An ant was zigzagging along the arm of his chair. He sent it flying with a sharp flick of his fingernail.

'Ask him to come out here,' he said. 'It's too nice to be indoors.'

'It is, isn't it?' she said, making the comment sound both poignant and ironic. 'By the way, he looks exactly like his picture on the book jacket – even more so.'

'Even more so? What's that supposed to mean?'

She was already returning to the house and did not answer.