

French Vanilla Death - Prima Parte

by Todd Maupin

She found him sprawled on the floor, facedown in the International Delight. Not surprisingly, even the defunct stranger had preferred the French Vanilla over the awful Amaretto. The coroner later determined that his demise occurred only two hours before the workday had begun. At the time, we only knew that our guest had been lying on the carpet long enough for the coffee spilled on him to have coagulated and almost completely dried, and for the French Vanilla to achieve the consistency of glue. Or, at least, a thicker glue.

Ann arrived early, as was her custom. Only 23 and technically only an assistant, her persistence, potential and talents often made her coworkers feel uneasy and threatened. She was petite, attractive, always impeccably dressed with her long brown hair inevitably stylish. Though the youngest and newest employee on our staff, she was arguably the most responsible and dedicated. Ann and I had a pleasant enough rapport despite a common theory that she was eventually to replace me. I was determined not to let this happen. When she entered, Ann did notice that the main entrance doors were unlocked but had reasoned that one of us must have arrived early to catch up on some lost time. Upon reaching her desk, she suspected that something was a bit askew. All of the interior office doors were closed and no light could be discerned through the narrow gaps beneath them. Furthermore, no radio music could be heard blaring. It was well known and understood that anyone arriving before Steve or remaining after him was bound to be awash in his or her choice of tunes as an unspoken reward for their own dedication.

By then concerned, Ann entered the coffee break room. The fact that

this room was already lit upon her arrival did nothing to surprise her. The electrical genius that had designed and outfitted this room had succeeded in wiring all of its outlets to the main light switch. Many of us have been forced to discard our once-frozen dinners or ice cream stashes following weekends when a new hire or janitor has unknowingly extinguished the room's light. More disturbing to Ann this particular morning than sour dairy products or spoiled condiments was the corpse on the floor.

In life, he had been a sizeable, intimidating man wearing a gray overcoat with a shabby brown suit barely visible beneath. In death, he shared this same shape and garments but was ambivalent to the coffee decanter resting haphazardly on his shoulder and the International Delight creamer cushioning his lifeless visage. Ann's initial thought, as she conveyed to us later, was that she was the mark in some tasteless and elaborate prank. Never having experienced death first-hand, outside of the occasional unfortunate pet, Ann reverted to her television and movie-gleaned knowledge as a guide to her peremptory investigation. Testing both the man's neck and his wrist, she detected no pulse. The lack of ripples in the stagnant creamer sharing the floor with the man's face told her that he was not breathing. It was at this moment that Ted arrived.

Long fearful of eventual job cuts, Ted had been making a recent effort to show Steve his inestimable value. This was not to say that he was now visibly contributing to the organization, working any harder or even completing any assignments, but Ted's diligence in simply coming to the office on a regular basis had been noticed. Ted was your organic garden-variety slacker. He had apparently graduated from college, though there was a wager circulating among some of us that his "degree" was not authentic, from an accredited institution, or perhaps the word "degree" having another meaning in language other than English. In any case, Ted was extremely likeable, laid-back and enjoyed an amiable relationship with all of us in the office. As long as there was no work,

commitment, or responsibility involved, you could depend upon Ted for anything.

This exact morning was an epilogue to an eventful night for Ted. He had entered the break room intending to employ the sweet java to carry him through to lunch. Seeing Ann standing over the corpse, he lifted his Halo sunglasses in astonishment. The three easy payments of \$19.95 would have to serve him later. Hearing footsteps, Ann turned her attention towards the new arrival.

"Who is that?" Ted asked.

"You mean, who was that, because he is dead," Ann shot back.

Ted was flummoxed. Obviously he was not prepared for anything so groundbreaking, at least not before Steve arrived, or maybe even ever. Ted rocked back on his heels and, catching himself, stared at Ann in disbelief.

"Okay, who was he?" he wondered aloud.

"I don't know. I've never seen him before. He either broke in, someone let him in, or he has his own keys." Ann's knowledge of Ted did not lead her to expect any valuable feedback.

"The door was already unlocked when I came in," Ted added, needlessly. Normally amazingly pale, Ted somehow seemed to be have become even pastier since entering the room. I would call it Eggshell White. The king of pop would have been jealous. I realize king of pop should be capitalized but I refuse.

Ann rolled her eyes. Snake eyes! "Yes, the doors were open for me, too. I thought someone else was here, but there is only him. We should call the police." Ann started towards the wall phone in the corner of the coffee room. When Ted grabbed her arm, she had only

moved a few steps.

