

WILDCLOWN HARD-BOILED
The Case of the Bog Bride and others.
G. Wells Taylor

Copyright 2005 by G. Wells Taylor

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written consent of the author, except where permitted by law.

Second Edition 2008

WILDCLOWN MYSTERIES

Email: books@wildclown.com

Website: www.wildclown.com

Cover Design by G. Wells Taylor

For Wildclown Project Team Members:

Richard Van Dyk, Robert A. Cotton and Peter Ciokan

Thanks.

Wildclown Hard-Boiled

A collection of Detective Wildclown's case files.

The Cat Lover

Drop Dead Blonde

Murder in Movieland

The Greasetown Vampire

Red Ransom

The Bog Bride

THE CAT LOVER

I don't like cats, so don't tell me that deep down, I do. And don't suggest that there was something wrong with my childhood. I didn't have one. I just don't like cats. They're not substantial enough for me. If there's a dog in the room, you put your hand out and he'll put his head under it. But cats are like unfriendly ghosts. They appear out of nowhere, and then fall back into the shadows without a sound. I like to know when an animal's in the room with me—especially one that eats meat.

I have never liked cats, and I've grown close to hating them since the Change. Along with the resurrection of the dead, all animals, even our faithful dogs turned on us, left us to our fates, or worse attacked us outright. Feral pets have become a real problem, but none are more dangerous than the cat. There have been attacks, many, and though they're rarely fatal, they maim, and disfigure. Greasetown Authority has a shoot on site rule for

cats. But they move quickly, and you never hear them coming, suddenly you're bleeding and they're gone. Cat lovers say it's the Change, that whatever happened to the world, caused them all to go mad. Me, I think the cats have just been biding their time.

At least I never liked them so I've never felt betrayed.

A recent brush with success had left me with more money in my pocket than I owed. I even had some in the bank, so I decided to take a little holiday. A vacation was just what the doctor ordered.

It was Elmo, my business partner, who couldn't appreciate the finer aspects of rest and relaxation; and so, he obsessively answered the phone and accepted any business and made appointments with anyone who flashed a couple of hundred dollars our way. Like most dead people, Elmo's a workaholic. I'd spent the last few months in and out of trouble, getting my chops busted, my head sapped and my shins bruised but I was working. I'm a detective and you have to take the jobs as they come; but success can kill in my business. Oh, in case you don't know, I dress like a clown. No fashion statement; it's a complicated deal I have worked out with the guy who owns the body I drive around in when I'm working. His name's Tommy Wildclown; but that's another story.

So, I knew that this kind of success would get me killed. If I didn't take some time off—I'd get sloppy and catch a bullet between the shoulder blades. As it was, my right wrist was broken, and bound up with a flexible plastic and plaster cast. It's what happens when a 200-pound man, that's me, punches a 400-pound man, that's the killer in my last case, in the forehead. Didn't help that he was sitting down, and that his chair was braced up against the wall. I let him have it, actually I let the building have it, and knocked him out so fast he didn't hear me scream. So, some time off to nurse the wound.

To get it, I packed Elmo up and sent him on a luxury bus liner to Old Orleans to track down acquaintances and buy some sensible clothes. Fashion was Elmo's only weakness. I dropped him at the bus depot, and then hung around to wave goodbye. I halfway expected him to get off and hire me out to find missing luggage.

After the bus's taillights disappeared into the fog, I went to my favorite eatery to read newspapers and have the best breakfast a clown with a broken wrist could buy. Then, I bought the biggest and oldest bottle of Canadian Club whisky I could find. My plan was to slip into a haze of delightful convalescence, talk to imaginary people, say what I'd like to say to people who pissed me off in the past, and maybe make a few crank phone calls.

I had a bag of groceries under one arm—man food, pickled stuff and pretzels, good for working up a thirst—plus my vintage whisky, as I fumbled inexpertly with the office key. I juggled my packages briefly, almost lost the jar of mustard, breathed a sigh of relief when the lock finally clicked, and pushed my way in. I'd left the lamp on by the couch in the waiting room. Unable to move freely now, I pressed my groceries against my hip, and clutched the slippery bottle of Canadian Club in my armpit as my left hand stupidly tried to pull the key out of the lock. Feeling an avalanche building energy, I abandoned the key to limp as quickly as possible, contorting my body, to push the descending package outward, so it landed on the couch when it fell. That perilous situation dealt with, I turned back to the key—yanked it out, then shut the door.

I snatched up my bottle of whisky, passed quickly across the waiting room and into my office. There must have been something in the air, because I paused. *The window was open.* I had opened it to air the place out—if that was possible with the flatulent

backwash Greasetown called air—but I had planned to shut it before taking Elmo to the bus station.

One thing you have to remember about the Change is you just don't leave your windows open. Things can get in—awful things. In a city that had a rising population of corpses walking its streets, you just don't leave your windows open. And there was the problem of animals hating people now. Even pigeons and sparrows had developed a hostile attitude—doves had become hawks. I had only started to work into a good curse when I heard the growl. It was a bad one. Sort of the worst kind of growl you're going to hear in a nearly dark office. There is nothing like the sound of an angry cat. Nothing at all. They produce an alien and monstrous noise, half growl, half wail. There doesn't seem to be a human analog to it. I'm sort of stretching a point calling it a growl at all. It was a noise I'd expect to hear at the dawn of time, when there were just swamps and reptiles. And worst of all a cat only growls when he means business. I just had time to flip the light switch.

