

French Vanilla Death - Seconda Parte

by Todd Maupin

Barnes, Briggs and Sanford had about thirty minutes at their disposal before the cavalry arrived. Because the door was closed, no one could tell for sure what they did during this time. Fran later insisted that they consumed some of her Nutra-Grain bars and made some packets of her ginseng, herbal tea disappear. Cleaning up after a homicide is thirsty work, I imagine, and no one should skip breakfast. Probably the main duty of three men was to keep the civilians' tainting touch far from the crime scene. Judging from the array of fantastical gadgets that the coroner's forensic team brought with them, the real action did not occur until their heralded arrival.

Two bored men and three annoyed women in green jumpsuits composed the forensic group. Each carried some type of frightening and ominous tool, which seemed to have lost all luster for their bearers. They spoke to none of my colleagues during their trek through the office to the coffee break room. The lead man, who did not seem to be the most important or distinguished, just the one walking in line before all of the others, knocked twice on the door and opened it quickly. He stepped gingerly through the doorway and the others filed gloomily in after him. The woman in the rear, looked over her shoulder and, scowling, closed the door firmly.

An hour passed before I arrived at the office. Admittedly, I was surprised to see my co-workers leap from their desks to come towards me. They acted in such a rapid, drastic motion that I almost perceived their movement as threatening. You might say I was shaken, not stirred. Normally no one gave a dry fig when I entered. Although my colleagues seemed to hold me in fond regard, for the most part, they were too busy to dote upon my every move.

Ted won the race and reached me first, began chirping excitedly. "Mike! Mike! You won't believe what happened!"

Fran was next. She was not at all quick but she ran a dirty race, deftly sliding trashcans in the paths of others or indiscriminately and strategically opening file cabinet drawers. "Quiet, Ted! They might hear you! We were told not to talk about what we have seen," Fran reminded everyone.

"Relax, Fran," said Frank, "They will be talking with Mike soon enough and he has as much right as us to know what happened." Frank seemed to take particular delight in contradicting Fran. Some offices play softball but opposing Fran did more to unite us and build cohesion and unity. Well, at least most of us. Fran never has been as enthusiastic about this game.

Ann took her cue from Frank. "The detectives said they would be talking with Mike, Fran. On any other given morning, he would have been there along with us when we found the body."

The body?! This peaked my interest. "Did something happen to Jenkins?" I asked. Jenkins was supposed to be on vacation, like always, but he was the kind of person who would die at work as a reminder of his dedication.

"No, Mike. A mysterious man was found dead in the break room this morning," Peggy explained. It was surprising to see Peggy out of her office among us, during the meat of the day. Maybe she had reached a good breathing point in her designs. Nevertheless, I should have realized that something important had occurred if Peggy appeared to greet me. I was nearly astonished to see her, live and in person, along with the others, when I arrived at the office.

Steve even made an appearance. His face was ashen and he seemed

tired. Asking someone if they are tired is the exact opposite of paying someone a compliment. My advice is never to do raise this question of anyone. It is akin to remarking to someone how overweight he or she might be. Fat chance that I would ever do that! Quickly concocting a scenario in my head, I reasoned that a death in the coffee break room meant jilted Joe for Steve. "Mike, I'd like to see you in my office right away," Steve ordered, yawning.

"Ooh, someone is in trouble," Ted taunted.

Steve glared at Ted. "How are those reports coming, Ted?" he asked. At that exact moment, something incredibly captivating must have happened at Ted's feet, because this was here where he suddenly directed all of his attention.

"They're coming..." Ted mumbled as he slinked away to his desk.

Everyone seemed to realize that Steve had seized all inalienable rights to the last word and shuffled back to their respective desks. "I'll be right there, Steve," I added. Like a zombie, Steve stalked back to his office. I deposited my briefcase and coat on my desk. Normally, I would have needed to enter the break room to begin the refrigeration of my bagged lunch. This day, however, I had not brought my lunch with me because I had not planned on spending the entire day in the office.

