

The Judge's Wife Part 9

by Daniel Harris

Saturday night. The judge, dressed in paisley print pajamas, sat in his living room watching Visconti's film adaptation of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. Gustave Mahler's poignant *Adagio* from the *Fifth Symphony* awoke the forbidden longings in the judge's psyche. The purity and beauty of the music reinforced his smoldering longings. Though the boy in the film, Tadzio, was older than he preferred, his body ached for the boy. Suddenly something clicked.

—Mahler! shouted the judge. That's it. That bastard Jack Mahler, he creates people. His spirit is in this house. He's the cause of my curse. That old Polish crone was on to something. She could see the rash! The rash is real. It almost killed the old crone. What was I thinking when I allowed this statue into my home?

The judge stopped the film and walked over to the statue. He dropped his pajamas. Reflected in the mirror on the stand were his genitals covered with a blue-green rash. He checked his face. There it was: the blue-green splotch. He grasped the extended left hand of the statue and squeezed. The rash disappeared. He checked his face. The rash was gone. The judge pulled up his pajamas.

Now he tried to remember: Did the statue give him the rash, or did he give the statue the rash? He was confused. Then he remembered the bird. The big raven with malevolent gold eyes. It was no ordinary bird. It had to be a messenger. Well, he got the message. He was infected. Now was the time for action.

He went to the garage and grabbed his Milwaukee Sawzall, inserted a new metal cutting blade and returned to the den. He would cut off the left hand of the statue at the wrist. Then he would dispose of the statue. Margaux wanted a divorce. Well, he'd get rid of her right now. He sure as hell didn't need this statue to remind him of her, or the misery her boyfriend, Jack Mahler, inflicted on him.

The fresh Sawzall blade made short work of the task. He took the amputated hand, still hot from cutting, into the bathroom. He stood naked in front of the full-length mirror. He experimented. When he touched the statue's hand, the rash faded. When he didn't touch statue's hand, the rash reappeared.

He had a plan. He took the severed hand out to his garage workshop. Using files and a sander, he smoothed the edges where he had made the cut. Knowing he could master the rash, he had the confidence to move forward. Variations on his plan filled his thoughts. His mind flew from idea to idea.

Back in the bedroom, he took a jock strap from his dresser. He carefully inserted the hand in the pouch. He liked the feel of the hand on his genitals. It was sexy, and it made a nice satisfying lump. All the horror of the ailment drained from his body. In Margaux's vanity mirror, there was no rash on his face. He checked his crotch: no rash. His intuitions were correct. The beauty of the solution was that no one could tell he had the amulet in his pants, and he no longer had the blue-green rash. Now for part two of his plan.

The judge took the keys to Margaux's Honda CR-V from the pegboard in the kitchen. He went into the den and lifted the statue off the table.

—Christ, he said, putting the statue back on the table. He tried several different handholds. Finally, by holding the statue's left arm and left leg, he could carry the statue.

This statue is heavier than fifty pounds. It must weigh a hundred pounds, he thought. Mahler picked it up effortlessly. For sure the S.O.B. has some special powers.

As the judge carried the statue to Margaux's Honda, the statue's left arm would come close to the severed hand nestled around his genitals. Each time the arm was near the hidden hand, there was an attractive force, pulling the statue against his body. It seemed as if the severed hand wanted to reattach itself to the arm. The arm kept twisting the body to be near the severed hand. It took the judge several tries to overcome this attractive force and wrestle the statue to the back of the Honda. With a final heave, the judge threw the

statue into the rear of the SUV. He covered the statue with a striped beach blanket.

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Jack Mahler, Margaux Howland and Margaux's son Troy, were dining at Gibson's, one of Chicago's favorite steak restaurants. The Saturday night clientele was a mix of sports and entertainment celebrities, tourists and neighborhood regulars.

Troy had never seen his mother so lovely and radiant. Margaux was all smiles. Her lover, Jack Mahler, wasn't at all what Troy imagined. Jack was six feet, moved with grace and had the gnarled hands of an artisan. Jack looked closer to fifty-five than his seventy years. Jack's rugged masculinity was the opposite of the judge's pampered good looks.

—I don't know about you, Troy, said Jack, folding his napkin and putting it on the table, but that's enough protein to fuel me for a week.

—Mom, said Troy as if Jack had offered a challenge, if you're not going to finish your steak, I'll take it.

Margaux held her plate while Troy transferred the remains of her steak to his plate.

—My growing son, said Margaux, patting Troy's hand. Here, take the potatoes, too.

Troy was tall and lanky like his mother. He looked more like a major league shortstop than an NFL defensive back.

Several of Troy's Chicago Bear teammates were also dining at Gibson's and visited their table. Troy introduced them to Margaux and Jack. On the Q.T. they all complimented Troy for having such a hot babe as a mother. One of Troy's teammates, who had also been a teammate of Troy's at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, asked Margaux if Jack was the Jack Mahler who wrote *The SoHo Quartet*.

—Yes, he is, replied Margaux, beaming with pride.