A high-pitched scream came with the light and a wiry black tangle of fur slightly bigger than a football hit my chest. I barely had time to get my left hand up. Needling pressure tore my skin, as the cat rocketed toward my face. My arm deflected it. The cat scraped toward the elbow—its rear legs ripping at my gut. I swung the hand but the creature clung like a burr—fire leapt up my arm when it sank its fangs into my palm. On impulse, I flung the fist at the wall. Tightly wrapped around my whisky bottle it should have been a crushing blow, but the cat sensed the impact before it happened and tore up my arm toward my shoulder.

The Canadian Club thumped dully against the wall and bumped on the carpet when I released it. With my right hand, I clawed at my .44 automatic where it hung from my pink skipping rope belt. My fingers wrapped around it, but the cast had thickened my palm by an inch and I could not hook a finger around the trigger. Instead I whipped the weapon up and slapped the cat across the room with it.

I just managed to slip the gun into my left hand when the cat launched itself again. This time, I felt its claws dig into my scalp—felt them lacerate the skin around my right ear. I swung the gun at the cat again, and it leapt out of range, ran across the top of the door. I am not ambidextrous and have never made the claim. I try to be proficient in small arms fire with both hands, but bullets are expensive items, and I'm usually broke.

I fired the big gun, tore the top corner off my inner office door, fired again and killed a picture of a brewing company I kept over a small shelf of books. I fired again and mortally wounded my dictionary.

The cat bounded and bounced from shadow to shadow and landed on my desk yowling—cursing, I cradled the gun on my broken wrist and aimed at the cat as it sprung.

Cats do not do well against .44 caliber handguns when they're aimed properly—and even worse at a range of two yards. Evolution had not prepared them for this. And what was left of my feline attacker formed a red shrapnel cloud that littered my desk, and sent wads of black fur onto the wall behind it.

Somewhere in all that crashing, screaming violence the phone had started to ring. When the .44's roar subsided the bell was all I could hear.

I walked around the desk, still quaking with adrenaline. Pausing to flick the cat's tail off my chair, I forgot I wasn't going to answer the phone, and answered it.

"Hello," I said, surveying the bloody wreckage of my relaxing afternoon.

“I’m looking for Wildclown Investigations,” came the voice, more clipped and officious than mine could ever be.

“You found it...” I muttered, leaning forward to shove the black cat’s lower jaw into the wastebasket. “I’m supposed to answer the phone with it.”

“With what?”

“With *Wildclown Investigations*.” I leaned back, and noticed a good quantity of blood up and down my arm. *Mine*, and there was a constant slow drip from the right side of my head. It pattered slowly onto my shoulder. Scalp wounds bleed like pigs. “How can I help you? I’m kind of busy.”

“I would like to employ your services,” said the voice.

“I’m on vacation,” I said, dully aware of an ache in my knitting wrist.

“Then why did you answer your phone?”

“Okay you got me there.” I cradled the blood-dappled receiver under my chin, reached into my pocket for a cigarette. Paused. “One moment,” I said, snatching up the bottle of Canadian Club where it lay mercifully unbroken. I snatched off the seal, took a slug. Then resumed searching for my cigarettes until I found one and lit it. “How can I help you?”

“My name is Jonathan Kradzyk. I’m the curator of the Greasetown Metropolitan Museum of Antiquities.” His voice really flowed around those words. I took another belt from my bottle as I listened. “And, well there’s been trouble, strange trouble involving animals.”

“Call the Humane Society.” I watched a tuft of black fur waft toward the floor.

“It’s more serious than that. It’s one of our board members. Margaret Meadows of the Meadows Culinary Delights family.” I knew the company. They made plankton and krill taste like hot dogs and hamburgers. “She’s been killed at the museum.”

“Call Authority.”

“By CATS!” Mr. Kradzyk said, impossibly.

I paused to study the remains of a cat on my desk. “I’m all ears,” I said, absently hoping I still had two.

“Can you come to the museum? I need this cleared up for our legal defense. In case her family suggests we bear any responsibility.” He cleared his throat, uncomfortable. “I’m told that to protect ourselves we have to be sure there’s nothing we could have done to prevent it.”

“Sure, I’m on vacation. A trip to the museum fits.” I knew the address, so just said two o’clock and hung up. Then I picked up the telephone book and looked through it for cleaning companies.

2. Greasetown Metropolitan Museum of Antiquities

The Greasetown Metropolitan Museum of Antiquities is in the new section of town barely a stone’s throw from its former haunt—a huge brownstone edifice that looked like it belonged in a museum. Its new digs were massive in their glassy prefabricated way, and boasted superior conditions for preserving the many artifacts contained therein. The old building bordering the new part of town as it did was slated for the wrecking ball, as

most things are, but had for the interim become a squatter's hotel for dead and living often drug-addicted indigents.

I made my way past the tall glass front doors of the new museum and into a foyer over which hung a massive mobile of cast iron. The sort of thing you knew some rich artist was laughing about somewhere, probably on the way to the bank. I walked up to the front desk and met a man coming out of an office behind it. He had a fragile-boned, violin-playing look to him, wore a blond hairpiece and glasses. His suit was tailored and crisp and would have made Elmo envious. He paused when he saw me come in, then a smile spread over his meagerly fleshed face.

"Mr. Wildclown!" He followed his outstretched hand toward me. "I recognize you from the Gazette. The hearings..."

"Yeah, I keep hearing about them." I shook the proffered hand with as much machismo as my cast would allow. "You're Kradzyk?"

"Oh, you've hurt yourself." His eyes did a study of the cast, then whipped up to my face. The recent cat attack had not needed stitches to repair, but I was pretty sure that a couple of the wounds still oozed through my black and white clown's greasepaint.