Having located my bearings, I headed for Steve's office. Throughout my walk, I knew without verification that all of my coworker's eyes had been lifted from any respective tasks to focus upon me. I felt like Sean Penn while he was engaging in his fateful walk. Someone could have blurted out "Dead Man Walking" at this point, but it would have been inappropriate here, just like it would have been for Penn during his wedding to Madonna. Not to be forgotten were the police-sanctioned ghouls in the coffee break room. They were irritable enough as it was; no need to draw their ire. Besides, Steve

was not going to reprimand me for any wrongdoing, of this I was certain. What did I have to do with anything?

Steve's office door was ajar, but I did knock twice quickly before pushing it open. Before finding my way to the guest seat in front of Steve's chair, I closed the door behind me. It was not that I was concerned about the privacy of our conversation, but I knew that the closed door was a torturous barrier for my interested colleagues. From my seat, I glanced around Steve's office for any new developments while my superior stared sleepily across his desk towards me. There was a bit of uneasy silence before either spoke. We both knew what today's buzzword was. During my stroll to his office, I had elected to force Steve to open the conversation. Seeing him squirm, hedge and stammer always provided for me some wry satisfaction.

"Okay, Mike. You've already heard some tidbits about what happened, so here goes. Ann found a dead man in the coffee break room this morning. None of us knew who he is, or was. I notified corporate security, which, likewise, involved the local authorities. Obviously you have not had the chance to see the corpse yet but I highly doubt that you know him anyway," Steve uttered these lines quickly, taking his breaths in the most awkward moments, in the middle of words or syllables. Even Ted would have noticed Steve's uneasiness.

"I'm sure the police will show him to me before they haul him away. Before or after the third degree, I'll wager," I plunged head first into the conversation to end Steve's agony. I do not like to see people suffer, nor suffer myself, so I was doing both of us a favor. Suffering occurs every day. Certain people even deserve to suffer, and occasionally I have caused suffering. I do not seek to be misunderstood here: suffering can be beneficial, even necessary. I just do not seek to be witness to it. Let someone else do the dirty work.

"Yes, they will be speaking with you. I have told them that you have a key to the front doors, like all of us," Steve warned.

"Except Ted," I reminded him.

"Of course, Ted does not have a key," Steve acknowledged with a smirk. Ted had been given a key to the coffee break room, which also unlocked the front doors. Apparently, Ted had never ventured to try. And why would he ever need to do so? Someone was always here when he arrived, he invariably departed when the 5 o'clock chime was still resonating and Ted was not one to come in of his own accord during after-hours periods. "I did tell the police about our little joke at Ted's expense, and they agreed not to spoil the fun. The younger detective seemed giddy about keeping the secret but the older man seemed less than disinterested," he added.

"Good," I agreed. Although I appreciated their sheepish sharing in our wool pulling, I was struck that the police seemed quite concerned about our key situation.

"Let me ask you this, Mike. You did not happen to come by this morning before your appointment for anything, did you?"

"No, the dentist's office is close to my house, so I slept in for a bit and went directly there," I admitted.

"Peggy already told me that she was the last one out last night. She insists that she locked the doors. I believe her," Steve stated.

"Maybe the cleaning staff?" I ventured. Both they and the maintenance department have access to every section of the building. They usually come to sanitize everything, or at least shift the dirt around, during the night so as not to disturb anyone.

"Could be. They've left doors unlocked before," Steve nodded. We both remembered the blustery, winter day when the homeless couple was asleep in the hallway. Ted had panicked, thinking he had been replaced. "You didn't come in last night for anything, did you Mike?"

"I was at the game." I was at the game. The ticket stubs were still in my wallet. I was prepared to pull them out, but I knew this would not be necessary, because...