"Wait! We should let Steve handle this situation. Not that I don't think we can do it, but maybe he will know a way to take care of it without too much excitement." Ted was noticeably uneasy.

Ann sighed. Ted's suggestion was not surprising. Ted's skill at shirking responsibility was astonishing. Unless someone were to have revealed to Ted that being a politician rarely involved actual work, he would have always been content to continue his unassuming role in the private sector. Though not politicians either, Ted's lips had been locked to Steve's backside ever since someone had stapled the "Job Market Slowing Down" newspaper article on the bulletin board. Ann knew this clipping was a sham, designed at Steve's request by Peggy, adroitly using Adobe's fantastical software. Peggy had revealed her role in this fabrication during a performance review in which Ann had observed. At the time, she had not reacted to the revelation, but during later consideration, Ann had admired Steve's motivational technique. No one wanted to see Ted lose his job. He was a great guy to have around, even though no one had ever witnessed him actually doing anything. Ted was harmless; he would not detract from an organization but would never contribute anything either. As a useless member of society no one would miss him, but having him around kept life interesting.

Ann yielded, "Okay, we'll wait. It is almost 8 o'clock so everyone should be here soon."

Ted seemed relieved and laughed nervously. "After all, it is not like he is going to become any more dead while we wait."

Good old Ted. Ann's theory was that Ted had once read "Let levity be your guide" on one of those motivational posters with the kittens hanging on ropes or climbing carpeted poles. Ann's theory further stipulated that the poster's caption might very well have been the

last thing that Ted had ever read. Recalling this theory brought a smile to Ann's face, which she shared with Ted. "I guess you're right."

"Right about what?" Peggy asked as she entered the break room. Seeing the corpse, she shuddered and looked to her co-workers for an explanation.

Peggy, the graphic designer, had been employed for quite some time, maybe over 25 years. Only Steve knew with absolute certainty and no one dared to ask him. Even though Peggy had long been with the company, she had managed to learn quickly and impressively well each and every one of the new-fangled and hip software packages making the rounds of the graphic design field. There are no flies on Peggy and nary a wrinkle. The word around the office attributed Peggy's youthfulness to some skillful nips and tucks. No one faulted Peggy for her appearance or for her value to the organization. If I had to name anyone who was absolutely essential and the most responsible for the company's success, this person would be Peggy. She was intelligent, vibrant and worthy of every cent that filtered down to her from the corporate coffers. Her power was deserved but also too strong.

Ann spoke first. "We don't know who he is. He is dead and was here when I arrived. The doors were already open when I showed up."

Peggy was not surprised to see Ann taking command of the situation. Not that Ted would have provided any resistance to her. Ted's crush on Ann is neither orange-flavored nor stored in a can but he had held it for Ann ever since she had been hired 6 months ago. Everyone but Ann is aware of Ted's feelings. She should have known. Ann sometimes voiced the phrase "I should have known," but I hesitate to believe she was ever referring to Ted's feelings. The gaze of every man passing through the office often lingered on Ann's sleek physique and less, but almost as frequently, on her pleasing

profile. Most certainly, Peggy and the other women in the office resented Ann's youth and sensuality. Unique among her feminine counterparts, Peggy's calculated and consistent self-confidence did not betray any of her envy. Peggy sincerely did admire Ann's resourcefulness and work ethic. There were no doubts in Peggy's mind that Ann would long be an important presence in this office or in any other in which she landed. Admittedly a bit jealous of Ann, Peggy did not feel threatened by her. She was on the knowing side of too many of Steve's secrets to fret about her own longevity in the office. Normally unperturbed by any new development, Peggy heard her voice crack as she spoke.

"Have you called anyone? The police? Steve?" Peggy was able to regain control of her vocal cords midway through the series of questions.

Surprisingly, Ted chimed in. He had always felt intimidated by Peggy because she seemed to be the only person within the office who was indifferent to him. Without fail, all of the others seemed content to see him. They noticed and smiled whenever he entered the room. Peggy was the exception. She might raise her brow to see who had joined her in a room but, if immersed in a project or task, she might not even glance at him. Trying to exhibit himself as competent with Ann was simple and self-serving, but voicing his ideas to Peggy required extraordinary trepidation.

