

## Graceland

I had wrapped up two cases over the weekend and was looking forward to making the six-hour drive to Door County, Wisconsin to escape the Chicago summer heat. Thoughts of a week sitting on the deck of my cabin on Moonlight Bay were enticing. I finished my notes on the Shackley case and was about to walk them in to Carol when the front door opened, letting in the noise of the car traffic on Fullerton. I sat back down and hoped it was the mailman. It wasn't. I heard enough to know it was a male and then heard Carol say, "He's in... one moment."

She timidly peeked into my office with an apologetic look. "Spencer, there's a—"

I cut her off with a wave and a shake of my head. "Send him in."

He was a large man who looked to be in pretty good shape for someone I guessed was in his eighties. But there was something odd about him that I couldn't put my finger on. He seemed to move without effort as he sat in the wooden chair in front of my desk.

I stood and held out my hand. "Good morning, I'm Spencer Manning."

He didn't offer his hand, but nodded, smiled, and said, "I'm Gary Owens. Thank you for seeing me."

I sat, asked how I could help him, and tried not to take it personally that he didn't want to shake my hand.

"Well, it's a bit worrisome, you know. I have a granddaughter who means everything to me. And if I may say, I mean everything to her. Her name is Patricia... she's the most wonderful person you'd ever want to meet."

"And Patricia is in trouble?"

"Well, now she may be... and then again she may not be."

I waited but he was done talking. And I was getting frustrated. "What is it you want, Mr. Owens?"

"I'd like you to find out."

"Find out what?"

"If she is or isn't."

I just knew Carol was trying not to laugh.

"What kind of trouble might she be in?"

“*That* I’m not sure of, but she’s had a tough time of it the last four years and I’m afraid she’s fallen in with the wrong sort.”

“And what is it you want me to do?”

“Just have a chat with her and set her straight.”

He seemed like a sweet old man but there was something not right. He was confused. “Have *you* had a chat with her, Mr. Owens?”

“Well, I’d like to... I certainly would, but I can’t quite manage it at the moment.”

A part of me wanted to ask why, but a bigger part of me wanted to get in my baby-blue Mustang and head north. “I’d like to help you, but having chats isn’t something I do. This is a detective agency, not a counseling service.”

His face lit up with a big smile. “That’s it exactly! I want you to do some detecting.”

I’m sure I wasn’t hiding my confusion. “You said you wanted me to have a chat with her.”

“Oh, I do, sir! But first you have to find her.”

I didn’t have to wonder about Carol... I heard the laugh.

He seemed like one of those old people Dad told me about who called the police with some complaint just to have someone to talk to. I felt sorry for him, but if I could leave in an hour I’d be putting a steak on the grill for dinner.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Owens, but I have several cases I’m working on and I just don’t have time at the moment.”

His smile disappeared, replaced by a look of utter sadness.

“I *had* hoped you could help, sir. She means everything to me.”

I gave up on my steak and asked, “When was the last time you talked to her?”

Now he looked confused. “Well, it’s been four years, but I’ve been keeping tabs on her. I know she misses me.”

I had no idea how to help this sad old man. I was even wondering if he *had* a granddaughter. But he looked so distraught I wanted to do something.

“Can you tell me her address?”

“Yes, but that won’t help... she’s not there. She’s missing, you see.”

“I still need an address if I’m going to look.”

He nodded and looked puzzled. “Well, you could try 2418 Addison. She has an apartment there.”

“Okay. Good. Have you called the police?”

“Oh, no, sir. I cannot do that.”

The front door opened again. This time it *was* the mailman.

I was hopeful about the steak. “Missing persons is best handled by the police, Mr. Owens. I have friends on the force who would handle this personally. I’ll even make the call right now while you’re here so you can talk to them.”

He stood, shaking his head. “No, sir, that won’t do. You were recommended. If you won’t look I’m afraid all hope is lost.”

I sighed and asked him to sit. “Okay, I’ll check at her apartment, but if I don’t find anything there I’m afraid that’s all I can do. The police really are better equipped to find someone.”

He slowly shook his head.

I sighed. “How old is she?”

“Just twenty-one.”

“Okay. Leave your contact information with my secretary. She’ll fill you in on my fees and have you sign an agreement.”