"Wasn't it great! That double steal in the ninth inning, and all of those home runs!" Steve said excitedly. He was a fanatic for all things baseball. For the first time all morning, he seemed almost awake. With his satellite, Steve never missed any of the home team's contests. With his picture-in-picture television, he seldom missed any games at all. With his divorce now final, he was no longer missed by anyone else. I knew that his mind had moved on from any concern about the unlocked doors and any possible connection of anyone to them. His focus was baseball now. We reminisced for a bit and talked stats before Steve received a phone call that he felt compelled to answer; he casually motioned to me that I was free to leave.

Meandering back to my desk, I passed the closed door to the coffee break room. Emanating from beneath the door's gap came the sound of muffled voices. Logic told me that if they were that engaged in discussion, their grisly task was nearing a conclusion. Not wanting to be caught at the keyhole, I did not linger at the doorway. The exact instant in which I returned to my seat, Ted was hovering over my desk. He appeared anxious. Everyone loved to watch Ted sweat and grow nervous. I was no exception. My phone's LED did not indicate any new messages but I lifted my receiver and dialed my voice mail anyway, just to agitate Ted's squirming. Had he been observant, which he was not, he might have noticed the lack of a red indicator light on my phone. Frank often joked, when he was not

talking about the navy and even when he was, that the voice mail light was red because most messages represent bad news. If people called to spread good news, the light would be green. I agreed with him. The robotic voice quickly told me its kind and diplomatic equivalent of "no one cares about you or wants to talk to you, loser" and I returned the receiver to its handset. While navigating through the voice mail menus, I had toyed with the idea of pretending to listen to some fake messages just to see if I could make Ted's pit stains appear before noon. I dismissed the idea with the rationale that this would only be cruel and I am not really a monster, despite what my ex-wife might claim.

"What can I do for you, Ted?" I asked.

"Did Steve have any more information?" Ted answered my question with a question. Do you know how much I love it when people do this?

"Not really. Mainly he asked me if I had been here overnight or even this morning. And I had not. This was pretty much it. He said the police would talk to me before they leave." I announced these sentences in a voice loud enough for all of my coworkers to hear. Obviously all of them were intently monitoring our conversation from whatever attempt they were making to appear busy.

Ann looked up from her desk. "They will probably just ask you if you knew the deceased. It was all fairly informal."

Fran's two cents was eating a hole in her pocket. Maybe she had recently seized a coveted nickel on the supermarket floor, and had spent a little. "Don't bother lying to them because they will know," she warned. Fran never believed anything I told her even though she had never caught me in a lie. The woman was immediately skeptical of any information that parted my lips. As far I can recall, the only occasions in which I have lied to her involved me paying her

a compliment.

"Why would Mike have to lie? He wasn't here. End of story." Frank said, defending me. In spite of it all, Frank was a decent guy. He had led a pretty clean life these past ten years, but I did not believe he could ever atone for the atrocities he committed while serving active duty. As much as he loved to blather on about the navy, he rarely mentioned his shocking, despicable deeds. I still cringe when I think back to him drunk and sobbing as he bared his soul to me. He seemed remorseful for what he had done, but his guilt could never atone.

"What would it take for them to call for a polygraph exam?" Ted asked of no one in particular. He really did watch too much television.

"That is not going to happen," Peggy contributed from the door to her office.

"She's right. They are too expensive and will not be used unless there is going to be a trial or hearing," Frank added.

"I took a polygraph exam for a job once," Ann admitted. This was new information for most of us. Peggy probably already knew because she had read through all of our personnel files. But for the rest of us...

"Cool! What was it like?" Either Ted was really excited or this was just another opportunity to learn more about Ann. Most people underestimated Ted - he knew what he was doing and could be sly when he wanted. Anyone believing Ted deserved any harm could only be as a sign of pity. Better to be removed from the misery of a purposeless life.

"It was fairly unpleasant. The worst part was that since I have low

blood sugar and am underweight that I nearly passed out," Ann revealed to us.

Fran was not impressed and was muttering under her breath. "Skinny little..."