"I told Ann that we should wait for Steve. He will be concerned about the PR of this whole thing..." Ted smiled at Ann while he spoke, but while he was turned towards Peggy, his eyes lowered so that he was looking at her feet.

Speaking of the devil, Ted turned as Steve entered. It was without shock that Steve converged on the scene without first depositing his coat and briefcase in his office. Steve only manages to be a fraction of himself each morning until he had sipped the Colombian nectar

from his nondescript, brown coffee mug. Only Peggy knew that, some afternoons, most frequently on Monday, but not always, that into this cup is poured a bit of bourbon. Steve was aware that Peggy knew of this but she did not know that he knew she knew, as I knew it. Peggy was also in the dark regarding Steve's knowledge of some of her own privileged information. Due to the disarray on this particular morning, Steve's morning crutch was not there to support him. However, inside the coffee break room, sprawled out on the floor and soaked in coffee and French Vanilla creamer, a substitute eye-opener he did find.

"Peggy, who is this man?" When in doubt, Steve always looks to Peggy for answers. Nearly 99% of the time, she is able to satisfy him. This was another of the reasons for which Peggy only considered Ann a casual threat. Without her, Steve would not have known where to turn in certain situations. Ann could ingratiate herself as much as possible but her ambition could only serve her to an extent. Steve is, first and foremost, a creature of habit. As long as they were holstered at his side, Steve's guns were where he would stick.

"We don't know, Steve. Ann found him when she came in this morning. He is dead." Peggy was no longer having any problems measuring her speech and dishing out the words in her usual, regulated tone.

"Have you called the police yet?" Steve asked. The two women shook their heads then looked at Ted, who hesitated. This could be a loaded question. Maybe Steve had wanted us to call the police so he would not have to bother with the hassle himself? Maybe his instincts had been incorrect? Ted inhaled deeply before speaking. He felt secure despite the sudden misgivings. After all, what would they do in the office without him?

"I thought that we should wait for you. We haven't been here very

long and I guess I thought you'd know best how to handle this from a PR standpoint. Maybe you know someone on the force who could help keep this quiet for the company's sake?" Ted employed his smallest, most innocent smile as he addressed Steve. Smiling was effortless because uttering the word "force" made him think about the original Star Wars films, but not the prequels. Certainly not the pod racing scene.

"Good thinking, Ted. The fewer people who know about this the better. Who else is here?" Steve scanned the coffee break room to ascertain that he had not previously overlooked anyone before he had noticed the body.

"Just the three of us, and now you." Ann answered calmly.

"The others will be arriving shortly. It is not quite 8 o'clock yet. Far be it for anyone to ever be early around here." Steve sighed, glancing at Ted, who laughed uneasily. Our department was relatively small. There were only eight of us. Before the age of automation, there had been many more, according to Jenkins. Many of my colleagues had voiced their amazement that the dead weight known as Ted had not been dispatched long ago. I knew better. Ted was like a box of baking soda. His purpose would never be truly apparent unless he was not there.

Ann chose the opportunity to shine Steve's apple. "Jenkins is on vacation and Mike will be in late because of an appointment. The others should be here."

She was correct in saying that I had an appointment. This was the exact morning that I had scheduled to visit my dentist. It was not at all a social visit; he did clean my teeth and found time for some drilling. Of course, he had made the "relax, this is just a drill" joke. It may have been more amusing the 300th time I heard him say it. After that it had started to grow stale. My dentist may not know the

fine points of comedy but he is well versed in teeth, which is why I still frequent his office. Considering the way the events had unfolded, I had selected an opportune day to have a premeditated late arrival.

As for Jenkins, by now it was almost by default that he would be away on vacation on any given day. Hired at the age of eighteen, Jenkins had served the company in some capacity for well over fifty years. None of us actually knows his first name and would not have addressed him as such even if we did. Doing so would have been like calling your grandfather by his first name. Even Fran tended to treat Jenkins respectfully. During his lengthy tenure, he had accrued such an amazing quantity of vacation time that he often stayed away from the office for weeks or months at a time. This was not to say that he did anything exciting or even interesting. He just did not do them here. In spite of his absences and sabbaticals, Jenkins' work was never lacking. To his credit, he managed to accomplish about five times more than Ted in only a fraction of the man-hours. Certainly, any number multiplied by zero yields a product of zero. Mathematics comes best to those who are cold and calculating but, even so, the subject is not my forte. The monotony of Jenkins' job allowed him to complete his tasks years in advance. At one occasion when he had actually been in the office, he had admitted to me that he had prepared everything for the subsequent ten years. I have nothing against Jenkins and wish him every bit of goodwill. No one could fault him for using the vacation time he had earned. Each time that we saw him was a shock. This morning had already provided everyone with one surprise. I, for one, did not need another.

