

A NOVEL

*Gatsby's*  
LAST  
RESORT

*A Telluride Murder Mystery*

R. J. Rubadeau



Beacon Hill Publishers, Telluride



A NOVEL

*Gatsby's*  
LAST  
RESORT

*A Telluride Murder Mystery*

R. J. Rubadeau

Copyright© 2010 by R. J. Rubadeau

First edition published by Beacon Hill Publishers a Sirius Publications Company. November 1, 2010

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, without permission in writing from the author.

Beacon Hill Publishers  
P. O. Box 3836  
Telluride, Colorado 81435  
publisher@BeaconHillPublishers.com



Beacon Hill Publishers  
Books That Matter

Printed in the United States of America on acid free paper.

ISBN 978-0-9817313-5-3  
LCCN2010937869

Book Cover Design by [www.KarrieRoss.com](http://www.KarrieRoss.com)  
Interior Design by Gwen Gades [www.beapurplepenguin.com](http://www.beapurplepenguin.com)  
Cover Art Work by Roger Mason [www.rogermason.net](http://www.rogermason.net)

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A book never gets finished without a lot of help. I had the colorful community of Telluride in my corner. As Will Rodgers, the 20th Century dean of hilarious observation, was fond of saying that it's easy to be funny, wry, and cynical when he had the whole damn Congress working everyday writing the material. My hometown does the same for me. Thank you Telluride.

Thanks: to Jim Kolar who was a constant source of procedural wisdom and support, to ace mystery writer Randall Peffer for offering guidance in the early drafts, to Amy Canon for being a tireless reader and mentor, to author John Heckler for early story twists and a collaborative nature. A special appreciation to my peer readers Susan Saint James, Clint Viebrock, Sharon Shuteran, Bob Trenary, and Shauna Palmer . Kudos to my editor Regan Tuttle. A very special thanks to iconic Telluride (& the world) painting talent Roger Mason for the cover art.

I want to thank the Telluride Writers Guild and Amy Canon, the Wilkinson Public Library and Scott Doser, Between the Covers Bookstore and Stuart and Joanna Brown, and Susan and Clint Viebrock of *Telluride Inside... and Out* webzine for sponsoring the inaugural Community Publishing 101 program in Telluride. This unique partnership provided the platform for this book to launch itself to the publishing process and set the bar for other volumes under the Preserving America's Regional Voices Achievement Award guidelines.

# Books by R. J. Rubadeau

## Novels

*Gatsby's Last Resort*

*The Fat Man*

*The Big Snooze*

## Non-fiction

*Bound For Roque Island: Sailing Maine and the World*

## Poetry

*offshore*

*(collected poems 1968-2010)*

for Mary, always



“What I cut out of *The Great Gatsby* both physically  
and emotionally would make another novel!”

f. Scott Fitzgerald, 1934



## One

# The Right Word Is Dead

**K**issing a dead man is not as glamorous as it sounds. The blue lips feel cold as a frog's belly. The taste is a mix of despair, mucous and table salt. The smell is a funeral without the flowers. If given a choice, I wouldn't do it before breakfast. I didn't have a choice.

"Move it Buster, or I'll put the thumbscrews to you." My ten-year-old daughter, who responds to the name of Cody, smiled her pearly whites, reached across from the passenger seat, and hammered the horn.

I jumped and strangled a startled squeak.

"Button your yap," I said.

Following the horn scramble, I settle back into my slow gallows shuffle in the general direction of the bank. I have a favor to ask at the Telluride Savings and Loan, and with the way my life is going, I expect a negative answer. My future is hinged on a single word. The favor I need concerns an ancient Mustang convertible that needs one or more of everything. I feel both its pain, and a long-standing moral obligation to put it out of its misery. I need something that starts quicker than I do in the mornings, but my business account balance is about twenty bucks away from lap dancing for pesos at a Mexican truck stop. The list of tapped out creditors must

include the entire town, or else I'm as poor a private detective as most folks believe. People illegally cross the street holding their wallets when I approach. I am shameless and harry them like a bucolic sheep dog.

Mark Twain explains that the difference between the right word and the almost right word for a writer is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. I take Twain's advice seriously. If you want to be a real writer, you have to be cold, wet, scared and out running naked in the thunderstorm with a kite in order to find the right words. This deep immersion method of literary research I apply with fervor. My passion embarrasses my whole family.

"If you were going any slower, you'd be backing up."

"Stow it, sister," I said and turned back towards the rust and red Mustang with a raised fist. "You better pull your mouth in, or you'll get a goog, and I'll pop a tooth out of it."

"Good one," Cody said, admiring my pre-breakfast choice of other people's words. The young lady isn't worried over her dental work. Cody is the brains of our lopsided partnership. We share an addiction for books written before either of us were born, and annoy anyone within earshot by quoting from them as often as possible.

"If I'm not back in ten minutes pump the place full of hot lead," I said, pausing at the door. Cody winked. "And get your butt off to school. You'll be late."

