

More news, another fugue...

by Mathew Paust

I didn't discover my cellphone was dead until the morning of our second day in Nags Head. This gave us until after lunch to pretend we were still on vacation, allowing for the phone to charge and me to remember to check it. There was one voice message. The number didn't ring a bell, and Lila would've called Rose or the cottage land line eventually. So I assumed it was a robocall, yet, as always, felt compelled to hear at least some of a message—could be a different phone, something urgent... The man's voice sounded vaguely familiar. He mumbled. Didn't catch his name, but I heard the “mister Stone,” and returned the call. Hopper Funeral Home. The little black man at Dad's service had been hit by a car. Hopper said he found an old newspaper article in the man's coat pocket he thought I should know about. I thanked him, and snapped the phone shut.

“Monkeydick?”

“As per Homer. Said he didn't know the guy's name.”

I was rinsing our lunch dishes for the washer. Rose was stacking them in the tray. I told her Hopper'd said the paper was so ragged and the print so faded he couldn't make out much of what it said except it was something about a shooting. What got his attention was the name “Joseph Stone.”

“An old paper?”

“That's what he said. I asked him if it was ‘*Judge* Joseph Stone.’ He didn't see the word ‘judge.’”

“So whattya think? Your dad involved in a shooting? You ever hear anything like that?”

“Not a clue. Whatever it was must've happened while he was still practicing. Probly represented this Monkeydick character. No big deal. He came to the funeral to pay his respects. Hopper said he was

still wearing the suit we saw him in, walking down Route 17. He said some young woman was driving. I left a message for Homer.”

Rose ran her hand up and down my back, tugged on my shirt. “You’re tense, Darlin’. Why don’t you go on out to the deck and get comfy. I’ll open that brandy. It’s too nice out there to waste inside.”

“I just have a weird feeling, Sweetheart. With that writer snooping around, and then this? Won’t take her long to find out, if she hasn’t already. No telling what it means.”

I was about halfway to the deck when the yet unfamiliar ringtone I’d switched to from *Beat Me, Daddy* (needed something more dignified in case I forgot to put it on vibrate and fell asleep on the bench) alerted me to Homer’s return call: Accident. Lost his footing. Stumbled into traffic. No ID...”

“What, dressed in a suit and no wallet? They don’t know who he is? It was Monkeydick, though, right?” I waited before telling her about the call until Rose had handed me the brandy in one of the snifter glasses she’d also found in the cupboard. Didn’t want to risk getting brandy spilled on me. Plus, I wanted a sip while trying to think of my next move. I nodded, took the sip, and gave the glowing flavors a moment to work their magic. It was good stuff. I nodded again, accommodating both my approval of the brandy and, for emphasis, her questions.

“Guess so. One of Homer’s jailers said he recognized the old guy. Said everybody called him Monkeydick. Just Monkeydick. No last name. Said everybody knew he’d served time for shooting some white woman. Homer said after a few more questions the jailer’s memory began failing him. “They don’t like to talk about one of their own. Can’t say I blame them much.” He’d fingerprinted the corpse, and expected to get the results back in about a week. I told Rose I’d like to go home, do a little digging.

“Well let’s give it the rest of this week. Weather’s so nice. Love this fresh air!”

“I don’t know...” I was on the verge of overruling her when it occurred to me I didn’t really want to go back so soon either. “You know, Lila can check the court records. If a black man shot a white

woman back then there'd have been one helluva fuss. Newspaper accounts, too, once we nail down the date." Rose smiled triumphantly, and I, distracted by the charm of her blatantly prejudiced concurrence atop another couple of heartening postprandial sips, and reassured by the crisp freshness of a perfect day with its ruffling cerulean (too majestic for just *blue*) ocean apron slyly reminding me of that pleasant weekend here with Dad and Lila...I managed to blow my wife a kiss as the edge of another wave of roiling fugue made known its arrival. Some heavy thinking lay ahead, but I felt pretty sure I could check off the lingering father/son estrangement box: he'd made a regrettable deal for Monkeydick long long ago, and the pain was deep, and it never went away.

Returning to my overarching worry--Amanda Mae Bass—I found myself in a death struggle with the swelling intuitive certainty that somehow *The Mercury* had gotten onto something murderous in Leicester that involved race and the new courthouse built on the site of an old whorehouse, and with the Stone family name paired with "Monkeydick" in national media, I retained on a sidebar bench the ultimate prospect of our changing it back to its Ellis Island "Stein."