"If Jenkins is out this week, Ted, you'll need to cover for him," Steve said absentmindedly, as an after-thought. He was still staring at the corpse as if his gaze could raise the dead or, at least, make it roll over.

"Sure thing, Steve," Ted responded eagerly. Ted had once told me, at

one of Frank's parties, that his ambition was to have Jenkins' job when the old man retired. Some had said that Ted was a bit slow, but I was not one to underestimate him. It takes incredible cunning and skill to get by in life by doing as little as absolutely possible.

"Don't we have a liaison who works with the police for situations like these?" Ann asked. She must have been the only employee on the planet who had actually read the corporate procedures manual. Peggy remained expressionless. Had she been alone in her office, she would have rolled her eyes or muttered something. Ted just stared at Ann, much like he always did during meetings, gatherings or at any given moment during the working day.

"Yes, there is someone. I'm going to give her a call," Steve informed everyone and after casting a forlorn glance at his dry coffee mug, started to leave the room. He paused just outside the doorway and half-turned towards the group. "Are you sure that none of you know this man?" he asked.

"No," Ann said. Subconsciously, she ran a hand through her hair, which caused Ted's follicles to tingle. Ted was mesmerized, but still managed to speak.

"Nope, " he added. Ted seemed relieved. Nervous about his job, Ted felt that anything which called Steve's attention elsewhere meant that the boss would not be thinking about him.

"We've never seen him before," Peggy repeated. Peggy knew exactly whom Steve would be calling and even had she known the corpse's identity, she would not have admitted it. She had no desire to be drawn deeper into an already unpleasant situation. The production stills on her desk were enough to occupy her days at this point in time.

Steve continued on to his office. The three remaining in the coffee

break room heard the sound of voices in the hall. One of these was that of Steve. The other, a feminine voice was presumably Fran. The idea of dealing with Fran on top of everything else seemed almost more unpleasant than what lay at their feet.

Fran was the personification of disgruntled. She had the entire cast of "CHIPS" on her shoulder and, sadly, this was the best work Erik Estrada has enjoyed in years. Fran resented Frank because his name was too similar to hers, and Ann because their names rhymed. Fran was the type of person who drives as close as possible to the curb on rainy days with the explicit intent of dousing pedestrians with standing water. Surly though she is, Fran was equally skilled as "office manager," her self-nominated role. Her official title was "receptionist." On her watch, no one ever crossed the office threshold unless they were on the payroll or she had first given them her explicit permission. Steve had promised us that he would have a friendly chat with her following her ten-minute interrogation of Jenkins' grandchildren. Only with Fran acting as a watchful escort were they finally allowed to see their "Papaw" in action. I had assembled my doubts that Steve had ever spoke with Fran about her curt behavior. My harbored doubts about Steve as a leader were so many that I was running out of room for them at port.

Fran peeked around the corner. Steve had most likely told her that something ominous had occurred in the coffee break room. Intent on keeping abreast of every new development and to maintain the flow of her gossip mill, Fran had to know with all certainty what had happened. Because she was such a disagreeable person, we all wondered who she called several times daily to spread her gossip. Ted's theory was that she had someone captive who was bound and gagged but attached to a phone, with the exclusive purpose of listening to Fran spout off on the latest tedium. Fran had something on every one of us. We could never determine how she learned our most intimate secrets, but she possessed vivid knowledge of whatever we had hidden or were hiding. Unlike Peggy who seemed

content just to know our secrets, Fran used these tidbits to her advantage. Whenever she wanted or needed something from any of us, or did not relish doing what we had asked, she alluded to some piece of privileged information. There was not one person in our office that would have regretted Fran's departure. I, for one, wanted her gone but have become frustrated because the proper channels to do so have brought nothing but static.

"What - oh goodness! Who is that man?" Fran asked after her gaze had panned around the room in search of what was amiss.

Ted, our emissary to Fran, swallowed and spoke. "We don't know who he is, but he is definitely dead. Ann found him," he blurted quickly.

"I suppose Steve went to call someone? Or must I do it?" Fran wanted to know. She was just staring at the corpse so to whom her words were directed was unclear. The corpse was not likely to answer. Not that I could blame him - I also tried to avoid talking to Fran. By default, this was Ted's territory.