As a Western Slope Ute with a dark Irish humor, I try not to be surprised when warned in ancient mystical ways of events about to happen. Foretelling the future is actually a cinch. It helps to be a born pessimist. If things aren't getting worse, they're a pleasant surprise. For no apparent reason, on this particular bright day, a shadow passed over me from the cloudless sky. Occasionally, once in a bright blue moon, aboriginal mysticism collides with the laws of probability. Sixty seconds later I twisted the knob on a major problem.



The limp body of the white and black spotted cow hit the polished wooden floor with a splat as I opened the door to the bank president's inner sanctum of the Telluride Savings and Loan. Two pounds of painted leather and plastic beans made a royal thud; then it was the sound of a

breeze rustling through Aspen leaves as the rush of air from the opening door vibrated the loose folds of the plastic shopping bag.

“Sorry to bother you,” I said to the silhouette behind the desk.

My eyes adjusted from the bright morning sun in the lobby to the shuttered bank president’s office. Designer fabric blinds hid the trio of floor to ceiling windows and gave the twenty-foot square room a sickly greenish glow. The room smelled of peppermint.

“Help,” I said. It was barely a whisper as I finally saw the details of the body hunched forward in the high-backed leather chair.

A white, translucent plastic bag was wrapped tightly around the head of the man seated behind the mahogany desk. An overlapping wrap of wide gray duct tape held the lethal cowl tight to the thin neck above the tidy Windsor knot of his tie. The nameplate I swept aside as I launched myself across the polished empty desktop read: “Stewart Lambis, Esquire.”

“Help.” My yell echoed through the half-open door. The already quiet bank went mute.

I tore my fingers through the thin plastic. The face exposed was a mottled blue; lips stretched rigid white. His pale brown eyes were open, glazed over and unfocused. I tried to yank him from the swivel chair to put him on the floor, but came up short. Handcuffs pin his arms behind his back. A short steel chain looped through a chair spring bound the wrists.

“Hey,” a voice said. “What are you doing?”

I quickly straddled the body in the chair and tried my best to pinch his nose, pull down his chin, tilt back his head and open his air passage. I started mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

He tasted dead.

“Stop!” An astonished male voice from the doorway made the exclamation point sound like an embarrassing question.

After a dozen more deep exhales and some hard handed pushing on the heart cavity trying to fill the man’s lungs with no response. I felt for a heart beat. I gave up, released his nose and pulled my face away from his. I felt a last settling in his chest and a slow release of shallow, stale breath against my cheek.

“Let him alone.” A feeble female voice tried to sound forceful and failed.

“Please.” The polite one added a cough at the end.

I finally let the dead man's head fall back over the chair to stare at the ceiling. I looked over my shoulder. The doorway was full of faces. None dared to enter the dimly lit room. I wondered at their shocked and puzzled expressions until I suddenly realized what I must look like. I awkwardly got off the man's lap, feeling my face turn red as I regained my feet.

I shuffle once, then raise my hand and carefully closed the dead man's eyes. I began to pull the plastic bag back up to cover his face then stopped. What was I doing? I stepped back and let my arm drop to my side. The silence from the doorway meant everyone was focused on my every twitch.

I opened my mouth to try and explain. I shut it again. What was I going to say? Up until a few minutes ago, Stewart Lambis and I had just been nodding acquaintances on the streets of our little mountain ski town. Now we were caught in the final act of his death rattle with my lips on his. I couldn't for the life of me remember why I had even come into the bank.

"Call nine-eleven," I said. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. No one in the doorway moved as they stared at their boss, expecting him to suddenly wake up and explain it all to them.

"Call an ambulance." Somebody finally contradicted me when the strained silence wore tissue thin. It was obvious I was the only one who knew a stiff when he saw one.

"Call the cops," I said.

The "Oh, my, God" and "What happened" murmurs began as I bent over and picked up the miniature cow that had likely slipped from the dead man's fingers with his last breath. It was toy size, fit snugly in my hand, made of soft black and white spotted leather, and stuffed full of beans. One like it rests on nearly every local business man's desk to remind us all of the peculiar essence of our beautiful hamlet that is only protected from over crowded "Aspen-ization" by the eight-hundred green acres of undeveloped Valley Floor to the west. The pastoral prize extends along the only road into and out of town.

I set the cow gently back on the desk, wondering about the handcuffs, the grocery bag, and the nagging certainty that Stewart Lambis might have a bovine secret he wasn't going to get a chance to tell. I resigned myself to wait for the police, remembering suddenly that a used car loan

was my reason for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Chances were lousy I was going to get an answer today.

Although Deputy Officer Darryl tried to come up with a solid reason to keep me at the jail until he could prove I had somehow killed Stewart Lambis by sucking the breath out of him, I was finally let go when it is confirmed by everyone else at the bank that I had simply found the body. The salacious lip attack I was obviously guilty of came after he was probably already dead.



I needed a hard drink and a place to collect my thoughts. I could still taste the cold insides of the dead man's mouth after two iced tumblers of Bushmills. My name, coming from the table across the room, as I sat alone on a corner stool at the New Sheridan Bar, riveted what was left of my attention.

"Did he really kiss a dead body?"

"It's what they said."

"Jeese Loueese." A giggle broke into the gap.