He bowed his head, stared at his lap, and very quietly said, “I’m afraid I can’t pay you.”

This kept getting better, but now I was hooked and wondering what the hell was going on. If nothing else, I could bring some relief to this confused old man. And most of my cases were charity anyway. I had a trust fund my folks left me and had the luxury of being able to choose the cases I took. Most were people who needed help but couldn’t pay, or couldn’t pay much. When I did get a paying customer I donated it to the police fund.

“Okay then, Mr. Owens. Do you have a picture of Patricia?”

He sadly shook his head. “Not with me, I don’t.”

“Then give me a description.”

He did. Long blond hair, a little over five feet, thin, and the most beautiful woman God ever made.

“Okay, then just leave your phone number and address with Carol. I’ll check out her apartment this afternoon and get back to you.”

“Bless you, sir. I’ll do that.”

I waited until I heard the door open and close and then walked into the front reception area. Carol handed me a slip of paper with Mr. Owens’ address and the address of his granddaughter.

“He didn’t give you a phone number?”

“Says he doesn’t have one. He doesn’t like these newfangled machines.”

I had to agree with him there. A friend who works for Motorola had just given me a gadget he called a portable cell phone he said they were bringing out soon. But the damned thing was as big as a shoe box—not very portable.

“I’m glad you agreed to look into it, Spencer. I feel sorry for him.”

“This doesn’t make much sense.”

“No, he’s just confused. But he does seem to love his granddaughter.”

I agreed. “If he *has* a granddaughter. I’m betting the apartment building on Addison doesn’t exist.”

“Then you can at least tell him you tried.”

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It did exist and it did have the name tag of ‘Patricia Owens’ on one of nine mailboxes in the foyer. I rang the bell under the mailbox and waited ten seconds before I rang again. No answer. I rang the bell of the manager—the tag said ‘Barry.’ A woman answered. She let me in after I told her I was looking for Patricia. She buzzed the door and was waiting for me at the first apartment. I gave her my card and introduced myself.

She looked at it and me carefully and invited me in. We sat at her metal kitchen table.

“So, why are you looking for Patricia?”

I didn’t want to mention her grandfather. I still wasn’t sure about him. “There is some concern about her welfare. Have you seen her recently, Mrs. Barry?”

“Come to think of it, I haven’t seen her in a few weeks... not that I see all my tenants, but Patricia would stop and chat if I was working in the garden. A nice girl.”

“Would it be possible to have a look in her apartment?”

She looked around the room like she had to check with someone, but there was no one else there. “That’s unusual, but since I haven’t seen her... Do you think she’s dead in the apartment?”

“I don’t think anything at the moment. But let’s check.”

She shook her head vehemently. “Because I certainly don’t want someone dying in my apartments. That’s just not good publicity.”

“It wouldn’t be good for Patricia either.”

“I suppose not.”

I followed her to the third floor where she opened the door to 3B and tentatively walked in. It was a small apartment with a living room, one bedroom, a bath, and a kitchen. It needed some serious remodeling. Nothing looked out of place in the living room.

Nothing looked out of place in the rest of the rooms either. But there was a picture of Patricia and her grandfather on the dresser. I slipped it out of the frame and into my pocket.

I thanked Mrs. Barry for her help. She looked relieved. Her reputation was safe.

“Can you tell me anything about her?”

“Like what?”

“Friends? Do you know where she worked or hung out?”

She shrugged. “She didn’t have any friends here. These are mostly older people. And I don’t think she worked. But I can tell you she paid her rent on time every month.”

I wondered how that could be. “Anything else?”

“Well, I don’t know if I should say... I don’t like to speak ill of anyone.”

*As long as they didn’t die in her apartments,* I thought. “She may be missing, Mrs. Barry. Anything you can tell me might help.”

She looked around again. There still wasn’t anyone there.

“Okay. One of the men here said he has seen her in the bar down the street... and with some pretty seedy looking characters. I don’t even think she’s twenty-one.”

“Do you know the name?”

“Only because I pass it on the way to the grocery. It’s the Brown Tap.”

I thanked her and, not wanting to lose my parking space, walked to the Brown Tap. Walking that block worked up a sweat.

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It was a typical neighborhood bar that had just opened for lunch. I was the only customer. The bartender greeted me warmly as I sat at the bar. He asked what my pleasure was. I told him I was just looking for information but, as long as it was lunchtime and I was hungry, I’d have a pastrami on rye and a Schlitz.