"No, Fran. Steve says he knows someone. I had suggested that we wait to call the police because Steve might know someone who can keep this quiet," Ted reassured her.

"Yes, we don't want people blabbing all about this to everyone they know," added Ann. A brief smile flashed across Peggy's face but she seemed to be the only person who understood Ann's veiled jibe at Fran's expense.

Fran looked skeptically at Ted, as if she did not believe the information given her. She seemed on the verge of saying something, but then, nodding slowly, suppressed her words. Had it been anyone other than Ted who had explained the situation, Fran would not have bought the story. She was a discriminating shopper

when it comes to information, but is normally satisfied with Ted's merchandise. Of all of us, Ted had the best relationship with Fran. Their rapport approached being amiable. This is just Ted's way and probably one of the reasons Ted was still with us. Frank told me once that he would not have touched Fran with a 10-foot pole. A 10-foot pole may have been more productive in the office, but Ted had more personality. Personality had gone a long way for Ted.

"Has anyone looked at his wallet to find out who he is?" Fran asked as she set her bag down on the floor and scooted it into the corner with her foot. She started to move towards the body when Ted's words made her pause.

"Uh, we better not. I've watched a lot of cop movies and they don't like you to interfere with a crime scene," Ted cautioned. Suddenly, he seemed self-confident. This could have been attributed to his fear of what Steve would say or maybe as bravado for Ann's benefit.

A new voice from the doorway agreed. It was Frank. "During Navy special ops training, they instructed us never to touch the body," he explained. "Leave it to the authorities, they told us." Frank never missed a chance to incorporate his navy experiences into the topic du jour. The navy had served him well, providing a work ethic to which he still adhered. He consistently accomplished more by 8:00 am than he did during the entire rest of the day. Frank was our lead programmer. Whenever Steve needed a new database or Peggy's software did not allow her to do what she sought, Frank jumped feet-first into the code and found the solution. Maybe it had been coincidence, but it always seemed suspicious to me that whenever Frank was vacationing, the network always seemed to encounter some serious problem. Most of us were willing to endure the bugs or slowdown until Frank returned, but Fran's complaints were so persistent and shrill that Steve was forced to call Frank just to placate her. If Frank was in the area, and he usually was, he would wander in, check the coffee break room for any free food and then

flip a switch or reboot some server to solve the problem. I know enough about computers to suspect that Frank's "inestimable value" to our office was mostly self-inflicted.

"Isn't anyone curious? Don't you want to know why this guy was here, in our office?" Fran looked around at everyone, trying to force eye contact with each of her coworkers. Only Ted met her gaze and squirmed uncomfortably until she looked away. Fran continued towards the body. "No one has seen anything yet. They could not be certain that his wallet was not in his hand when he died." She played quite the devil's advocate when she was not just being devilish.

"What, do you suppose that he was putting some money in the coffee expense donations jar?" Frank asked. "Why would anyone come into an office where they are not welcome and proceed to fish out their wallet?"

"How do we know that he isn't supposed to be here? Maybe someone from upper management sent him to check up on us?" Peggy ventured. Considering how much she knew about everyone else, it was astonishing how much Peggy resented the idea of someone scrutinizing her life and activities.

"If that were the case, Steve would have known who he was." Fran said, pleased at herself for ruining Peggy's hypothesis.

"Maybe he was sent to monitor Steve too?" Frank responded with a grin at Fran. This was not the best time for an "in your face" or "your mama," so Frank just thrust out his chest in a gesture of beaming pride.

"What if he was not sent for corporate reasons but to harm someone?" Ann proposed.

"I don't understand the distinction," Frank remarked slyly.

"Why would anyone want to hurt anyone in our office? We're decent enough people," Ted contributed to the speculation.

"Well, I know that no one wants to hurt me. I go to church and everything," Fran reasoned. She looked calmly at the others and did not read the others' stifled guffaws as anything but sudden, spontaneous bursts of coughing. We have contemplated at length what kind of church would embrace the patronage of a person such as Fran. I will admit ignorance about most religions but I knew that Fran fully deserved whatever final destination she reached.

"Whether he had sinister reasons for coming to our office or not, he is not going to hurt anyone now," Ann stated.

"So why should be afraid to check his pockets?" Fran asked, again starting to reach towards the body.