—My name's Steve Harris. I really enjoyed your books, especially the second one: *Francesco Martinelli*.

—Thank you, Steve, said Jack. That's my favorite, also

After dessert and coffee, Troy said he had to study game films.
—I'll see you after the game on Sunday, said Troy, kissing his mother.
—Glad to meet you, Mr. Mahler, said Troy, shaking Jack's hand.
—My pleasure. I'm looking forward to watching you play.
—Maybe, said Troy, with a shrug. Bear-Packer games are bitter rivalries. Coach may not want a rookie in a game against Aaron Rodgers. I might get some playing time on kick-off's and punts.
—You could have a chance at a game-changing moment, said Jack. Be ready for it.
—We'll see. Goodnight, mom. Don't do anything I wouldn't do, said Troy, winking and climbing into a cab.

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The judge drove into Jack Mahler's studio driveway. Jack's van was parked next to the studio. The judge couldn't remember if Jack owned a car or motorcycle in addition to the van. The lights were off in the studio. The yard lights were on a motion sensor and lit up the driveway and parking area.

The judge peered into the studio from the window in the door. He could make out a large object. It was too dark inside to know what it was. The judge returned to the Honda and looked for a flashlight. There was a flashlight, but the batteries were dead.

He walked to the house and rang the doorbell. A gray cat sat in the bay window watching the judge with the disdain domestic cats have for cat-haters.

If the cat's in the house, thought the judge, then Jack is probably away.

The judge leaned on the doorbell for twenty seconds. No answer. The cat had jumped from the window and now sat on the back of a sofa watching the judge.

That's good. No one's home, thought the judge. What are the chances the studio is alarmed? Probably pretty good. He walked back to the studio. Sure enough, there was a decal on the door window: Secured by ADT.

The judge looked at his watch:10 p.m. Plenty of time to attend to this later, thought the judge.

He backed the Honda out of the driveway and drove to Marina Jack. He loaded the bronze statue on a dolly and wheeled it to his boat.

—Evening, Judge, said the Harbor Master, an energetic red-haired woman in her forties.

—Evening, Cass.

—I hope you're not planning on going out tonight.

—No, tomorrow.

—There's a big sea running from those strong northerlies we've had all week. Big Pass is treacherous, and the sand bars probably have shifted. The surf has washed a lot of sand off of South Lido beach.

—If things have calmed down tomorrow, I might venture out.

—Well, be prudent. I pulled a lot of living and dead yachtsmen and fisherman from the water during my twenty years with the Coast Guard. These Florida inlets can be as wicked as anything up north.

—Judges are nothing if not prudent, said the judge.

Cass turned her electric cart around.

—Are you staying on your boat tonight? Cass asked, pulling even with the judge.

—I have some case reading to do. It's more peaceful here. The morning leaf-blower fest in my neighborhood is not conducive to serious study.

—I know what you mean. Well, Goodnight, Judge.

—Goodnight, Cass.

The tide was at maximum flood. The judge's boat, docked at the A-Dock along the sea wall, floated too high above the pier. He couldn't lift the hundred pound statue aboard now. He left it in the cart. On board, he set an alarm for four a.m. The tide should have ebbed enough to allow him to load the statue aboard his boat. He made a peanut butter sandwich and poured a generous scotch.

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The judge woke at 3:30 a.m. He put on jeans, a T-shirt and deck shoes. With the tide ebbing, the rail of his boat was below the level of the pier. He lowered the bronze statue of Margaux into the aft cockpit. He covered it with the beach blanket and lashed it to the fighting chair.

He gathered up a flashlight and the heavy axe he used to deliver the *coup de grace* to big sharks and strode to the parking lot. That bastard Jack Mahler was going to pay, thought the judge, and pay big-time. Two could play at these games. Mess with my head, you'll wish you never met me. I am going to render final judgment on your art, Mr. Artiste.

It was pitch-dark on Jack's street. The judge decided to park the Honda on the street. He walked up to Jack's studio and gallery. First, check all the doors and windows, he said to himself. He had to be careful not to become alcohol-brave and trip the security alarm.

He found where the telephone line entered the studio. He knew from countless robbery cases that a telephone line connected the central alarm center to the studio. He cut the line with the axe. Now he had to find a way to enter the studio.

He couldn't believe his luck. The bathroom window in the gallery was open a crack. The judge pushed it fully open and wiggled through the window. He didn't hear an alarm.

—Shit, said the judge under his breath. Squirring through the window his right hand had gone directly into the toilet bowl.

—Doesn't that jerk know to put the toilet seat down?

The judge rinsed his hands dried them on a towel. He grabbed the axe and flashlight and entered the studio. He saw the alarm panel by the front door. A red LED on the box was blinking. He walked to the panel. Printed under the blinking LED: SYS ERR.

I probably have a half hour before some factotum from ADT arrives, calculated the judge.

He flipped on the work lights. There on a wooden stand was the life-size alabaster statue of Margaux. It looked almost finished.

The judge's eyes gleamed. He relished the thought of destroying this replica of his unfaithful wife and her lover's efforts. He came to

destroy paintings, but now he could extract his revenge on Jack and Margaux.