"Wit Thorpe has nothing, wants nothing, is a nothing," said a raspy female voice. "A waste of prime mountain air."

"Do you think he really killed him?"

"Well, he beat the rap the last time."

A lot of reckless hair did a wave around the table as they all agreed with the blindness of justice.

"Is he crazy?"

"You could say his inner child pretty much runs things inside that little ol' head of his."

"Did you see the Indie Film Fest premier of his latest half-finished work in progress last month?"

"It was just his amateur, blurry video bloopers of people screwing."

"No." A now familiar voice contradicted the statement with a smoker's laugh. "It was badly focused evidence of other people screwing other people's spouses."

"Imagine that being your job?"

That ushered in a liquid moment of silence for the victims.

"Someone said you could tell who they were even though their faces and privates were spotted out." It was a stage whisper.

"Sweetheart, I recognized most of those men, and I didn't need their faces to do it."

"Patsy Susie." The voices howled in chorus.

"He calls himself a writer, but I hear he couldn't write his name in the dirt with a stick, some phobia about finishing things or something."

"His wife is such a saint." Another female voice picked up the pause. "Is she going to be embarrassed when they charge him with ... what ever?"

"Is kissing a dead person a crime?"

A pause allowed all the time needed to consider the facts and take another long pull of alcohol. Digger was working on the next round in a hurry.

"He can't seem to hold a job. He's been fired all over town. The only thing he can do is sneak around and get the goods on wayward husbands, and choral society partners."

I could imagine pursed lips wrapped around these words.

"Would you put up with it?"

"Not me," Patsy Susie said. "Even if he was good under the sheets. Got to admit that he fills out his jeans. Maybe his wife isn't so saintly after all."

"Patsy Susie." The squealer repeated her first chide with a staged horselaugh and a snort. "You're always aiming at the crotch."

"He is kind of sinister," the other said. "Foreign, dark and sleek, a hunk, like those old movie stars. Antonio Bandaras on steroids maybe?"

"A mostly drunk lightening rod for trouble and a liability for the town." The first voice out of the gates added. "I pity the kids."

"Two little girls, right?"

"My mother always said, 'if it has wheels or testicles you're going to have trouble with it.' Given the choice, I want to own a nice set of wheels and have a bundle of money. I'd take a new Mercedes over having any man in the damn universe. You can always get laid. An expensive ride impresses the young meat in this town to death." Patsy Susie brought them all to laughter again.

"Isn't that the truth." They all agree, clinking their empty glasses together.

I've got more experience with disappointing women than anybody else I know. Retreat was the only course of action that made any sense. I slunk

out, with a subtle wave to Digger as he nearly lost control of the tray of drinks. I did it without drawing attention. I can do that. Slinking is an art that can't be taught, only learned by becoming invisible of necessity when your fat is in the fire. I had studied the science since being "re-fired" from the local ski mountain and just about every other job I've ever had. It seems I have trouble taking orders from those foolhardy people who dare to employ me. I am now trying to be self-employed, but find I can't take orders from myself either. Slinking around and videotaping the unwary for money is now my indentured profession. Most days it isn't really as much fun as you might imagine.

## Two

### Rose's Problem

I was being watched, and I knew it. The skin on the back of my neck crawled with fire ants. Walking into Rose's, Telluride's default grocery store for its fifteen hundred residents, I feel as though I am facing a hangman's noose. I owe someone a favor, and the bill is due. My day is predictably going from bad to worse.

Rose had recently installed a two-way mirror in her closet sized office to watch the cashiers. She would have preferred to be out front, watching each exchange from the drawers, doing random spot tallies, but the health conscious customers and local town statutes in Telluride wouldn't let her chain smoke in her own grocery store.

Rose Laphorn, born and raised in Rifle, Colorado, hated any infringement on her God given rights to free range grazing, ancestral water allotments, packing an assault rifle if she wanted, and doing whatever she damn well pleased on any property she owned. "Hell, let them shop someplace else," she said to anyone who would listen and cheated on the odious clean air ordinance every day. The world is simple and sharp for Rose, divided into two categories of people: those who are trying to cheat her out of her just profits, and those who haven't tried yet.

I gag quietly when I let myself into the cubicle following the gruff response to my knock. She stamped out a nub into a full ashtray and shook another slender white cylinder from the pack on her desk. A noisy, dusty, stained green smoke-eater whirs impotently in the corner. People in the store file silently past the two-way, blue tinted window behind her back.

“How they hangin’?”

It was meant to be an affectionate greeting. To her I am just another kid she had hired before, and is now back looking for a job.

I wait, nervous, just as I had twenty years ago when I had applied to be a bagger and stocker. I remembered sitting upright in the same chair, inhaling the second-hand smoke from unfiltered Camels, and feeling intimidated.

“Thorpe, I want you to catch the rotten bastard now.” Rose paused, the lighter an inch from the end of the new cigarette. She lights up and blows a rolling wall of billowing smoke in my direction. “Catch him and kill him.”

“Kill who?”

“The raping son of a bitch.”

“Rape?”