"Betcha didn't lie," Frank said with a knowing glance towards Ann. If there was anyone willing to wager that Frank had a story ready about how he used to administer polygraph tests while in the navy, I could have made some money. To hear Frank talk, he was the navy and had his hands in every pot on their stove. Yet, for once, he refrained from hearkening back to those days.

"Remaining conscious took all of my concentration. I don't think I could have lied even if I wanted," Ann admitted.

"Did you want to lie?" Peggy asked, probably having in mind some transgressions within Ann's file.

This question was to remain unanswered as the opening of the coffee break room door abruptly ended our impromptu meeting. Fortunately we are all quite skilled at appearing busy and shifted easily into this mode while the forensics team filed out from the room. It was akin to watching circus clowns exit from a tiny car. Who knew that our coffee break room could accommodate so many people, especially when one of them was inconsiderate enough to be sprawled out on the floor, consuming more than his share of space. As punishment, this person had been strapped to a gurney and was wheeled out into full view and then left under the guard of an extremely stiff young patrolman in uniform. The final two individuals to emerge from the room were an older gentleman in a tired and worn suit that may have never been stylish and a younger fellow in a snazzy suit. The pair was engaged in a discussion and gesturing at a file folder. The older one scanned the office and his eyebrows rose when he noticed me. Catching the attention of the younger man by

deftly clearing his throat, he indicated me with a flick of his wrist. The file folder was quickly closed and forgotten as the men headed my way.

"Mr. Seaver?" The younger man called out to me gleefully with the air of one who enjoys his job too, too much. Had he tried to sell me a time-share condominium, I would not have been surprised.

"Yes," I said, rising from my desk and walking towards them.

They made no effort to meet me at a given point in between. I could imagine them both sitting at attention at the police academy being taught this strategy as a means of gaining the upper hand in an interrogation. "Establish yourself as the one who holds the power by not relinquishing any ground to the subject," a gruff, veteran instructor might have advised. Or, Barnes and Briggs may have just felt depleted after a few hours in a room with technicians, a corpse and a patrolman. The latter, arguably, the stiffest of them all.

The youthful Briggs enthusiastically offered me his hand, which I accepted and shook firmly. Prepared for the same gesture from Barnes, I dropped my hands to my hips when I realized that the older man was just staring coolly at some point above my right shoulder. This must have been some other police academy trick. "Intimidate the subject by showing how meaningless and unimportant they are to you." In spite of his behavior, Barnes spoke first. His voice matched his appearance quite well; it was musty and sleepy.

"Mr. Seaver, you have a key to the front office doors, correct?" He asked as he examined me suspiciously.

"Yes, sir," I answered, trying to appear nonchalant.

"Did you enter the office late last night or early this morning, maybe

leaving the doors unlocked?" Briggs continued eyeing me curiously and expectantly. He reminded me of Matlock, more than Columbo. This is not to say that I have ever watched "Matlock" or own the complete series on Dvd.

"No, sir, I did not." This was true: I had not set foot in the office since leaving shortly after 5pm the evening prior.

Both men looked disappointed. Briggs jumped into the questioning with an flourish of a swashbuckler. "Did you notice anything suspicious when leaving?" he wondered.

"No, I did not," I replied calmly. Nothing at all appeared out of the ordinary when I filed out the door along with everyone else. "Normally I do not pay much attention, I will admit, but the previous evening I had specifically noticed nothing unusual." The moment this statement left my lips, I regretted its stupidity. Luckily, the detectives let it slip by them.

Briggs motioned to the corpse guarding the corpse. The patrolman awkwardly unzipped the body bag. He accomplished this by touching the zipper and the bag with his shirt sleeves rather than his fingers. I would have loved to have given him a black cat or made him stand under a ladder just to see how he would react. But I would have expected him to certainly be carrying the necessary nullifying salt to throw over his shoulder.