"We had just better not touch him," Ted repeated. "The forensics investigators will know if we did."

"What does a forensics team do, Ted? Do you know?" Peggy asked. Every so often Peggy felt the need to strip Ted down verbally in front of everyone. The embarrassment never seemed to move Ted towards resentment.

Ted responded with a blank stare. A nightly dosage of CBS television programs had drawn his interest into forensics but had apparently done little to increase his knowledge. Ann came to his aid. Recently graduated from an apparently prestigious university, she had audited a class on the subject. "They can determine precisely if the body was moved or tampered with, in any way. And they can determine from fingerprints who it was who moved it," she warned. Though from a more reliable source, this generic explanation could also have been gleaned from television.

"We could just tell them that one of us stumbled over him in the darkness," Fran offered.

"That explanation would only work if this room was not the marvel of modern electricity that it is. Even if we all synchronized our stories, someone would eventually blurt out that the lights in this room always stay lit," Frank reminded everyone. Fran's lips quivered as her mind frantically searched for a comeback. Apparently her inner hamster had taken a break from running on his proverbial wheel, because no response came. The little guy must have stopped to quench his thirst.

"It is best to leave him as we found him. When Steve's people and the police have sorted everything out, they will tell us who he was," Peggy stated with a glance at her watch. The piles of documents on her desk were certainly not going to diminish without her personal involvement.

"Don't be so sure, Peggy," Frank interjected. "If he is a government agent with top-secret clearance, he will just be quietly carried away without a word. Unless someone has the required clearance, they will remain in the dark. Even my Navy clearance is no longer high enough to be in the know." Again with the Navy. Probably even the Village People would have tired of the frequency that Frank rattled on about the Navy.

"They cannot just make him disappear. They will have to debrief us, right?" Ted asked.

"Debrief us of what?" Ann wondered. "We don't even know anything anyway. There is a dead man on the floor in our break room. This is not exactly an international secret." Ann's remark seemed to return everyone's thoughts to reality. What followed was a period of silence. Peggy was about to suggest that they all proceed to their

offices, but before she could, Steve returned.

Though aware that everyone was analyzing his face for clues revealing what he had gleaned from his secretive conversation, Steve was remarkably stone-faced as he addressed everyone. "Okay, listen up. Through our corporate channels, both internal security and the police have been notified. We can expect our guys shortly but it is anyone's best guess as to when the boys in blue may arrive." Steve's expression softened after he finished speaking. I have always considered Steve as one who was hesitant to discuss a subject unless he knew more about it than anyone else. Most likely his contact told him very little with regards to what would happen next.

"Did anyone notify the FBI?" Ted asked innocently, with all apparent serious and conviction.

"No, why would we drag the FBI into this?" Steve seemed surprised at the question.

"Believe me, if the FBI needs to be involved, then they already know what is going on here," Frank chimed in. "You can say the same for the CIA, Secret Service and whatever other agency comes to mind."

Peggy rolled her eyes. "Frank, don't encourage them. You know as well as I do that the FBI is not at all concerned with the daily events of our office. Our actions are well beyond their radar. They have no reason to monitor what goes on here, do they?" Instead of having the desired effect, Peggy's words seemed to convince her that maybe we were all under somewhat of a microscope after all.

"A dead body is not ordinarily of federal concern," Steve clarified. "If this were to become of interest to the FBI for any reason, the local police would notify them." This reassurance seemed almost prepared and resulting from another's mouth, as if Steve was regurgitating a statement told to him just minutes earlier.

"So what does this mean for us? Should we start working as per normal and just wait to be interrogated as the day grows long or should we wait right here?" Fran possessed the innate skill to complain while she asking a question. Maybe it was the body language, tone of her voice and carefully included sighs that made the question seem less genuine.

Steve opened his mouth to announce his command decision but was rescued by the arrival of corporate security. Steve's subsequent slinking from the room was unobserved by the guard. Aside from seeing them skulking around at holiday gatherings, few of us have ever had cause for direct dealings with our protectorate. Individuals who enjoy careers in the private security field are often given a raw deal. Not all of them are Barney Fife incarnate with the lone bullet carefully stashed in their pocket. Would we be so lucky! More often you will encounter folks who truly do "enjoy" their line of work, almost to obsession. These are your card-carrying NRA members, militiamen (and women), and the weekend warriors who have opted not to limit their passion just to 28.6% of their week. Our security representative fell somewhere within the middle of the spectrum. Hank showed all indications of being friendly and dedicated to his profession. However a few minutes with him were sufficient to reveal that his main motivation was authority. Not to be misunderstood: the rules, in and of themselves, did not really matter to him. What pleased him to no end was his right to punish anyone daring to infract upon the rules. Hank was nearing his mid-thirties and just starting to develop a paunch. His uniform did not quite make him seem like a real law-enforcement official but, nevertheless, presented him as an imposing presence so early in the morning.

