

# Puzzle

by David Griffin

At fifteen years old, my legs would not have felt the slightest discomfort or ache after a morning of playing basketball. Later in the afternoon I pushed them down hard to pump my bicycle up the steep hill of my paper route while a heavy canvas bag of rolled up newspapers tried to pull me off and dump me on the ground. My route served over sixty customers in a densely packed neighborhood of homes. It stretched up a long steep hill through a mixture of two family homes and single family bungalows, each with a front yard no deeper than a bedroom. I folded all my papers beforehand, sitting on the steps of a closed-up bakery down at the corner across from Juan Kipper's little variety store. Then, bag over my shoulder, I jumped on my bike and pedaled straight up the sidewalk to the end of the block at the top of the hill, steering with one hand and throwing papers neatly to their destinations.

For second floor customers, I was a picture of athletic grace as I rode along and slid a paper from the bag. Bending low, the folded newspaper held down near the bike pedals, I swooped my body up like an Olympic champion. My arm described a wide arc as I threw the paper over my head and aloft. Most times it landed smack in the middle of the upstairs porch.

For downstairs customers, the deadly power of a pitcher trying to put a man out stealing second base erupted in my soul. I got off a power shot, a side-winding line drive whipped straight out at the target, usually an aluminum storm door. They were just then becoming popular and folks were replacing their old wood storm doors with the crisp modern metal models. When hit with a rolled up newspaper at high speed, the sheet aluminum bottom panel exploded with the sound of a shotgun gone off.

I swear I didn't see sleeping Mr. Cassidy slumped in the chaise lounge ten feet away from his brand new door one luckless afternoon. A half second after the newspaper detonated on target, his animated torso catapulted three feet into the air. He chased me

all the way to the corner as I pedaled for my life. It was wonder he didn't suffer a heart attack or broken toe as he ran after me in his white socks. That episode cost me a customer and gained a reprimand from the newspaper's management, but it didn't stop me. Nothing compared to the deeply satisfying concussion produced by the blunt end of a rolled up newspaper slamming home into an aluminum door. Even when I was made to pay for Mr. Cassidy's socks.

Each afternoon when I reached the top of the hill, I re-checked my carrier bag to ensure all of my folded newspaper missiles were arranged tails up. Then I'd push off and zoom down the other side of the street at three times the speed of my uphill climb. I was a sight to see. I could do the route in seven minutes if I didn't crash into a tricycle left on the sidewalk or go flying off in the street into the path of moving cars when the bag of papers shifted its weight. If the front wheel began to wobble and I felt I was losing control, I'd plan my impending crash by aiming at any of the bushes placed lovingly in front of the houses by sweet elderly ladies who always expressed more concern for my well being than their foundation plantings.

Not everyone held my welfare to be more important than their tranquility. Especially when I missed the mark and took out a potted plant. Or broke a storm door window. I once had to spend my Saturday afternoon with an aggrieved customer, Mr. Ibonacci, as he instructed me in the fine art of glass replacement. Boring.

Some customers objected to my flying artillery tactics and feared for their safety and property. Some curtly requested their paper be laid quietly on the welcome mat or even in their back hallway. I would ignore them. If they continued to insist, I'd explain that such was impossible since it would disturb the economic balance of the newspaper's pricing algorithm due to the extra work, and could only produce an adjustment in the price which the management did not want to pass on to the consumer. If they were still listening at this point, I'd further explain that my delivery methods were fixed by federal statute because of Freedom of the Press. This bullshit worked two or three times, but eventually a few customers phoned the newspaper downtown and expressed concern for the little children playing on the sidewalk. I was ordered off what one customer called my Newspaper Rocket. I had to walk the route and trudge up the driveways of a few malcontents to politely lay their papers in the back halls, including the home of the Santini sisters.

Aside from Mr. Cassidy, these two adult sisters were the only blemish on my happy years as a newspaper carrier. By the time I was done with the women arguing, their shenanigans and the police, I'd had enough of Italian sisters for a lifetime.