"Come with us, Mr. Seaver," Briggs commanded to me. All of my coworkers looked up from their desks, thinking that I was headed downtown, but when they realized that we were merely crossing the room to the body, they resumed with veiled dismay their charade of being productive. No doubt about it, the man inside the bag was deceased. Were it to be any consolation to his loved ones, he did appear at peace with himself. He was older than me, which seems to occur less and less these days as I climb further into my forties. The

man's face was indicative of a difficult life and he appeared to have enjoyed liquor on frequent occasions. I could almost detect the odor of alcohol on his person; had I leaned in closer, I could have likely determined if the alcohol was for business or pleasure. Had it been of the business variety, it could be attributed to the forensics team. While not as skittish as the patrolman, I preferred not to come any closer than necessary to the deceased. What's more, the detectives might have thought it unusual to see me bend over the corpse and inhale deeply.

"Do you recognize this man?" Barnes asked in an upbeat tone. This guy was energized beyond belief. Despite the intensity of the circumstances, my mind wandered, picturing Briggs zealously completing even the most mundane of tasks. Watching him fill out his income tax forms, apply varnish to treated wood, or using a can opener would be like viewing a musical dance number.

I waited the appropriate length of time before responding to the question. "Nope," I said. Honestly, I had never seen this person before and there had been no reason for me to meet him.

Briggs seemed satisfied with my answer. "Thank you, Mr. Seaver. You may return to work," he told me. He stood expectantly and with a hint of delight along with Barnes until it became obvious that both of them wanted me to leave. The patrolman probably wished I would stay or at least zip up the bag before I departed. Unfortunately for him, I was not about to do either. Fully realizing that all of my coworkers' eyes were following my every move, I returned to my desk.

Sanford, the patrolman, closed the body bag, and pushed the gurney out through the front doors of our office. This was a slow process because he was barely touching the gurney, only employing his fingertips to push. Barnes and Briggs spent a few minutes whispering to each other before they both proceeded to Steve's

office. Barnes knocked twice on the door and opened it. Briggs followed him inside.

Did we dare discuss the day's events when the police could appear at any moment? I checked my watch. It was 11:22:33. Maybe Barnes and Briggs would be out of our lives by noon, leaving us to talk at length about the day's excitement during lunch? Or, depending on what the investigation had unveiled, they might wish to interrogate each of us again in turn. By unspoken agreement, no one uttered a word until the two policemen emerged from Steve's office at five ticks before the lunching hour. Knowing my colleagues as well as I do, I suspected them all of merely pushing papers around while we waited. This was not really unusual in ours or in any office; no work was accomplished in any of the 30-minute periods following arrival at the office, before lunch, after lunch, and at the end of the day. The same inactivity can also be attributed to the time surrounding important meetings. Some could attribute these daily lulls as arguments for shortening the workweek. However, unless it was truncated to around two hours per day, these inefficient periods would remain. To be fair, there are only certain days that see the average office worker not reaching his or her full potential for productivity. These are called weekdays. To the casual observer we appeared in deep concentration on what lay before us on our desk blotters. Neither Barnes nor Briggs seemed interested in any of us as they filed out the main doors and out of our office. We continued our ruse until Steve unexcitedly burst from his office and into our midst. "Please, everyone, into the conference room. We have to talk," he stammered. Was he breaking up with us? The phrase "we have to talk" never forebears good news. So help me, if he tried the "It's not you, it's me" line, I was prepared to tell him that "we need to see other people..."

Within moments, we were all seated in our regular seats. The chairs were amazingly comfortable. Ted often came to the conference room to work in the afternoon, after lunch "because he needed some extra

table space." Unlike during a typical meeting, there was little chance of anyone snoozing today. Everyone was eager to hear what Steve knew about our mysterious guest. Steve's dramatic pause and shuffling of his notes extended long enough that Fran muttered and not quietly something akin to "just get on with it." Either Steve took note of Fran's impatience or was just ready to begin. Whatever was his motivation, he cleared his throat, a gesture that normally would have put an end to any side conversations, which at this time were not in occurrence.