Hank wasted no time with greetings. "Which of you found the body?" he asked without lifting his gaze from the corpse.

"I did." Ann said loudly. Hank did not turn to her immediately. He seemed to be studying the corpse. Once he appeared satisfied that our unexpected guest was truly deceased, he focused his attention on Ann. Frank told me later that while Hank was addressing Ann, he almost expected the guard to turn his attention suddenly and slyly back towards the corpse as if he were afraid of second base being stolen.

"Has anyone touched the body?" Hank asked. His presence of mind was admirable. Most men who talk with Ann have some initial difficulty in forcing their mouths to operate properly. Hank did not fall prey to the peanut butter mouth syndrome, as did some of our best and brightest. Maybe he would have been curious to hear more about Frank's time in the Navy.

"Not that I know of, no," Ann responded. What followed was a series of questions already asked and answered. Ann confirmed that she did not know who had been the man who was now absorbing our French Vanilla. She had noticed no signs of forced entry when she arrived other than that the main doors were already unlocked. She explained entering the coffee break room only because she had reasoned that someone else must have unlocked the doors but noticed no signs of life anywhere within the office. Most definitely, there were no signs of life in the coffee break room, unless one makes note of what was growing in the ancient take-out containers on the refrigerator door.

Hank interrogated each of the others in turn. The information given was less than revealing. It gave cause to wonder what was Hank's true purpose at this point. He did not have a notepad or even seem interested in the identities of anyone with whom he spoke. Frank's theory was that Hank had been sent to make sure that none of us touched the body until the real police arrived. Hank, power monger that he was, parlayed this duty into a means of being intimidating and making the corporate civilians uncomfortable. Or maybe Hank

was only meant to distract us while something truly underhanded or covert occurred behind the scenes. Whether his purpose was legitimate or just an elaborate smokescreen, Hank seemed satisfied or at least indifferent about everything he uncovered while questioning my coworkers. When reliving the experience later, Ted insisted that Hank had delved into highly personal territory during their interchange. Although Ted was prone to exaggeration and paranoia, Frank gave credence to Ted's words. Perhaps, Frank was merely trying to antagonize Ted, which he loved to do almost as much as talk about the Navy.

Shortly after Hank had completed his interrogations, he departed as abruptly as he had arrived. Just as he filtered out of the coffee room, a pair of tired detectives wandered in, followed by a wide-eyed patrol officer in a crisp, bright and shining uniform, which could have been a rented costume. The detectives were more settled into their plain-clothes garb than was the junior officer. The senior officer wore a shabby, wrinkled suit, which the office's feminine contingent described as featuring absolutely no matching pieces. He appeared as Columbo, only without the trench coat or Peter Falk's charm and shot-in-the-dark brilliance. The detective stifled a yawn as he waved his badge to identify himself as Barnes. After he had scanned the room and filed a mental note of everyone's presence, he checked his watch. This gesture's purpose might have been to determine when he had arrived on the scene, or, more likely, Barnes was already bored by the tedium. His partner was not named Noble, as he immediately told us. This little icebreaker brought smiles to everyone in the room, except for the other two policemen. The joke actually brought wincing to their respective faces; no doubt they had heard this "off-the-cuff" remark several thousand times, at least. The junior man was in fact, named Briggs. He was dressed more sharply and carried himself with the zeal and excitement of one who is newly assigned to a position. Probably he had been recently promoted. He casually introduced the patrolman as Sanford, but his tone was similar to revealing what kind of hot dog buns were served

at a picnic, indicating that the patrolman's name was superfluous information at best.