He brought the beer and we chatted while I waited for my sandwich. I showed him Patricia’s picture and asked if he recognized her.

He did. She had been coming in almost every night, but he hadn't seen her for a while.

"She have any friends she hung out with?"

He was still looking at the picture as he slowly said, "Yeah, there was one guy. Big fellow... older than her."

"Do you have a name?"

"Just a first. Ian. English accent. Pretty good with a pool cue."

"How much older?"

"Around thirty."

"Have you seen *him* recently?"

"He's here every night... except Sunday. We close at six."

"If I come back tonight, could you point him out to me?"

"Well, I leave at six today, but you can't miss him what with the accent and all. He draws a crowd. Usually shows up around ten."

I thanked him and thought about the case while I ate my sandwich and finished the beer. My thoughts weren't getting me very far. But at least my method of shaking the trees and seeing what fell out had led me to the next step. Dreading leaving the air conditioning, I savored the pastrami and the beer.

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I stopped back at the office, filled Carol in, and called Lt. Powolski. My dad had been Chief of Police until he and Mom were killed in a car accident three years ago. I had grown up with the lieutenant, 'Uncle Stosh,' who was as much a member of the family as I was. Saturday afternoons were now reserved for gin rummy and watching the Cubs with him.

I filled him in on the case and asked if someone could check on Patricia and her grandfather. I gave him all the information I had. He made his usual comment about the department not being on my payroll and hung up.

I headed home and used the excuse of not knowing how late I would be up to get in a nap. Any excuse would do.

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I got back to the Brown Tap a little after nine and nursed another Schlitz at the bar. At five to ten I heard the English accent greeting the crowd at the pool table. I found Ian in the mirror above the bar. I didn't see Patricia. My plan was to follow him home and confront him there without his army of buddies. He closed the place at one.

My Mustang was two blocks away and I had no idea if he had a car. If he did I'd get the plate number and make another call to Stosh. He didn't. He headed north from the bar and went into a house in the third block.

I watched as the lights went on but I didn't see anyone else in the house. The kitchen light went off and I expected to see the lights come on upstairs. Instead, a light showed in the window well of the basement. That went off five minutes later and then the light came on upstairs. Ten minutes after that the house was dark. I walked up and down the block for another half hour and the house stayed dark.

As I walked past for the last time a car pulled out from a spot two houses to the south. My plan was to come back in the morning and wait for Ian to leave. I needed to get in the house. But, seeing as how I had just been handed a parking space, I decided to spend the night. On the way back to my car, I walked up the block and down the alley. There was no garage and the property was surrounded by a high fence just a little shorter than my six-foot-two. The back yard was full of weeds and a back door was in the middle of a dilapidated deck.

The parking spot was still there when I got back, and a breeze off the lake had cooled the evening down to the point where I could spend the night in the car and not be totally miserable.

I slept pretty well for being scrunched behind a steering wheel. I was used to spending nights in that position but I was always awake on a stakeout. I was awakened by the sound of a slamming car door at 5:42. I yawned and got out to stretch my legs. I kept close enough to watch the house and an hour later got back in the car. Ian appeared at 7:05. I sat in the Mustang listening to WGN until ten when I figured everyone going to work had already left. I took my lock picks out of the glove compartment and hopped the fence in the alley.

The back door was no problem. It took me ten seconds to get inside. I watched out the window into the backyard for ten minutes and saw nothing and no one. It took fifteen minutes to walk through the first and second floors. The place was a mess, but I found nothing out of the ordinary. I saved the basement for last.

I took a towel from the kitchen and turned the knob on what I thought was the basement door. It didn't turn. Who would lock their basement door? That lock was actually harder to pick than the back door, but a minute later I had it opened. I flipped the switch just inside the door and started down.

One dim, bare bulb cast a ghostly yellow glow over a cluttered room with a furnace in one corner and walls lined with shelves and benches covered with tools. Typical basement. There was nothing strange, but there was another door on the street-side wall. It was locked, but this one was easier. I felt for a light switch but didn't find one. The only light was coming from the bare bulb by the furnace. I stepped into the room and let my eyes adapt to the dim light. The room was empty except for a toilet in one corner and a bed against the outside wall. And there was someone on the bed covered with a sheet.