They argued all the time and constantly insulted each other. Whenever I stepped into the back hallway of their two-family home during that spring in high school, my stomach would churn when either woman complained to me about the other. No matter who I ran into first, all I saw on either face was anger, a stony coldness that reminded me of the way dead people look in their caskets. One woman complained that her contribution to their oddly arranged two-floor household was more than her sister's. The other said she had suffered the most from their dead mother. I wondered if Mamma Mia was relieved to have passed on after a lifetime of listening to her daughters squabble, but I kept my opinion to myself. I was just their dumb paperboy and the last thing I wanted to do was become part of their war.

I figured the Santini sisters were welcome to live out their lives of bickering and insults as long as they didn't try to involve me. I didn't want to hear any of it. You'd think at their age .. nearing forty, according to neighbors ...they would act like adults. I was only slowly progressing on my own walk to maturity that year, but enough examples surrounded me of other adult brothers and sisters who didn't shout at each other. It was true my little brother and I seemed to constantly argue, but I never shouted at him. I just punched him or put a pillow over his face until he stopped moving. And I always assumed I'd stop doing that as we got older, when it would hurt if he hit back.

Too late, I realized the hearts of the Santini sisters clashed in a storm of bitter feelings over a man from years before. Had I known how far jealousy drove an aggrieved heart, I'd have been more frightened, and much sooner.

"My sister, she's stupid, *stoonad*," said the sister in the downstairs flat whose name appeared as Mrs. Santa in my newspaper route collection book. Newspaper boys never cared about any of the names of customers on a route, but the newspaper management required the information for their records. Most names were made up by the paperboy in the hurry of teenage impatience. When a kid asked a customer's name for his collection book and the customer responded with Hapanozowicz, a kid wrote Mr. Happy on the line. A fifteen year old could handle Smith and Jones, but nothing more complicated. Struizziero became Mr. Stress, because a teenager in a rush wouldn't say to an adult, "What was that? Can you spell it?" In the book I inherited from the previous paperboy, I found Mr. Loan Ranger and Mr. Rigley Field, names I assumed to be total fabrication. Juan Kipper, the older Jewish man down at the corner named roughly after his holiday, was happy to be called anything civil, he once told me when I got around to asking his real name. And the day we replaced Mr. Ibonacci's door glass I discovered his real name was not E. Bunny. In my collection book, the Santini sisters appeared as Mrs. Santa and Mrs. Claus, but from neighbors I knew their real names. Downstairs was Mrs. Spina, a widow. Her sister upstairs was Miss Santini, a single woman who dressed as though still hunting for a man, preferring short skirts and blouses that would give most women pneumonia. And as well, a following of men of low moral character, as my grandmother would put it.

The Santini women had similar features, but to me they seemed as different as day and night. Although as attractive as her sister, the slightly older Mrs. Spina dressed like an old woman and wore a dark blue ratty men's cardigan sweater my grandfather would have taken off and given away to the first beggar to stop at his door. Her shoulders were stooped from a lifetime of bearing up under something I did not understand and wouldn't want to. While Miss Santini was seldom home, Mrs. Spina never went anywhere, except to Mass on Sunday, the day she left the sweater in the closet to shift for itself.

"I stay here and take care of the house," she had told me. "My sister is the one who works." Her sister was also out often in the evening, or so Mrs. Spina often complained and the neighborhood spy network of widows verified.

Jigsaw puzzles were Mrs. Spina's only entertainment, the big kind in a large box of over a thousand pieces with a photo on the front of Mt. Rushmore or another romantic destination she'd never visited. She laid the puzzle out on a table and worked on it for weeks. The hobby was a family tradition and her sister enjoyed puzzles. They competed to see who finished the same size puzzle first. But how they contended with each other produced more arguments. For the year I delivered their newspapers they refused to

speak to one another, except to holler Italian curses up and down the back stairway. Being an Irish kid, I knew no Italian except for curses heard often in the neighborhood and even in church if the Italian priest wasn't near.