The detectives might have employed the familiar good cop, bad cop routine, but this probably would have been a dull show for Barnes. As it was, Briggs took the lead and did so with gusto. And so commenced another round of questioning. Unlike those administered by Hank, Steve was present this time. He even participated, throwing in comments and explanations designed, I imagine, to protect the company's better and vested interests. Barnes and Briggs seemed annoyed by Steve's constant interruptions, while Sanford appeared oblivious to everything that was not Ann's legs. Ann, as always, used her body to her advantage, and quickly escaped the limelight. Ted's skittishness made it appear that he was hiding something. Even though we liked having him around, Ted was not a popular addition to our poker games because of his personality. Frank answered each question with a question, or attempted to incorporate a naval anecdote into each response. Peggy's cold and distant demeanor served to lessen the number of questions directed towards her. Fran played her familiar role of hostile witness. The only twist was that this time she was a witness in addition to her habitual hostility.

Throughout these exchanges nothing truly groundbreaking was unearthed. It was again established that no one was acquainted with the deceased or knew how or why he had come to lie in the coagulating creamer that morning. When Frank and Ted poured over the event later for my benefit, they did not emphasize many details. They did mention one unexpected and unusual confrontation.

"Could we have a list of everyone who has keys to the main door?" Briggs asked, mainly to Steve, but more to Ann's legs.

"A list, if there is one, would be held by our security department. I

could..." Steve started to explain.

"No, Steve, I have one in my desk," Fran chimed in helpfully. Although being helpful is against her true nature, she unfailingly did just that if it meant contradicting someone else or making them seem foolish.

"Thank you, Fran. I forgot that you keep a copy of the list," Steve noted, his tone indicative of how ungrateful he was, juxtaposing his spoken words. Fearless as she was, Fran ignored the subtext of Steve's statement. She strolled out of the coffee room towards her desk and quickly returned with a file folder. Within seconds, she extracted a sheet and handed it to Sanford. Sanford nearly gasped and held the sheet as if it were toxic waste, a baby in need of changing, or a Hot Pocket. (you choose the flavor) His arms outstretched, he passed the paper to Briggs, who accepted it gleefully, on par with all of his actions. He glanced it over then passed his gaze from Ted to Steve.

"So, everyone here has a key except for Mr. Zinsky," Briggs summed up for all of us. Ted, the aforementioned Mr. Zinsky, appeared startled, as if he expected that his father to be suddenly on the scene. According to Frank, Ted's expression morphed from initial surprise, into one indicating deep concentration, then irritation as being the only keyless individual in the room, and finally preoccupied embarrassment at the thought of why he was the only one not to be entrusted with a key.

"Do Mike and Mr. Jenkins have keys, too?" Ted blurted out.

Steve shot him a look that clearly stated his question was not welcome, but answered regardless. "Yes, both of them also have keys. Due to the nature of their positions, they need to have unlimited access to our office," Steve responded, wanting to clarify his reasoning for the benefit of the police but not wanting to justify

his decision to Ted.

"When will I get my key?" Ted asked. A pin did not drop at this moment, but it might have been heard over the undetectable rustling sound of the corpse decomposing. No one was willing to cut the tension with the police on the premises. Finally our city's finest came to the rescue and without needing any more clichés to do so.

"You have all presented very helpful and useful information," Briggs told everyone. Ted appeared relieved to hear these words and his hands almost stopped shaking for a moment, until...

"Where are these other employees? This 'Mike' and 'Mr. Jenkins' that - Barnes scanned his notepad - 'Ted' mentioned?" Barnes spoke for the first time in quite a while, projecting his question as more profound and meaningful than most of those tossed off by Briggs.

Ann repeated what she had said earlier. "Jenkins is on vacation and Mike has an appointment with the dentist."

Barnes nodded. "We would like to speak with them, too. When do you expect their return?"

"We'll have to check the calendar, but Jenkins might not return for weeks. He has several vacation days accumulated," Steve said apologetically.

Barnes mumbled something that sounded like 'lucky bastard,' but vocalized "And what about Mike? What is his last name, by the way?"

Fran jumped on the question like a dropped nickel at the supermarket. "Mike Seaver. His last name is S-E-A-V-E-R," Fran sang triumphantly. Have I mentioned that she did not like me? Or anyone, for that matter.

Believing that Fran was not going to volunteer any additional information, Barnes looked to Ann. Ann understood what was wanted. "He should be arriving within the hour," she stated.

"Super! We will finish things up in here and we'll hope to speak with Mr. Seaver before we leave. Thank you for all your help. You can go about your day," Briggs enthusiastically unleashed everyone upon the day's work.

Barnes spoke next, calling towards the patrolman "Sanford, son, call the coroner's office." With that morbid development, everyone filtered out of the coffee room to their respective offices and desks.