"The man's name was Paul Robertson," Steve began. No one batted an eye. Steve might have told us his name was Robert Paulson instead and none of us would have even shifted in our seats. He was a stranger to us. Hearing his name did nothing to change this.

"Who was he?" Ted asked. This is an example where Ted is useful to have around. The normal tact and etiquette dictates that this question should have been held for another few minutes, allowing Steve to prattle on and for us to stammer and nod in agreement. If only Ted had known he was being efficient at this moment, he would have ceased immediately.

"According to the police, he was a known criminal. A contract killer." Steve spoke quickly, hoping for less pain by removing the proverbial bandage in one fluid motion. This information, in contrast to the uttering of the name, did raise some eyebrows. Anyone claiming that Fran only possessed one of these on her forehead would have certainly noted two distinct units. Theoretically, I owed Jenkins a Coke. But since he was not there to see...

"What was he doing in our office?" Peggy asked in horror. It was almost entertaining to see her vulnerable and, for once, without all of the answers.

"Drinking coffee," Ted smirked. Remember that lack of tact I

mentioned?

"Quiet, Ted," Steve scolded, "This is serious. He had photos of all of us."

"Even Jenkins?" I asked. There was no reason to kill the old guy.

"Yes, him, too. But there were some strange markings on his photo and yours, Mike," Steve replied.

"What do the police think the markings mean?" Frank wanted to know. I was grateful to him for sparing me from asking the question.

"They don't know. They really did not go into much detail about them. Of more concern was his 9mm pistol." Steve's gaze hovered on me just for a second before moving on to each of the others as if he was weighing the impact of his words.

"This guy was sent here to kill us? All of us?" Ann seemed terrified in her jump to the most unpleasant scenario.

"This is just one theory..." Steve began...

"Come on! What else could it be? It is not like our office holds anything of value or we are located at a busy junction. No one ever comes here without a good reason!" Frank exploded.

"Why else would he, a hit man, have pictures of all of us?" Peggy's question was rhetorical and was not really addressed to anyone anyhow.

"How did he die?" I asked, hoping to move the conversation in a less frightening direction.

"It was a heart attack," Steve explained, "This Robertson was not in

good health. He smoke, drank and was no stranger to illegal drugs."

"How did he get in?" Fran asked. She maintained an impressive vigil on who passed through our office at any given time. That someone could enter so easily was likely more disturbing to her than his alleged intentions.

"The police still do not know. None of you were here before him or late last night so unless someone is lying, they will presume that the cleaning staff forgot to lock the door last night," Steve said.

"So, what's next?" Ted asked. He appeared more somber now. Rarely did he appear so serious except when fearing for his own employment. I would have never thought of Ted as one of those people whose job is his life...

"Barnes and Briggs would not tell me anything more. In fact, they admitted they shouldn't have said as much as they did. They asked that I not tell any of you, but I felt you have a right to know." It was no surprise to see Steve trying to gain some points and curry favor with us. It was not October anymore, but Mr. Baseball always wants to be the MVP.

"Why would anyone want to kill us? And who? Do they have any leads?" Ann asked the valuable questions.

"Like I said, the police do not know. The detectives actually wanted my opinion and theories of my own. I have a few of these," Steve admitted.

"The competition? A disgruntled former employee?" Frank ventured.

"Our staff has not shrunk in years. The only changes in years have been adding Ann and Ted," I quickly interjected.

"And what competition? It is not as if we are industry leaders or threatening to seize the lion's share of the market," Peggy's dose of reality did not lift any spirits.

"Does anyone have any enemies?" Steve presented this question to all of us. Quickly everyone turned to Fran, who failed to notice that she was the only person to respond.

"No" was the consensus answer that she spoke. For a few minutes, the conference room fell silent. It was almost peaceful enough for one to hear the traffic whirring by on the streets below. This was a moment of reflection as each of us searched the contents of our minds for answers and explanations. Who would want to kill me? To whom have I committed such an egregious wrong to be the target of a sinister death? Certainly, I cannot attest to where the others thoughts carried them, but my own past contained no threats. I had been diligent in my dealings; to my knowledge, there was no one alive with a desire to end my life. My colleagues had most definitely not been as careful as I; in their lives lurked an imminent danger that they had narrowly avoided this day. Past transgressions would be their undoing and I was determined not to share their unfortunate fates.

