

The Case of the Incinerated Spinster

by strannikov

Inspector Blandtkrill was called in on the off-chance the old crone had succumbed to the wick effect. This would be the first case even suspected of being a wick effect event in the 409-year history of the Murdstowne Constabulary, which even in the seventeenth century had never burned a witch.

Blandtkrill took up the grim case with characteristic understatement and professionalism. He coughed and hacked amply with evident distaste as he entered the cramped four-room flat. (We shan't characterize the frankly disagreeable odor that hung heavily inside the poorly ventilated flat.) There by the opposite doorway opening onto the thinly carpeted kitchen lay—well, what seemed to be all that was left of Miriam Flagellporte, an elderly postal worker who had failed to report for duty for four consecutive days before actually being missed.

The old bat's spidery thin arms were clad still in the sleeves of her ratty gray sweater (the Inspector guessed it had been a cardigan, the sleeves were identical to those on a cardigan once worn by a maiden aunt on his father's side, her name escaped for now, but she had died when Blandtkrill was but five: as a matter of fact, he had next to no active memory of her until confronted with this pair of detached arms, other than infrequent flickers of the distinct visual memory of her own thin arms clad in her own ratty grey cardigan, batting him about the ears one afternoon after he'd cracked the plate glass covering her coffee table with two handfuls of marbles he had dropped).

Miriam Flagellporte's left arm (positive ID pending) had fallen to the base of the floor lamp (the bulb still burning, Blandtkrill observed tersely, the lampshade warm, dusty and yellow). Her right arm had fallen to the floor beneath the small dusty walnut table. Her

naked shins had wound up on the floor in front of where the chair (and she in it) had sat, the dark ends of the stumps almost touching, her feet still comfortably clad in her white Florsheim nurse's shoes.

The rest of her was all gone, the chair with her: a greasy black stain which does not merit laborious description held to the floor odd nails and tacks and bits of wood and a small handful of springs all coated in clumps of viscid black grease, all collected between the right arm under the walnut table and the left arm beside the floor lamp and between the pair of shoed shins before and the lightly shaded wall behind. The glass bowl holding popcorn atop the walnut table had not cracked, the popcorn itself was not scorched, nor was the walnut table itself, to speak of. A leaded glass ashtray with six cigarette butts (Camels, unfiltered, no lipstick) and an off-brand disposable lighter sat next to the bowl of popcorn.

Once the extremities had been gathered up and carted off to the morgue and the two photographers finally stepped out scratching their heads, Blandtkrill hesitated but then decided to sample the popcorn: worst mistake of his day. It was stale and heavily salted but had some other distinctly unappetizing flavor that he could not spit out, though he went straight to the kitchen to spit violently into the deep sink for at least ten minutes. Alone in the flat he searched the kitchen frantic and frenzied until he found some bottled red pepper sauce in the refrigerator. The Inspector gargled with a couple of healthy guzzles and finally began sensing relief. After gargling, he promptly vomited into the sink, then rinsed out it and his mouth with thorough repetition, returned what was left of the red pepper sauce to the fridge, and hurried from the scene.

At the morgue Dr. Snavelly confirmed the identities of the detached limbs found at the scene as all belonging to Miriam Flagellporte, based on fingerprints from her employment file and footprints accompanying her birth certificate. The coroner would not identify the source of ignition but, based on the available medical history, suggested that the deceased could have suffered a stroke or myocardial infarction while smoking. Inspector Blandtkrill recalled

signs of cigarette burns to the dusty top of the walnut table around where the ashtray sat.

After a fitful night's sleep, another long bout of vomiting, and over forty minutes with his dental floss, toothbrush, and trusted Listerine, the Inspector wrote up his report as day broke. He attributed the deceased's death to "combustion caused by accidental self-ignition", based on the results of Dr. Snavelly's autopsy of the four limbs and the scant evidence found at the scene. The floor lamp had held only a 75-watt bulb and could not be said to have contributed to the incineration.

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