"Shaving," I murmured looking around. "I'm all thumbs."

Kradzyk looked at me seriously a moment, then let go of the discussion with a grin. "I'm glad you could take time from your vacation to consult on this, Mr. Wildclown." His eyes looked inward. "Poor Margaret..."

"Yeah..." I leaned against the glass counter, my heavy shoulder inches away from pricey and delicate looking Aztec jewelry. "Fire away."

"We had a board meeting two nights ago, Wednesday. Just typical budget stuff." Kradzyk looked like he wanted to lean too but there wasn't room so he had to cross his arms. "Margaret was here with the other members. She was in charge of the African acquisitions committee. They put together purchase plans and accompanying cost sheets, it's all in an effort to keep the Museum's collection interesting and exciting."

"Right." I was beginning to regret leaving the office. Still, the cleaners had left it stinking of ammonia, and there was no way I was going to air it out again. I lit up a cigarette.

Kradzyk paused to watch the blue smoke rise up into an air filter, a noticeable look of relief passed across his features and he continued. "The meeting ended at 10 o'clock. I locked up and the next morning, she was found by our cleaning staff, dead in the Egyptian artifacts wing."

"Where?" I asked. It was a toss up, say that or ask for a drink. So, I followed Kradzyk through dimly lit hallways past ancient arts and crafts until we passed under a sign that said: *Egypt Land of Mystery*.

Inside, there were numerous glass cases housing ancient fabric and jewelry. There was a mummy—evidently missing the strange 'undead' animation that most of the dead had been endowed with since the Change. I'd read about the problem with mummies. Most had had their brains sucked out as part of the mummification process. And the brain was important to the living death that the dead could enjoy with the Change. Drying out for a couple of thousand years didn't help either. A mummy wouldn't be able to move if he wanted to.

"You say she was killed by cats," I said as Kradzyk came to a halt beside a large stone sculpture—a man's body about ten feet tall with a cat's head. "What happened after

Blacktime? What did she say?" I was referring to the time that the dead experienced between living and reanimation.

"The cats ate her tongue and lips, eyes—her whole face." Kradzyk looked nauseous shaking his head. "There's some doubt that she will regain her sanity. And it may be for the best."

I looked up at the sculpture, felt my hackles rise at the inscrutable cat's face carved there. "Ironic." I looked down the length of the sculpture to the section of concrete beneath my feet where the bloodied carpet had been cut away. "That cats killed her here?" I gestured at the sculpture. "In front of him."

"Oh, that has been a subject of some discussion I assure you." He dipped his chin at the cat-person sculpture. "*Bast*, that's the Egyptian Cat god. Supposedly a friendly incarnation of the lioness goddess, Semha, Skemet...her name escapes me. Not my specialty." The curator shook his head. "Authority forensics took up that section of carpet and is supposed to be investigating the death, but I was surprised that it did not provoke a stronger response from them."

"Authority's got its own troubles right now." And that was true, since the infighting started; they'd been busier investigating each other than the populace. It was part of the reason my business had suddenly boomed. People needed help and Authority couldn't give it right now. "Why do you think it was cats?"

Kradzyk frowned. "The type and number of injuries, the extent of the trauma to the body and well, in the blood, we found paw prints. Many prints."

"But no cats."

"No," he said and smiled. "Why do you say that?"

"You wouldn't need me then. You could explain it as a freak accident caused by an open window or vent. Cats don't like people any more, remember?" I dropped my cigarette butt on the concrete and ground it out beneath my boot.

"Well," Kradzyk said, motioned toward a vent in the wall, "One of the investigating Inspectors pointed to that. The casing *was* off that morning. The investigator said that there has been a sharp increase in the feral cat population in town. They're after the rats..." I walked over and inspected the four by eight inch grate while the curator talked to my back. "But that's ridiculous. To imagine the cats came in through that—enough to kill a woman."

"That goes to an air exchanger?" I ran a hand up the wall as I stood.

"Yes. Which makes it completely ridiculous." Kradzyk took a step away, momentarily unsettled by my clown detective shtick. "We checked the air exchanger on the roof that day. All of its vents were screwed into place."

"That's good." I walked back toward the stone cat goddess. "If she was killed here, it wasn't by cats. But she probably wasn't killed here."

"Why would you say that?" Kradzyk looked pleasantly surprised.

"Well because then I'd have to suggest that a group of cats were acting in concert. Either they had a key to the building, or a screwdriver, knew Mrs. Meadows was here, waited for the meeting to end, let themselves in and killed her so fast that there is no evidence of a fight." I remembered my own tangle with the cat that morning.

"Of course," Kradzyk groaned, looking mildly chastised.

"What was her committee working on?"

“Oh, many things. She was in the process of acquiring a large Moroccan collection from the City of Light’s Museum. Some sort of trade she was working out.” He looked deflated, studying the stone sculpture. “All seems silly now,” he said staring at me evenly, a slight tremor of embarrassment flexing beneath his features. He pointed to my head. “You’re bleeding.”

“Oh...” I wiped at the blood with my hand, saw Mr. Kradzyk nod. “It’s two hundred dollars a day. I’d like to talk to Mr. Meadows. There *is* a Mr. Meadows, isn’t there?”

“Yes. Mr. Meadows was a board member before Margaret was. But he quit. Actually he looked after the same African Acquisitions committee. I don’t know what his reasons were for leaving. I just know that before Mrs. Meadows took over the job, things had stagnated.”

“So.” I looked at our stone friend and the other exhibits. “He was responsible for acquiring these pieces?”

“The older ones.” Kradzyk looked up at Bast. “I believe.”