"The detectives will be returning to speak with all of us. They treat these situations very seriously and want to explore all possibilities, no matter how inconsequential these may seem. I urge you to spend the afternoons reflecting on anyone dangerous in your lives. Don't discount anyone just yet," Steve spoke in a cautionary tone. It was really an impressive display of bravado. The man was scared and spineless, this I knew, but he portrayed a strong presence in his attempt to be the intrepid leader.

"Let's go to lunch," Frank suggested. A chorus of agreement from all of us echoed this idea.

"We'll use the petty cash and let the company treat us," Steve said, "We've earned a perk today." He really was seizing his opportunity to become friendlier with all of us. Maybe the morning's traumatic event was the catalyst for his renewed attempts at camaraderie, or he was only starting to ache from a void of solitude that baseball could never fill. Office gossip suggested that Steve's wife took all of their friends, while Steve kept the furniture. I have been suspicious of his master plan since long before his divorce. He was a supervisor who maneuvered skillfully through the levels of interaction with his subordinates. Regarding workplace decisions, he remained steadfast and unwavering, but whenever casual situations present themselves, he was relentlessly agreeable. His secret agenda might someday factor into his death. I believe myself a shrewd judge of character, but Steve had even fooled me for years. No longer would this be the case...

"What is everyone hungry for?" Frank asked cheerfully as we began to file out of the conference room.

"Anything but the coffee shop," Ted replied with a smile. Everyone ignored him.

"Pasta, Mexican, Indian, Chinese?" Fran asked, naming some possibilities. She was being unusually giving. Normally she would only name one type of cuisine or one restaurant specifically. Then if the group selected anywhere else, she would sulk and make the meal miserable for everyone else. However, on one occasion, we agreed to humor her and dined at her restaurant of choice. She still managed to be an unpleasant companion even then.

"Maybe the festive atmosphere at 'Chica's Tacos' would brighten our day. We all like their food," Ann proposed. Perhaps cheating death had rendered everyone unusually ambivalent because no one immediately rejected the idea or recalled a health violation to deter us. Instead, everyone was surprisingly agreeable.

"Today's lunch special is never-ending tacos," Ted reminded us. For someone who did not know his job, he could relate in amazing detail the best bargains at all of our most frequented restaurants. Frank believed that Ted occupied many of his office hours studying menus and fliers.

"Mexican will be a nice change. I still have some carb points left for this month that I can use," Peggy said. Peggy never failed to look terrific, but was for some reason always involved in those fad diets that seem so ridiculous.

"Me too," Fran added. Fran never looked terrific, and was, much more believably, always involved in those fad diets that seem so ridiculous.

"That settles it then. Andamos. Let me stop into my office and grab some petty cash for the bill," Steve said from the doorway to his office.

Everyone gathered their coats and we convened in the lobby of our floor. Fran locked the main doors as we waited for the elevator to rumble and grind upward to meet us. It arrived with a groan and everyone stepped aboard but me. The elevator was a bit tight for seven and six fit inside much more comfortably. Besides taking the stairs down was easy. "I'll see you on the ground floor," I said. Everyone was accustomed to my disdain for elevators.

"Maybe we'll wait for you," Ted joked as the doors closed.

As I passed by the trash receptacle near the door to the stairs, I stopped and removed the lid. Resting on the bottom of the trash bag was a very distinct blue envelope. Inside was a copy of the key of our front office doors that I had made the week before and given to my contact. At least the ailing Robertson had remembered to discard

the key before entering the office. I had requested that it must be done in this way. A month later when I hired another hit man, I insisted that they send one with a healthy heart who completed the job successfully. Live and learn.

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