“Every other goddamn day this month.” Rose stuck her face forward across the desk. The aging folds of pasty smoker’s skin framed the glinting gray irises that floated in a soured yellow cream. Her brows were plucked randomly and penciled as unevenly as a haiku poem. Her seldom washed silver hair lay askew in sagging tendrils with a long number 2 pencil stuck behind her ear. She was daring me to ask another question. I kept the yapper shut.

“You owe me,” she said with a belligerent look.

I agreed. She had once hired a half-breed juvenile delinquent who needed a job to stay out of jail when no one else would. I owed her a lot. I would likely still be a delinquent if she hadn’t given me a shot. The fact I still behave like a juvenile is my own doing.

“This is more than just about money,” she said as she handed me an invoice from the pile on her desk. The bill was from Baked In Telluride and listed a bread delivery of ninety-three loaves of various shapes and grains. The bottom line was seventy-eight dollars and nine cents.

“I want the lousy little shit on molesting, rape, sodomy, and willful destruction of private property.”

“Who?”

“How the hell should I know?” Rose coughs up some phlegm, chews, and then swallows it again. “You’re the private detective.”

I was. Silence became my best defense from the obvious facts. She sucked deeply and stared at me with mongoose eyes, the kind of cruel gape reserved for a wounded snake.

“How did he taste?” she finally asks.

“What?”

“The dead bank guy.” Rose wheezed up into a laugh, unable to contain herself at my expense. “The whole town is glad you’re out of the closet so now we can keep an eye on you, mister twinkle toes.”

“I don’t have any problem with gay people.”

“Obviously, *Chico*.”

“You do?”

“No problem, as long as they pay cash.”

I gave her my coldest stare, and she blew more smoke at me. My options were minimal. I could throw a hissy fit and leave because she was questioning my manhood, but that would be throwing gasoline on an already roaring fire. My other option was to stay, take the abuse and do exactly what I will have to do anyway. I was astonished at the clarity of my thoughts, as the mounting nicotine ingestion began making my heart thump and my head hurt.

After finding out the rest of what Rose wanted me to know, I left the store in a stumbling hurry. In the clear mountain air outside, I took a flurry of deep breaths and resigned myself to the fact that I will have to do exactly what Rose asks or leave town. I think about my kids, my wife, my house mortgage, my whole sorry life, and blow out of town ten minutes later on a random tip about another case that, for want of a better term, I was working.

## Three

# Paradox

Can I drown a brunette in this?" I ask. My morning was only almost over, and another drink was the worst idea in the world except for all the rest.

"How tall is she?" Mick, the one-eyed bartender, responded with feigned interest.

"Five-eight, nine." I cut the air above my head with a flat hand. I was seated on a wobbly round stool at the bar and barely caught the foot rail with my cowboy boot as I tried to regain my balance.

"Here," he said, pouring another inch of Bushmills into my glass. Mick owes me. I had driven to hell and back to get here to the Town of Paradox; all for nothing.

The adage reads: "good bartenders, like Irish mothers, may not always be right, but they are never wrong." So much for adages. Mick had been dead wrong. It was a recurring flaw of mine that I trusted bartenders more than Irish mothers. This *camarera* had destroyed my misplaced trust once again. Mick was also Yugoslavian with a heavy accent and not a twig Irish, which helps explain the bitter disappointment I had in myself for believing in this particular tooth fairy. First Rose's bread rapist, and now this. I sighed loudly. Mick took it wrong.

"Don't guilt me, man," Mick said. I detected a whine in his voice.

"Guilt isn't a verb," I said, taking a sip of the whiskey, confident in my usage.

"It is when you do it," he said and poured another inch in my glass before I could set it down.

The dust lay thick in the shadows of the bar. Harsh slivers of sunlight from the windows exposed the old tables and mismatched wooden chairs scattered about the undulating riprap of the scarred and battered, pastel-tinted linoleum. Hot, high plains desert waited just outside the heavy metal door. Melancholy was not exactly the right word to describe my mood. I searched for a substitute. Pride in my vocabulary was one of my many faults. Glum might be the word I was searching for.

"Troubles?" Mick seemed intent on making conversation as part of his ongoing apology, but he defensively put the square bottle back on the shelf behind the bar.

"The DA is breaking my balls." I grumbled and drain the extra dollop of amber liquid. I grit my teeth as my jaw muscles spasm from the assault.

"Vise-grips," I said, wiping the ice sweat from my upper lip with the back of the hand that held the glass.

"Ouch." Mick adds a painful expression for color, and grabs his crotch for protection and sympathy. He paused in that position. It put a crimp on follow-up conversation.

I usually confine my afternoon on the job drinking to a couple of beers, but this has already been a day I intend to forget quickly. Dead bodies before breakfast have a knack of changing the daily routine.

I had already wasted the better part of the morning on the road to nowhere. Paradox's name comes from the fact that it is a very distinctive high-sided valley that runs straight as an arrow for a couple of dozen miles. The one river that flows into and out of the valley does so at a ninety degree angle to the valley floor, cutting a deep canyon through sheer cliffs on both sides. It is a place for strange sightings. The brand new silver Mercedes Z3 that Mick thought he saw at a friend's trailer had turned, on further inspection, into a few decades old silver and gray-primer spotted, Honda Accord. I was fairly certain a little homemade crystal meth had something to do with this case of mistaken identity.