I looked up at Bast’s big cat face, and then turned to Kradzyk. “Can I get his phone number?”

“Certainly.” Mr. Kradzyk’s eyes lingered on my bleeding head and then retreated. I followed slowly feeling in need of restoration.

3. The Meadows Place

Making seafood taste like ballpark franks seemed to have paid off for the Meadows family. They owned part of a spacious living complex called Glade Tidings on the west side of Greasetown. The complex was designed to resemble a massive estate in the English countryside—crushed gravel driveway, the works. It was divided into four complete castles connected by a central recreation facility. A tall stone wall protected the perimeter. I had to pick up a pass at the guardhouse to get through the gates—a side effect of the walking dead and rising crime rate that came with the Change. The house or condominium or semi-detached mansions shared the large tree-covered grounds. I had heard there was a manmade lake out there somewhere and pondered setting a hook for a manmade fish.

I pulled up to the front of the manor house and climbed out of the car. I was driving a retro-Galaxy 2000 called a Galaxy XM. Elmo had picked it out himself since he did most of the driving. I chose the black paint over the dark green he was toying with. Walking toward the house, I slipped a hand along my belt, and patted the gun that nestled there. My compromise with Tommy, wherever his spirit lurked in the shadows of my borrowed body, had allowed the fairly recent addition of an overcoat and fedora to the drably painted clown’s coverall. It was a welcome change with Greasetown’s meteorologists calling for rain slightly more than 95% of the time. I had found, in the last six months or so that Tommy’s psyche had become more and more cooperative. I had my moments—certain things still set him off, and I was occasionally forced to struggle for the steering wheel; but I found that the odd night I was able to sleep in the body as well. There were still times I relinquished control for no other reason than I did my best thinking when disembodied.

It was Saturday, around eight. I had called ahead, and caught Mr. Meadows at home. I told him I was a detective hired by the Museum. It was just a formality, but I had to ask him a few questions about his wife. He agreed, be there around eight.

My boots crunched on the wet gravel as I approached the flagstone walkway. At the door, I paused for a final drag from my cigarette, pitched the damp butt into the garden and knocked.

The door swung wide. There was a gentleman, must have been sixty pre-Change years of age. All the extra years that the Change's longevity gave to the living weighed heavily upon him. There were creases on his face that were deep enough to lose a quarter in. Then I remembered; his wife had just died. I took off my hat as his expression gave away his surprise.

"Why, are you? You are? I've, I've heard about you." He pointed a finger. "Read about you."

"Wildclown, pleased to meet you Mr. Meadows. I'm sorry about your wife." I could see him racing toward the question about the makeup so I cut him off at the pass.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions about Mrs. Meadows." I gave him my strictly business face. "I have a Photostat of my license if you prefer."

"No, Mr. Wildclown." He stepped back pulling the door wide. "I was startled. That's all. But it's come back to me. The newspaper stories—about the *Death House*. Forgive me."

"No need to apologize Mr. Meadows." I walked into the foyer and was immediately impressed. Why not, it was designed that way. There was a massive cherry wood staircase that swept up in front of me. It led to an open pillared walkway upstairs of the same construction punctuated with many doors. Under this, to each side of the stairs, a room opened outward that looked like it had hosted King Arthur and the round table knights in another life. A huge fireplace ringed round by heavy wooden furniture was at the far end of it. Shelves on the walls held hundreds of books, there were coats of arms on plaques, and guarding numerous dark alcoves were authentic-looking suits of armor.

"Please come in." He stepped aside but kept his hands out for my hat and coat. I made no move to give them to him so he simply nodded. "Do come in. Please." And he started away from me toward the fireplace talking over his shoulder. "My serving staff is away. I—I wanted to be alone with my thoughts, and so many of them were devastated by Margaret's death."

"Of course." I moved to the warmth of the fireplace, stood in front of it looking at the flame.

"Can I offer you a drink?" Meadows said to my back.

"I'll take a whiskey or scotch." I had the urge to kick at the logs in the fire. "Please."

I turned in time to see his broad backside move toward a liquor stand and tray that was on wheels, parked close to a chair with an open book on it, beside a floor lamp. That would be handy in a big place like this, the liquor on wheels—might even be good for the office.

Mr. Meadows returned now with a hefty drink in each hand—the kind of hefty that would take the edge off the day. Meadows' hair and eyes were the same faded gray. His smoking jacket looked drained of color too.

"You share your wife's interests." I took the glass and a quick bolt of scotch: sweet and malty.

“I’m sorry?” Meadows’ gaze followed mine to the book on his chair.

“*Sehkmnet*.” My voice echoed in the glass. “Egyptian isn’t it?” The title of the book was *The Legends of Sehkmnet*. I tried to remember the name Kradzyk had stumbled over.

“Oh, oh, the book.” He shook his head. “I’m a hobbyist, truly. I turn an eye to it, fascinating. Though my interest is of a more philosophical nature.”

“*Philosophical*.” I felt the fire’s heat on my back. “And *Bast*. Isn’t this *Sehkmnet* related to *Bast* somehow? Do you know anything about *Bast*?” I was just starting into a discussion with him, but something in the way he’d taken my interest in *Sehkmnet* made me want to taunt him with *Bast*. “The curator, Mr. Kradzyk, at the Museum, I believe he referred to *Sehkmnet* as we spoke about *Bast*.”

“What about *Bast*?” His eyes had narrowed and his voice held a hesitant quality.

“You didn’t like your wife’s work did you, Mr. Meadows?” I dribbled the last of my drink onto my tongue. I was sure it would be impolite to ask for another so soon and resisted the urge to hold the empty glass out.