He studied the statue looking for the best place to inflict damage. He didn't know what kind of stone it was, but he figured a few good blows from the axe would crack it apart. He couldn't believe how desirable Jack had made Margaux. She was fairly dripping with sexuality and beauty.

That Jack Mahler is some piece of work, thought the judge. Didn't he see the post-menopausal sagging of the flesh, the flaccid breasts, the thinning of the hair, the cellulite on the back of the thighs? Jack wasn't as good an artist as he thought. It was obvious his ego surpassed his talent. What made him think he was one for the history books?

The judge raised the axe over his head and brought the butt down on the crown of the statue's head. The axe stopped short of the statue's head and bounced out of the judge's hands, slithering across the studio floor.

—What the hell?

The judge looked at his hands. Blue-green slime dripped from his arm.

—Goddamit to hell. I forgot to take the hand! Gaaahhhhhhh! he yelled in frustration.

He retrieved the axe and looked for a new place to strike.

—Take this you whore, he howled, aiming the axe at Margaux's right arm. Again it rebounded out of his hand before touching the stone.

He studied the statue. He touched it with his bare hand. Instantly, a blue-green cloud hid the statue. A pestiferous stench filled the air. He could barely make out the statue in the blue-green fog.

—What's going on here? he said to the statue.

The judge retrieved the axe. He swung with all his strength where he thought the belly of the statue was. Again the axe rebounded as if it had struck a force before it touched the statue.

—Ah ha! Why is there no sound when the axe flies off the statue? Something is wrong here. What is protecting the statue?

The judge stood panting. The stench of the blue-green cloud made him nauseous. But, his blood was up. Years of withholding his real feelings about Margaux now came forth as rage. Unmitigated hatred. He looked at his hands and arms. Blue-green sludge covered his arms. The blue-green growth was making him crazy. His fury overwhelmed rational thought.

—Play with my head, Mahler, this is what you're going to get. You're going to suffer. I'm going to erase you from my life. You're going to wish you never met me.

The pestiferous cloud became stronger. Nausea overwhelmed the judge. He ran to the studio door and flung it open. He tripped on the doorsill, falling he vomited in the driveway. White maggots crawled in the blue-green spew.

Standing in the driveway, he couldn't make out Margaux hidden in the blue-green fog. He decided to push the statue over. The judge ran at the cloud full-tilt. When he entered the enshrouding cloud, there was a bright blue flash. The force of the blue spark threw the judge on his back. He didn't remember hitting the floor.

When he came to, he saw the statue of Margaux standing above him with that familiar seductive smile on her face. He thought he saw one of her big toes twitch. He crawled to Margaux's alabaster foot and bit the toe. Immediately his body convulsed and began to shudder.

—Ahhhhh, yelled the judge, running from the studio, blood gushing from his mouth.

Outside, he stopped and spat a tooth onto the gravel driveway. He wiped his mouth with his hand. The blood on his hand was blue-green.

He spotted the gold-eyed raven. The very vile bird that delivered the rash. It stood on the ground its eyes changing colors. The raven plucked the judge's tooth from the gravel, and flew away disappearing in a blue flash.

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Margaux screamed. She was writhing in pain. Jack snapped awake.

—What the hell? Sweetheart, what's wrong?

Margaux sat perspiring and holding her head with both her hands.

—Jack, It feels like someone hit me with a hammer.

Just then her upper body shuddered as if struck. Margaux's right arm snapped into an unnaturally twisted position. It was as if she was suffering from a stroke or some neurological attack..

—Christ, what's going on here? Should I call the hotel doctor? Jack asked.

—Just hold me, she said, wincing from another attack.

Jack took her in his arms. He could feel the tremors in her body. Not minor twinges like a muscle spasm, but gut-wrenching convulsions.

If she was having a seizure, he had to make sure she didn't swallow her tongue.

Jack pried her mouth open. At that moment, Margaux convulsed and bit Jack's hand. Blood poured from the wound. Margaux reflexively swallowed the blood filling her mouth.

Jack felt her body relax. Margaux gave him a tired smile.

—What the hell happened? asked Jack, wrapping his bloody hand in a towel.

She screamed again and shook her right foot.

—Something is biting my big toe.

Margaux lay back on the pillow covered with perspiration. Her nightgown and bedding were soaked. Her eyes smiled at Jack, but she looked exhausted. She held Jack's hand for comfort.

—Something weird was going on, said Jack. Sweetheart, I thought I was going to lose you. What was it? A stroke? A seizure?

—No, I'm okay. Nothing like that. It was something Carlos was doing.

—You mean Carlos, the gardener in Santa Fe?

—Carlos, she whispered. It was Carlos. When I bit you and your blood dripped into my mouth, for a brief moment I saw your studio.

The judge was trying to destroy your statue of me. Then I saw Carlos morph into a raven. I saw the judge run from your studio.

—Jesus Christ. Damn it to hell. I've gotta call ADT. What was the judge doing in my studio?

To be continued.