It is hard making a living as a mostly honest private investigator on the western slopes of the Colorado Rocky Mountains. Trusting Mick and running afoul of the hard-assed female prosecutor for San Miguel County, known by everyone as “The Iron Maiden,” is no way to increase my income.

The Assistant District Attorney has been on my case for years, and now wanted my gun permit revoked for “reckless endangerment of a minor.” I was, of course, guilty, despite my continuing protests to the contrary.

“On second thought, I think she’s at least six-foot tall in those stiletto heels,” I said with a husky voice of justification. I motioned for Mick to re-fill the glass. He was happy to oblige. We were alone in the bar. I had an ongoing problem. Mick had the solution.



Idiot is my middle name. Wilfred I. Thorpe was the birth record legacy handed down from my long departed father. The DNA donor was an idiot too, and had vanished “for the coast” as soon as he found my mother pregnant. Mom never knew what the “I” stood for. Her family speculated and settled on the obvious. Most people liked the joke behind the lonely “I,” and put it prominently between my other two initials. I was called Wit. It still enrages the bigots in the Four Corners area that a half-breed Ute would carry a moniker that suggests he is ironic and funny at the same time. Enraging bigots is the second best thing I do.

The short version of the crime that put me on the ADA’s shit list was anything but circumstantial. It seems that after a long and sleep deprived weekend of chasing the horny little jackrabbit in the silver Z3 all over the San Juan Mountains, I stumbled exhausted into my own bed. I had left the snub nosed thirty-eight caliber Smith and Wesson in its leather hip-clip holster, unloaded, on the nightstand.

Unfortunately, it was also the Iron Maiden’s nightstand. Our three-year-old daughter, Katie, had been poking at the barrel with one of the shells, using the pudgy fingers of her perfectly beautiful little hand when we woke up to her presence this very morning. Busted, tried, convicted and sentenced before coffee.

As Mick the one-eyed bartender did what he did best, I pulled out my cell phone and called home. With my new priority for today firmly

established at seeing how quickly I can drown my problems, I wasn't going to make it back in time to pick up Cody from school. I am hoping Angelina, my cousin and sometimes nanny, was in a benevolent mood and would do the chore for me.

No answer, no luck, *es mi problema*. I look at the sweating glass of whiskey and ice longingly. I shake myself like a wet dog, throw a twenty on the bar alongside my business card. It read: Last Resort Detective Agency; Telluride, Colorado. A Literate and Discreet Investigative Service.

"Is this a joke?" Mick said, finally fully engaged. He held the card up to his black eye patch.

"Call me if you spot that bald headed, over-sexed bowling ball or his silver Z3 ever again," I said.

Mick saluted me with a ham-sized karate chop to his forehead. It was lucky he didn't knock himself out with the blow, trying to make it snappy and worth the huge tip. He staggered backwards holding his hairline. I wondered if his middle initial was "I".

"Always there for you, man," Mick said with a groan as the iron door slammed shut, pulled sharply by a heavy sash on a frayed clothesline rope.

I walked out into the harsh high desert sunlight heading for the 1972 Mustang. It wasn't vintage, just a rusting, falling apart wreck. It was the reason I needed a loan for a new secondhand car from a dead man. I had seventy five miles of winding Rocky Mountain road back to Telluride and twenty minutes to do it in. Success was about as probable as anything else in my life turning out the way I wanted today.

## Victimized By Sheep Herders

The look in those cold green eyes was venomous enough to wilt a ten-foot Sequoia Cactus. I should be used to it by now. I had known her all her life. Familiarity does not lessen the “I’m in for it” feeling as the angry intent in those peepers washes over me like a bucket of glacier water. She slammed the car door and kept herself from meeting my stare after that first breathtaking visual assault.

“Cody, I got hung up,” I said. It sounded lame. “I tried to call. The school office wouldn’t answer. I left messages.”

Silence speaking volumes did not do the absence of a response justice. She pinched her lips together tightly until they were only a razor slit. She balanced her briefcase on her lap and waited for me to die a gruesomely horrible death. Obliging her would have probably let me off the hook too easy.

“If I had a cell phone,” she said, dragging on the last word for a full five seconds. “I could have got the message.”

I tried to adopt a calm, resigned fatherly tone. “We’ve talked about the cell phone thing. No can do, Frodo. Your mom would have a fit.” Then, remembering that I shouldn’t blame the other parent, I added, “I would too.”

She snickered, crossed her arms and glared at the windshield in front of her. It was her mother's look, and it meant business. Waiting for the windshield to crack from the intense pressure, I swallowed nervously without letting her know. She knew. It was also obvious she hadn't heard about bank guy Lambis and the kissing part of my day, or I would be forced to detail the event. That chore would happen soon enough. No rush on my side.

"How was school?"

"I hate it," she said, finally buckling her seat belt across her lap.

"What's to hate in fifth grade?"