“What do you mean?” Meadows was doing a good job of looking aghast, and I began to doubt my line of questioning. He continued, “I held the same position myself.”

“Terrible isn’t it. The way it happened.” I couldn’t resist and kicked one of the burning logs now. A geyser of orange sparks shot up.

“It is.” Turning to him, I could see that the question calmed him a little. “I assumed that was what you were here to talk to me about.”

“It is.” I ran a finger along the marble mantle. “It’s all ironic.”

“Yes it is.” Mr. Meadows’ shadow grew up beside mine. “She loved cats.”

This time it was my turn to look aghast. I couldn’t help but run that sad story from start to finish. Imagining a cat lover dying in such a way. Torn to pieces. *Cat got your tongue?*

“I’m afraid it is only half her problem.” Meadows turned away. I watched him from the corner of my eye. “She is dead, with specialists now; but her afterlife will be terrible. Disfigured as she is. Her mind was broken by the attack. They think she came out of Blacktime before the cats were finished.”

I imagined the scene until it started to penetrate the edge of the scotch’s growing numbness. “Did it bother you that she was about to trade away the collection that you had worked so hard to acquire?”

Mr. Meadows stepped up to me—an angry look crossed his features and was gone without a trace. “That’s ridiculous. I relinquished *my* position on the board.” He reached out for my glass. “Refill?”

I looked down, then nodded. “Always.”

“So you are saying what?” Meadows walked back to his liquor wagon and I listened to him pour.

“You left the museum. Kradzyk said that the African collection had stagnated during your tenure.” I watched him flinch a little at that.

“I acquired some magnificent pieces for the Museum.” His voice had a hard edge this time. “I don’t call that stagnation.” He turned with the drinks and came toward me. “You should have seen it before I took the position. Spears, shields, a few masks. It lacked depth. It was devoid of meaning.”

“I see,” I said watching his face. There was no fear there: just sadness. “Then it would be difficult to see your work traded away.”

“That is the nature of a museum. The bartering of exhibits often facilitates the acquisition of new pieces. Museums are under funded, that’s how it works.” He held my drink out to me. “What do you propose? That I somehow conjured cats to kill my wife, and then wiped them away with a wave of my hand. All because I did not want her to undo the work I had accomplished in a volunteer capacity at the local museum?”

I took the drink, set my lips to it and as I did our eyes locked. We paused both of us eye to eye for a minute until Meadows’ face cracked in a grin. He started laughing and a second later I was on the verge of embarrassment.

“No,” I said, finally, took a seat across from Mr. Meadows. “I’m not saying that.” I took another good haul from my drink. “I’m not sure what to think of it. A woman killed by cats, impossibly. But with the Change making all animals hate people, I don’t know why I’d need a motive. I just have to find out how they got in and how they got out.”

“The world has Changed.” Meadows sat down, took a drink from his glass and watched the fire. “It has changed. And I told Margaret as much. The changes had to be respected. People must see this.”

“Well, she kept busy. Involved in the community.” I was beginning to like the hazy glow around the fire—downright vacation-like. “She adapted. Why did you quit the museum?”

“Because they did not understand the value of what they were acquiring. What they were doing.” Meadows shook his head. “I did not think that it would be Margaret—my replacement. But she excelled in her position and began to think the way *they* think.”

“You don’t sound happy about that.” I pointed impolitely.

“I wasn’t happy. No.” A dark pall fell across his features. “I had no idea she would take my position.”

“So it did bother you that she was undoing your work.”

“If they didn’t have the right, why would she?” His eyes looked inward, searching. “They were not sanctified for Sehkmet.”

“How’s that?” Definitely now, I could see an aura around the flames. A little panic started at the back of my mind but something kept me from moving. “Sanctified?”

“They would handle artifacts from which magical powers bled, that in ages past had been filled with human life essence, human souls...” His eyes did not meet mine. I could only see shadows. “To call them mere acquisitions! No human may acquire or possess these things—it is sacrilege. But only did they see the value, the commercial value. I would not participate. And then Margaret took the position. I tried to dissuade her.”

Now I could definitely tell that something was up. My tongue felt all leathery. The way it feels after a whole bottle of whisky not two drinks. And my sinuses were drying out on top of my rapidly depleted vision... I tried to get to my feet, and collapsed on the floor.

“It was everything I could do to forestall the trade...but to no effect.” The last thing I remember was Meadows standing over me. There was something about his eyes, something feral, like the cat I’d shot that morning. “These things are sacred. And the time for respect is at hand.”

4. Sehkmet

Lucky for me, years of heavy drinking had made me a very expensive date, and whatever Mr. Meadows had slipped into my glass along with the excellent scotch whisky was not enough to keep me out for long. I awoke in darkness, luckily again, still in possession of Tommy's body. My vision was shot, and somewhere there was a distant ache from my far right hand that I knew would eventually make its way home to me, to pleasure my nights with excruciating pain. *If I survived*. I flexed my arms and they were numb—tied at the wrists with coarse rope and bolted to some kind of setting overhead. The air was cool and damp around me.

Sadly, my nose was not similarly desensitized, and the sheer ammonia fire that registered almost knocked me out again. It smelled like I was on the shores of a great lake of cat urine. The foul air scoured my eyes, scorched my nostrils. My skin crawled at its touch. I paused, mid-vomit to watch a dark-robed man walk down a spiral iron stair with a torch. I was in some kind of spacious cavern. In the new light, I could see that I was in a natural cave of slate-like rock that produced odd reflected angles. I knew instinctively that the spiral stair would lead up to the Meadows house, probably the basement. The cavern consisted of the same material that made up the bedrock for Greasetown and a long section of coast.