I said hello and got no response. I pulled back a corner of the sheet and found Patricia. I couldn't tell if she was breathing so I felt her neck and found a weak pulse. But I couldn't rouse her.

Thinking that the shoebox phone would have come in handy, I went upstairs and called Stosh. Ten minutes later, a fire department ambulance and two police cars pulled up in front. Detective Rosie Lonigan and her partner Mike Kelley followed the medics up the front stoop.

"How does trouble keep finding you, Spencer?" she asked.

"Kinda comes with the job, Rosie. You found me didn't you?"

"We all have our crosses to bear," she said with a smile.

I led them all to the basement. The medics said Patricia appeared to be drugged but wasn't in any danger. That had been my guess. We all followed the ambulance to the hospital.

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By three p.m. Patricia was awake enough to talk. She was giving a statement to Rosie when I walked into the room. She had been hanging around the bar for months and had made friends with Ian. About two weeks ago, he had convinced her to come home with him. She remembered struggling as he put a rag over her mouth. She vaguely remembered lying on a bed in a room with a toilet in the corner. She asked Rosie how they found her. Rosie introduced me.

"Well, then I have you to thank, Mr. Manning. But how did you know to look for me?"

"You can thank your grandfather for that."

She looked confused, but I knew she hadn't fully recovered from the drugs.

"My grandfather? I don't know what you mean. Who hired you?"

"Well, your grandfather."

She started to cry and tremble.

"Thank you for finding me, Mr. Manning, but you don't have to be mean."

Now *I* was confused. "Mean? What are you talking about? When you're up to it I'll take you to him."

"Get out!" she screamed through tears. "You're the meanest person I've ever met!"

"I don't—"

"Get out! Get out!"

I tried to respond, but Rosie took my arm and led me out of the room.

As the door closed, I said, "What the hell was that about, Rosie?"

"Let's go to the waiting room. I think I can explain."

We sat in a quiet corner with me still wondering what had just happened.

"You can explain that?"

"Well, sort of."

"Sort of?"

She took a deep breath. "As I was walking into the hospital I got a call from Stosh. We ran your Gary Owens. The address he gave you was 4001 N. Clark?"

"Best as I remember."

She sighed. "That's Graceland cemetery."

"Oh great, he gave me a bogus address."

"Well, sort of."

"Rosie! Stop with the sort ofs!"

"Sorry, Spencer, that's the best I can do."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Another deep breath. "That's his address, but it's not all of his address."

"Good. That clears it up."

"Maybe this will. It's 4001 N. Clark, plot 1307."

I stared at her for what seemed like an hour, but it was only a minute. "What does that mean? Is he living in one of the crypts?"

She shook her head. “No, he’s buried there, not fifty feet from Louis Sullivan.”

I stared some more.

“Spencer, Gary Owens died four years ago.”

“Rosie, he was in my office. He was worried about his granddaughter.”

“And he had reason to be.”

“You’re saying the person sitting in my chair was... wasn’t... a person?”

She shrugged. “I’m not saying anything. I’m just telling you the facts. You’re the big PI. You figure it out.”

“You’re saying that the Gary Owens in my office was a... a... spirit?”

“Again, Spencer, I have no answers. I just have a girl who is safe and you have another successful case. But this time maybe you had a little help.”

“Help how?”

“Not how... who.”

“Okay, I’ll bite... who?”

“Well, let’s say Gary Owens, deceased for four years, walks into a heavenly bar and sits down with Chief of Police Manning. The conversation turns to his worry about his granddaughter, and your dad says he knows just the guy to help.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“You have a better answer, let me hear it. That’s mine.”

I told her I’d pick her up at five at the station. She was buying dinner... and beer... lots of beer.

A few months ago, my publisher challenged the Calumet authors to write a “spec fiction” story in their genre for an anthology he was compiling. Spec fiction is fiction that includes settings and characters created out of imagination and speculation rather than being based on reality.

I at first gave it no thought, but woke up in the middle of the night with the idea for this story. Ghosts are at the outer edge of the definition, but that’s as far as I’m willing to “speculate” with Spencer!

However, writing this did start me wondering if there are more short stories in Spencer's future.

Cheers!