I was given the Look again. "Everything," she said, putting an end to the subject.

We drove away from the now empty front stairs of the red brick Telluride Elementary School. The principal waved down from her office window with a lukewarm smile and an expression of resigned disappointment over my normal late arrival. The Look again. Is it part of the Y chromosome? I felt that I needed and deserved detention every time any woman's eye passed a fleeting judgment.

"No friends?" I asked. I knew the feeling.

"Please."

"What?"

"They're sheep," she said.

"Soft and cuddly?"

"Brainless," she said, "and victimized by sheep herders."

"And you're...?"

"Fat. P-H-A-T," she said. Spelling it out with an emphasis on the last letter.

"Is that, like, really cool?"

"It stands for Pretty Hot And Tempting," she said with no apparent emotion. "And that's me." Her thumbs on both hands hit her sternum in a coordinated jab.

I hesitated with an embarrassing lurch of a slippery clutch at the stop sign and looked over at this miniature of her mother. She was brushing imaginary crumbs from her lap. The briefcase was now down in the footwell of the front seat. How had she gone from nine years old to twenty overnight? I know girls are smarter, but this is ridiculous.

“Who are you?” I ask. “And what have you done with my daughter?”

I got a crack of a smile and figured I was forgiven and we had an understanding. It was a blood bond among equals; the dad to daughter understanding. She would let me know what that understanding was at the appropriate time on her agenda.

“Well,” I said, trying to head off the warning bells in my head that screamed I was being set up. “What have you got for me, Watson?”

Her silence stretched into a full minute as we rolled slowly out onto Colorado Avenue at the town’s official speed limit of fifteen miles per hour. I could see the body language had taken a definite turn for the better as her mind started to spin with the important facts of her day.

“I’m Sherlock,” she finally said. “You’re Watson.”

“Whatever,” I said, ignoring an old argument. “What you got?”

“What’s it worth to you?” She asked. Her forearms were now loosely crossed over her stomach. Her eyes were again predatory slits as they gazed at me from profile. The perfect little nose swung up in a delicate nub, just like her mother’s.

“Depends on the goods.” I played along in our usual negotiation ritual. It was going to cost me. No getting around it. I had been late. I had nothing positive to report from a wasted day. And, I only had one thin twenty left in my pocket. I was in trouble.

“Two cases you’re already working on have new twists,” she said with only a slight lisp as she studied her nails at full arm’s length. “And,” she said, loading on the added enthusiasm, “a really, really rich woman wants to hire someone to throw her husband’s new boyfriend out of her father’s house.”

“Who owns the house?” I blurted, unable to resist the bait, and instantly forfeited any bargaining position I might have had. The munchkin was getting good at this. I wasn’t going to save any of that twenty.

“Want to talk turkey?” she said, twiddling her little pink thumbs in her lap. I nodded. She did most of the talking.

I admit to the casual observer that it might seem a bit unethical to pump your fifth grader for gossip. But kids say the dandiest things to each other about what they overhear at home. It is amazing what Cody can pick up during those few minutes at school when the kids finally get to

talk among themselves. My justification is that if you don't want the juicy stuff to get out and around town, don't talk about it in front of your kids.

Third-hand gossip from children has proven to be my best source of much needed firsthand information and potential income. Sure, I have been known to use teachers and even school administrators when they need the extra cash, but my best stuff, came from the juicy gossip with the truth tucked inside. The best conduit for intimate information, right up there alongside bartenders, hairdressers and barbers, has always been the parroting of their parents' conversations that flows like a spring stream from the kids. Besides, it is definitely cheaper. Teachers won't give it up for a sawbuck anymore. They want beers, lunch, and a fifty to ease their guilt at being a gossiping snitch.

I ended up minus the twenty and the use of my cell phone at the rate of a dollar a minute. I had to pay for each needed word out of her sweet little cherub mouth. The whole deal took four blocks. One of us was getting really good at what they did.

"It was worth it," I said, trying to save face, as we slapped a low five on the deal.

I now knew where my wandering husband in the Z3 goes for whoopee during these long afternoons. It was also in my best interest to get my bill quickly to the attorney of yet another doubtful wife because she and the hubby are sleeping together again on the sly from their kids. And finally, she had a solid lead on making some potentially easy money, persuading a gay couple to simply copulate elsewhere.

"The day is finally looking up," I said to myself. I always make that mistake.

Cody was busy calling her friends and giving them her new cell phone number as I came back into awareness of what really was happening in my world. I could feel the vise-grips getting ready for another painful squeeze.

This morning, on top of the gun thing with Katie, Cody had debated at the top of her lungs for a full ten minutes with her mother and me for letting our "oldest" daughter be the only one without a "personal emergency cell phone" in her whole fifth grade. The fact we didn't scoff at her proclamation was a sure-fire litmus test that we lived in Telluride, a privileged Colorado ski resort and festival town, which is way off the scale in high rollers.

“Mom can’t know,” I said, sounding pathetic.