Mr. Meadows continued down the stair then stopped at the bottom. His torch, it turned out was some kind of gas lamp. It threw a lot of light around the cavern and illuminated two things: thirty feet in front of me stood the massive stone sculpture of Bast that I'd seen at the museum, and in front of that, a roughly circular pit about fifteen feet across. *Three things*, an altar sat at its edge in front of Bast. From the dark pit came a quiet rustling punctuated by low growls.

Meadows walked over to the altar and set the lamp down. He bowed to the sculpture mumbling in an alien language before making his way to me.

"So, you've just lost your mind then?" I said. My tongue had awakened enough by now. "Sure makes my job easier."

Meadows' serene expression flashed ire as he slapped me hard across the face. All of my old injuries fired on that one. "Silence!"

So, I watched him for a few seconds, as I focused on my legs' unchained status. I gauged the distance between Meadows' face and my boots.

"You do not understand!" Meadows hissed and walked away.

"Your wife was going to trade away the fake statue of Bast that you put at the museum," I said as Meadows whirled glaring. "I've got a bad feeling for the guy who carved it."

"This is Sehket!" The madman turned back to the statue, fell to his knees and bowed low. "She has come to revenge her many injuries. Now she will not wear the soft fur of companionship. She comes to slay her betrayers."

"Sehket," I said quietly. "*She's coming?*"

"She is here. As the other old gods have come." He rose to his feet, came toward me. "That is why the animals of the earth have chosen this time to slay us as they can."

"And you've decided to help." I tested my legs, quietly put weight on my toes. "Your wife was trading away the sculpture. Your forgery would be discovered, and your 'church' here would be exposed. What do you guys do meet Fridays? Bingo on Mondays?" I saw anger flash in his eyes. "So, you brought her here, tied her up, and fed her to your cats."

“Not for me. For Sehkmet.” He walked behind me. I turned my head and saw him tugging at the rope. A pulley on the ceiling would pick me up and lower me into the hole in front of Sehkmet.

“Your cats are in the pit?”

“They are not *my* cats!” he hissed in my ear. “They are incarnations of Apocalypse. As the demons return to the world for vengeance their servants prepare the way. The loyal may serve them in the New Age.”

“Sure,” I said, certain that my legs would cooperate when I needed to do something. “And your wife was a sacrifice. As I bet your accomplices were who helped you bring Sehkmet here.” I gestured to the idol with my chin. “Your accomplices, I can understand. Probably members of your church, or maybe just some paid workers right? Maybe they were dead already. But your wife. Was she unconscious when you killed her, or did you like it when she screamed.”

I took a hard hit in the back of the head this time, but the action slackened up the rope in Meadows’ hands, and allowed me to fall forward. I had to move quickly, and started to run, immediately feeling the rope begin to tighten as Meadows realized his mistake. Then it went taut, but not before I could take one good bound that sent me pivoting upward over the pit in front of the statue. Meadows pulled again, which brought me arcing upward enough to deliver the stone statue of Sehkmet a hard double kick to the face.

That brought a scream from Meadows, who released the rope. And I was falling toward the crevasse full of cats. For a glimmering second I saw the multi-colored blanket of death, their incandescent eyes. I jammed both elbows hard into the slate at the pit’s edge, and struggled against the jarring action as my legs slapped the sheer side of the chasm. A great chorus of cat growls rose to greet me. Hands tied, and heavy rope sliding past me, I knew that I’d be pulled in as the last played out.

There was a heavy hollow knocking sound in the background and I realized that my kick had unbalanced the statue. I heard Meadows shrieking, running toward the idol.

Suddenly sharp white pain lanced up my leg as a cat made the leap and sunk its claws and teeth. Adrenaline flooded through me, and I crushed it against the cliff wall with my knee—its ribcage collapsed—then I scrambled up as another cat leapt onto my back.

I rolled onto the starving blood-mad creature turning in time to see Meadows run to Sehkmet’s statue hands out before him. As I elbowed a cat to death, I watched the statue continue its rocking motion—perhaps it wouldn’t have tipped if he hadn’t pushed back. A scream and crushing sound. And the statue collapsed on Meadows. He tried to get out of the way; he probably should have taken the full hit to end it quickly. Instead, the statue caught his foot, crushing it into place while his body hung over and into the pit. Meadows screamed when he realized his peril; it must have been something looking down at all those hungry cats. And then he was covered in a rending cloud of carnivores. I saw his free leg kick outward feebly, and his arms flail briefly. There was nothing I could do short of amputating his leg to pull him out. I briefly toyed with the idea of finding my gun and putting him out of his clawing, screeching misery. Then I remembered what he had planned for me. I took the spiral stairs upward in search of a phone.

5. A Time Coming

I made my way to the desk at my office. Sat down. The ammonia from the cleaners was like fresh flowers after the nostril scorching I'd received from the cat urine. I poured myself a drink and stretched back in my chair—my eyes dully scanned the outer world through the blinds. It was five a.m. and I was going to drink myself silly. If I were lucky, I'd stagger into the outer office and slip into a coma round about the time that people used to go to church.

Authority had arrived at the Meadows' place pretty promptly after my call, all things considered, and thanked me for the help in their ungrateful way, before debriefing and ordering me off the premises. They were going to use some kind of carbon monoxide machine to kill all the hungry kitties Meadows kept in his basement before they burned them.