She stared at me, phone to her ear waiting to be connected. This pitying look underlined the sad conclusion that I was a moron as well as an idiot. She would not even attempt an answer. How could her mother not know? She was going to be on her phone from now until sometime next week. I had been had, good. I felt my stomach clench at the thought of dinner that evening with my harem at 416 Hollyhock Lane.

## A Full Time Ladies Man from New Orleans

I took the coward's way out and dropped Cody off at home. I received a cold stare from our reluctant nanny Angelina and a smacking wet kiss from Katie with my announcement that I had to stop back down at my office. I could smell the graham crackers and milk on my cheek as I park the car in the alley behind the Crowell Building. My office was on the third and top floor, up four switch back flights of creaky narrow stairs, and cantilevered out over East Colorado Avenue in a single dormer. And, I mean the whole office.

Stepping over the shin biting wooden bench that almost blocked shut the inward opening door; I descended the two short steps to the closet sized, thirty square-feet, half-octagon of the room. The major redeeming features of the hovel were the ten foot tall, divided, oversized windows. The knee to ceiling panes of glass hid behind pulled paper shades. They formed four walls. The door and the guest bench were the other.

Two scarred and worn desks were pushed up against the opposing braces of a tandem of windowsills. Each small desk was crowded with a computer monitor and teetering piles of yellowing copy paper filling to overflow the available horizontal surface. The two old wooden swivel

chairs touched each other back to back. Unoccupied floor space without a stack of file folders or musty old books with paper page markers galore was nil. Squeezing two live bodies in here usually took a shoehorn.

Vladimir Nabokov, who wrote *Lolita* and loved to hunt the butterfly in Telluride, once said that all the rest of the world's books "seem to be all by the same writer who is not even the shadow to my shadow." I wanted to feel like that about my writing just once. I had recently pledged to write only when my emotions boil over and the itch drives me crazy. I wanted *Lolita* in my writing. I always got a few shades less.

Flopping into the hard wooden seat, I pulled myself up to the desk. A finger to the keyboard space bar sent the Wes Studi's Magua screen saver into the ozone and a document window opened. Arial font, 12 point, square margins set at an inch, with no fancy formatting, ever, gradually appeared before my eyes. It read simply "Short Story," centered and underlined. The empty space that followed filled me with a sickening dread. What to say? Who is it all about? When should I begin?

Hemingway once said about beginnings, "Not too soon, but not too damn much after." What the hell did that mean?

My newest, and probably last, attempt at becoming a real writer hinged on tapping into a raging blizzard of emotional chaos, to ride the ragged edge, and bring the words on the page to life. I swallowed hard, feeling as low as quail crap, half as animated as a dissected frog. Using three fingers on each hand, hunting and pecking, I began to type. All I could think of as the fingers moved on the keyboard was how much I wanted life to be caught up in a mystery, and as easy to appreciate, understand, and predict in retrospect as the surprise endings of my favorite books had always been. I bit the nip of my tongue and let it go.



The man she called Gatsby slid into the rich red leather driver's seat of the 1922 Packard Coupe with a menacing look. She was spent, slouching in the saddle soft upholstery against the passenger door.

"You've got to tell me, everything, now," he said with an implied and very real threat, slamming the door shut with a compression of air that hurt her ears. "People are talking

about you, and now me, deary. The parties are dying, stale. They don't want us around anymore. If I didn't bring the booze, they wouldn't have us. Tell me why, you worthless southern bitch."

The woman took a gold cigarette case from her patent leather hand bag, offered the open box to his icy stare and then slowly extracted a long thin custom rolled Galoise Vixen from among a half-dozen others. She studied the Long Island fog swirling in the pale light from the shoreline security lamp. Waves crashed in a dying hiss just out of sight against the breakwater of the private yacht club's parking lot. A foghorn moaned. The smell of damp seaweed at the waters edge was sharp, iodine, rotten, unmistakable.

Gatsby was chewing the inside of his lip and was suddenly mesmerized by her fingers as she tapped the end of the white cigarette against the flat gold top of the closed case three times at each end. His eyes then followed the cigarette to her rosebud full red lips. Without a tremble, she flicked the flint wheel of the thin gold lighter, and bluish smoke billowed towards the dash and windshield. He stared at her mouth and the perfect oval it formed around the smoke. Her little finger dabbed at a minute bit of tobacco on her pink tongue, drawing it out. She avoided his eyes.

"It's just about me and the hospital," she said.

"It isn't a hospital."

"I can't help it."

"You aren't sick."

"I am already dead."

The bootlegger reached across the space between them and slapped her soundly. The impact echoed a gunshot in the tight quarters of her car.

She smiled around the pain. "I really can't stop it."

He slapped her again. The cigarette dropped from her fingers. She bravely tried to smile still, but the tears in her eyes and the taste of blood in her mouth made it look like a lewd suggestion. She fought the necessity of it, but finally swung her eyes around to look directly at him.

Gatsby grabbed her by the lapels of her full length Cashmere coat and pulled her face close. He stopped, shaking her. Their noses were an inch apart. He scanned her fear with his hard blue eyes. She could smell the whiskey on his breath. His face suddenly collided with hers. A rigid tongue smashed against her closed teeth and finally parted them to swim inside. He tasted her blood too. It spurred him on.