Meadows had been going nuts over the past couple of years and it was the primary reason he had abandoned his place on the Museum Board. Sadly, no one but his wife knew about his new cat obsession. She had quietly covered for his hobby of collecting and trapping the felines for preservation in his secret basement. Margaret Meadows took the job on the Board to extend her protection of his madness, but had no idea how lethal his obsession had become. When her plans to trade the statue threatened to expose Meadows' Sehkmet religion and theft, he had decided to act. Evidently, he killed her at home after her last board meeting in his little secret sanctuary before bringing the body to the Museum. She had indeed planned to trade the statue of Sehkmet to the museum in the City of Light and they might recognize the forgery. The recent Authority infighting could have made him confident enough to kill her for her sins. They wouldn't likely investigate something that was clearly the work of animals. On a hunch, I'd asked about access to the old museum, and it turned out there was a service tunnel that was used for transporting relics during the move and then boarded up. Meadows had brought his wife's body into the museum that way, and left her. Being a touch insane and a religious zealot, he'd left her body by the statue of Sehkmet as a warning, adopting the air of the educated that a dumb flatfoot would never make the connection or a detective in clown's greasepaint.

Kradzyk paid me four hundred dollars and put a lot of emphasis on me not making a big deal of it with the press. No one could explain the paw prints on the piece of carpet around Margaret Meadows' body and Kradzyk explained that Authority forensics had since lost track of the evidence.

As I sank slowly into drunken silence I wondered about the madman's predictions. Maybe there was a time coming when we would learn respect.

DROP DEAD BLONDE

Christmas after the Change is the evil twin to its pre-Apocalyptic counterpart, I'm told. See, I don't remember much about the world before. Things have changed for me too. My particular brand of amnesia leaves me playing mental leapfrog with a madman that dresses like a clown and seems to have memory troubles of his own. But that's all beside the point, another story—the icing on *my* cake. It left me here at a bar with a drink in the hand of a borrowed body contemplating Christmas in a world without children

while a dead man noisily slurped a martini two stools down. At least I had a drink in hand. Oh, and a cigarette too. I'm always smoking.

I celebrated the season that way bellying up to a bar at my least favorite drinking establishment, and pounding down one whiskey after another until I was able to look at the world without wincing.

People still gave each other presents, the churches sent out carolers and staged second-rate reenactments of the Greatest Story Ever Told but it didn't go much farther than that. Everyone was going through the motions. The Change woke us from dreams of sugar plum fairies and coldly squelched all thoughts of salvation. The walking dead, constant rain and Greasetown's recurring blackouts didn't help either. It was hard to celebrate giving and taking in an endless downpour without the traditional flashing lights and ornaments while the cold eyes of the dead watched you from the shadows. Authority restricted power usage to one hour a day per household or company for nonessential energy requirements during the Yuletide. People complained at first, but there were no longer any children, so what was the point.

Just after the Change, when we realized that the human race had become sterile, but before we understood that the children who remained were not going to grow up—people rallied around their Christmas trees like an antithesis of despair. But as time pressed on and children physically remained children, people realized that yet another terrible thing had happened. Somehow, the knowledge that their minds continued to mature in the stunted bodies made the horror of their situation all the more unimaginable.

Soon after that realization, Authority rounded up all the forever children they could find promising the public it was for protection and study. Many parents escaped the edict by running inland with their children only to disappear in the lawless wilderness that was growing there. Stories circulated about a place in the forests where the forever children ran free, but a few days in Greasetown under the Change would make you realize how hollow that sounded. Some still remained in the cities—these children who would not age—but they were rare and had suffered much worse than Authority scrutiny. Most had fallen into the grips of unscrupulous men who ran the sex trade.

I managed to avoid despair by working and drinking hard—not always in that order and rarely exclusive of each other.

I'm a detective.

I'd like to say I was just sitting there minding my own business. I was in a way, being about three-quarters involved in bobbing for ice cubes in a potent Rusty Nail. December twenty-fourth had been a long day, and I needed something with a little extra kick that wouldn't knock my teeth out. The drink was prepared for me by a stocky lady barkeep with a large droopy belly that completely smothered the dirty apron that struggled to peek out from beneath it. As I mentioned my attention was not altogether focused on my drink and the lady who served it. For the last few minutes my mind had been drawn from its quiet pickling to the ragged couple down the way, just past the dead guy drooling gin. They were an awful looking pair of bar flies that had been buzzing over an escalating series of arguments. He had just threatened to slap her face, an action that one look told me would produce a dustbowl of pancake powder. Not much of a threat since the man appeared to have reduced himself to a level where he'd have a tough time knocking the dandruff off his shoulders. But as my blood alcohol level rose, I had a growing sense of compassion for the woman—if for no other reason than for her eyes that seemed lost and

homesick behind a tall stand of false eyelashes. It's a sobriety test for me. As soon as I begin to sympathize with the other boozehounds at the bar, I knew it was time for a sensible man to go home.

Maybe it was Christmas, maybe it was the half-bottle of scotch I'd swallowed in the car, but I had just decided to down my last innocent bystander's drink and play cop when a voice spoke over my shoulder.

"I can't believe some people," it said, simple, husky and full of self-assurance.

I turned to look at the owner and almost dropped my chin in the ashtray.

The first thing that grabbed a hold of my tongue was a pair of pale blue eyes that seemed to glow with an inner light. The pupils were utter blackness and appeared to float in hazy azure pools. The eyes were enough to hold me stupid, blinking in reply; but finally a flash of her pale lashes introduced me to the rest of her face. Framed in a cascade of blonde, brown and frosty curls to the shoulder, the face held a light sandy hue—made tantalizingly youthful by a spray of small pale freckles. The eyes sat under a narrow forehead on either side of a thin, straight nose. Full lips pulled back in a smile revealing straight white teeth that said without speaking: *I know you want me.*

And they were right. My first impulse was to bare my throat to them.

A quick peek at her body, a rapid, very urbane and sophisticated glance showed me a sleek and well-muscled form wrapped in a black skin-tight shirt and slacks. The neon red from a beer sign over the bar gave her whole body a purplish passionate glow. I counted her nipples out of the corner of my eye. Two: my favorite. She tossed her leather jacket on a barstool and climbed aboard.

Then her smile tightened and a deliciously goofy grin slid over her features. "Earth to the guy in clown makeup! Can you read me? Over?" She laughed and slapped a forearm I had left on the bar. The eyes flashed by me, and then happily hovered over the unhappy couple. "Looks like they made up."

I turned to watch the barflies kissing awkwardly as they left the bar arm in arm.

"Thank god they can't reproduce," she said.

"Every day," I countered, suddenly stumbling upon my voice box.

"Erin Moore," the blonde said, her eyes mercilessly gripping mine.

"Wildclown." I smiled flatly; gesturing at my face paint as I shook her small soft hand, hoping it would be enough. I found explaining the clown face the hardest part. It was embarrassing and Tommy, my host, tended to start to rail with indignation wherever he lurked during my possessions.

"I noticed." Her teeth paused, point to point. "It's *wild* clown."

"I was just having a drink," I said as I felt the first pang of Tommy's annoyance. I had to move quickly or risk being expelled from the body. Then I'd be forced to watch Tommy take over and screw up the introductions from where I hovered near the ceiling when disembodied. "I was wondering if you wanted one."

"I do want one." She looked away and scanned the labels on the spigots. "Something big and brown."

I bought a round and started a long evening of great stories and interesting opinions. We didn't even talk about Christmas more than once or twice. Like myself Erin knew there was no reason to talk about the ghost of a holiday. And the more she talked, the more I realized she had a way of making me forget who I was, where I was and what I did for a living. Her voice chatted and laughed me far from the world of the Change, to

some sort of a place of memory approaching sunny. I couldn't believe it, but decided to let myself. And her eyes, they pulled me easily longingly toward a place I'd almost forgotten about. I let myself go a little. Stupidly.

She had been a nursery school teacher before the Change, and had worked for a while with forever children in the years just following it, before Authority had started the big round up. Later courses in narrative psychology bought her a profession doing motivational lectures for corporations.

I took her avoidance of my makeup story as her polite and sensitive nature when I should have taken it as a warning. I'm just over six feet tall and about two hundred pounds. My face is decorated like a clown's in black and white; a thin skipping rope belt around my spotted coverall holds a powerful handgun. *I would have asked.*

By the end of the night I was ready to do anything for this mysterious former nursery school teacher; I'd fallen under her enchantment. Much later, when I returned from the little clown's room I discovered she was gone. The barkeep grunted at my unspoken query and gestured to the door. I looked out through the hazy glass and watched gray slush slowly piling up in the street. A car went by with a noisy hiss.

I returned to the bar and spent a somber hour recovering my inebriation sipping a pair of triple scotches. Erin Moore was an interesting woman. I was lucky to have met her in the first place. One final glare at the bartender, I paid, struggled into my overcoat and left.

2. Fu Manchu and Blackbeard's Ghost

Fumbling at my office door I had a slight grin under my clown's smile. Life was too hard in Greasetown in the world after the Change to look any gift horse in the mouth. And Erin Moore was just that. She was the extent of my Christmas, and she had transported me to a time outside the rainy cold and damp. I had to smile. It would make hating the days to come that much easier.

A pair of sturdy hands on my shoulders swung me around so that a second pair, these curled into knobby fists worked my stomach just long enough to knock my gun to the floor and the breath out of my lungs. I dropped to my knees and dragged a painful bite of air over my teeth. All four hands grabbed me this time, hoisted me into the air and slammed me against the doorframe hard enough to crack the window. Distantly I noticed the thin line trace through the last 'n' in 'Investigations' and the 'ld' in 'Wildclown.' My dead sidekick Elmo would have had a kitten over that one. He loved that window. But his feline distemper would have to wait. I couldn't expect him back until the end of the week. He was over in Gritburg visiting a living relative from the south. Christmas right... Like most dead people, Elmo suffered some long-term memory loss. He had been able to recover some of it after a visit to Old Orleans where he had lived his life as a private investigator before the Change and his death. Family he found told him he was Baptist.

The two thugs who had worked me over and were now crushing me against the doorframe appeared to have skipped science class the day they were discussing evolution. Both were wide-framed and heavy-featured and would be more at home in animal skins than in the tailored wool suits and overcoats they wore. Their dark fedoras obscured their faces with shadow. One threw an arm across my throat and leaned in. Closer inspection showed me that he had a long droopy mustache like Fu Manchu. His breath stank of

cigarettes and neglect. He lodged me firmly into place while his comrade, this one's outstanding feature was a black bristly beard, went through my pockets with his thick fingers.

"Hey!" he growled. Malicious joy filled his features and revealed large crooked teeth. "What's this?" He drew his hand from my pocket. In it was a large white envelope folded in half. I'd never seen it before. I smiled as he held it up.

"You're in for it now!" said Fu Manchu and his grip on me slackened for a second—not quite long enough for me to overpower them and escape, but just enough time for him to pull a pistol or lead sap out of his pocket and dent my skull with it.

As I dropped into darkness I heard someone laughing.

Buy the **eBook** at shop.gwellstaylor.com or visit Wildclown.com to order the **paperback**.