She sighed with resignation into his greedy mouth and felt her legs part, falling open on the soft red leather seat...



It was fully dark when I realized that I had been writing for nearly three hours. The stress in my neck was evidence of the unobserved passage of time. I hit “save” and took a deep breath. I reached past the screen and pulled the cord on the shade. It rolled quickly up, all the way to the top and over with a rumbling flapping sound I always loved, but dreaded having to set right. The cool yellow glow of the streetlights below filled the office as I shut off the overhead fluorescent lights. Out the window, across the rooftops on the other side of the street, the lights of the ski area’s gondola terminal building, high up on the mountain, glittered against the vanishing definition between the peaked ridges and the coal black sky.

How had that trance happened? Gatsby? Where did that new story tangent come from? Who the hell was the woman? And why was this Gatsby character slapping her around? The first four aborted drafts had been simply a character sketch of a 1920’s bootlegger: cute, wordy, and horrible. They were a slow meandering tale of an obsessive compulsive partier and adrenaline junky who stumbles towards his own demise. This new thing was the best writing I had done in years. Time was actually suspended. The story flew. Just like a real writer.

I forced myself to shut the computer down without rereading a single word. Let it cook overnight in its own juices. Don’t worry it to death like a starving dog with a butcher’s bone; at least not right away. Give it time to ferment. Patience was a hard new lesson my barber was trying to teach me. He said it was something real writers had. I wasn’t sure what he meant.

I pulled the shade back down. Standing up on the desk to grab the fabric-covered ring on a string, I saw the town sheriff's white Bronco slowly ease down Colorado Avenue. I was glad I had shut off the office light. He was probably already rolling right along on my case, taking charge personally. The *putz* definitely wanted to be the one to take my gun permit. He had a thing for my wife. It was puppy-ish, self indulgent, embarrassing, and publicly recognized by everyone in town.

The Sheriff also had a different kind of thing for me. He thought I was capable of murder. I couldn't disagree. In two years of the private eye business, I had already been on trial for one murder I didn't commit and had now stumbled over another dead body with more questions than answers.

I decided right then that Sheriff Bueller would have to wait until I was ready to make this particular collar that would make his day. Bueller would likely view this particular duty as a part of his career highlight reel. To him, I was an amateur, a cop wannabe, a fraud. The Last Resort Detective Agency was riding a brief bureaucratic window of opportunity that allowed anyone in the State of Colorado with the inclination to hang out a Private Investigator shingle the prefect right to do so.

I was, by my own account, an unpublished writer playing at being the people I was trying to write about. I still hadn't been able to complete my first book that was half-finished two years ago. I finally burned the old carcass and took to reading F. Scott Fitzgerald's magazine submissions from the 1920s and am now working hard at writing a readable short story. So far I was still waiting for the words to magically appear on the page.

Feeling sorry for myself, I decided to make a few calls. It was important I find a paying customer before the next round of threats from my creditors arrived.

My finger punched the number for Mrs. Agnes Singer into the desk phone. I had no trouble reading my daughter's perfectly formed, rounded numerals on a scrap of lined writing paper. I waited for the ringing to start. I expected an answering machine and wasn't disappointed. I left an introduction, a heart felt endorsement for my services, and hung up.

Ernie Sampesee called from the open door as the phone hit the cradle. His baritone voice projected into the dust filled cervices of the office.

“Wit, my boy, you’re in deep, deep trouble,” he said. The smile that accompanied the pronouncement beamed, and I knew he was right. “But I certainly envy you the audacity to blow your own horn like that.”

“What trouble?” I asked, ignoring his admission of eavesdropping.

Ernie laughed and the sound forced me to breathe deeply to deal with my increasing anxiety. I can always gauge the exact level of truth in what my barber says by an assessment of how much he is enjoying my pain. It was another thing the self-help books said: “real writers always enjoy the pain of others.” If that was truly the test, maybe Ernie was the closest thing to a real writer I knew.

“That’s what I like most about you, Wit, old cod. You don’t even see trouble when it’s smacking you in the forehead. People in town are describing you as that guy from the Li’l Abner cartoons with the black cloud over his head.”

“The one with all the consonants and not a vowel in sight?”

“Exactly,” Ernie said, helping me into my old wool coat one arm at a time.

“Did you hear I was caught in an act of endearment with a corpse?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “It’s the talk of the town.”

“What are people saying?”

“They are now calling you ‘The Kiss of Death Kid.’”

“Is that all?”

“I only listen to the polite conversation,” Ernie said.

“Are you keeping something from me?”

“Almost daily,” he said.

“What can I do about this?”

“Give them something else to talk about.”

“You mean do something stupider than I did today.”

“Exactly.”

“I feel like a third-rate schmuck.”

“No, my boy, you are an absolute first-rate schmuck.”

“Just once in my life I want to be referred to by the gossips as a sometimes pimp and full time ladies man from New Orleans,” I said as I closed the door to my office.

“You aren’t from New Orleans.”

“Details,” I said.

We ambled arm in arm, loudly and awkwardly down the narrow stairs.