On a Saturday morning in April of 1959, Mrs. Spina stood in her kitchen doorway waiting for me to dig change out of my pocket. Sixty cents back for her dollar covered the newspaper's weekly price of forty cents. Mrs. Spina was not a good tipper. She wasn't any kind of tipper.

I heard the door open upstairs at the top of the back hallway. Miss Santini shouted down a stream of Italian, including familiar words like *strunz*, *stoonad* and *pootanha*, the latter an awful thing to call your sister, a prostitute to use the nicer term.

Mrs. Spina turned and loudly spoke a stream of curses back up the stairs.

"That woman," she said to me, "she shoulda been offered to the devil."

This was either an Italian rite that I hadn't heard about or just an example of the inventiveness family members demonstrate when insulting each other.

I wasn't coming up with any nickels so I dug deeper, checking both front pockets. "I'm sure," I said to Mrs. Spina with my best Catholic schoolboy mannerly sarcasm, "that God loves you both."

"*Oo Faa!*" she groaned, "a little saint bringing my newspaper."

"I was trying to be cheerful," I said..

"You do me a favor and you can give me just two quarters change," she said.

"Sure," I said. "as long as you're not asking me to mow your lawn for a dime."

"Oh, no," she said, "come in the dining room and get a dish from the top of the *armadietto* for me. Come." She grabbed my arm, still in my pocket diving for change. The woman was quite strong and dragged me through the door into the kitchen. She let go and moved to the doorway of her dining room.

I was not supposed to enter a customer's house or apartment, and besides I didn't want to. Mrs. Spina seemed safe enough, but an incident from two months before had left me gun shy. As an adolescent boy I of course idly entertained the fantasy of a voluptuous young woman one day answering my knock in a bathrobe opened all the way down her front. Or perhaps wearing only a thin film of Saran Wrap. Instead, a damsel in her late twenties had asked me to mow her lawn and afterward pulled me into her kitchen. She lunged at me and covered my face with kisses while trying to get my shirt off. I escaped, but it scared the crap out of me. Who would have guessed real sex could be scary? But Mrs. Spina at nearly 40 years of age did not appear to be much of a risk. I crossed the kitchen and joined her in the next room.

A buffet, a tall cabinet and table and chairs that would seat a large Italian family crowded the dining room. A bright simple fixture of three light bulbs hung from the ceiling and illuminated the center of the room. The furniture was old, the finish having dulled over the years. Mrs. Spina may have inherited her mother's dining room set and I wondered if that might be another source of upset between the two sisters.

Mrs. Spina indicated the tall cabinet in the corner and on top was a colorful bowl like my mother served spaghetti from..

I stood on tip-toe, grabbed the dish and handed it to her. She headed for the kitchen with it in her arms and I began to follow. I stopped midway through the dining room.

On the large table lay a jigsaw puzzle with a corner and two of the borders assembled from the many pieces that would eventually form a recognizable picture, often

of a painting done by a great Italian master such as Giotto or my favorite later in life, Caravaggio. But it might also be a photo of Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon.

I heard Mrs. Spina put the bowl on the kitchen counter. She came back to the dining room from the kitchen and stood next to me.

“She thinks she’s got me this time,” the woman whispered while holding an upraised finger close to her chest so that only I could see her pointing upstairs toward her sister. This was their favorite game. They gave each other a puzzle with the photo on the front of the box removed. This trick made the work supremely difficult, and more so if the scene was of something unfamiliar, such as an anonymous mountain. In their game, the first to have every tiny puzzle piece in place was the winner. The first sister to guess the subject of the picture would gain the advantage and pull out way ahead of her sibling in her sprint to the finish line. Mrs. Spina was at home all day and devoted quite a bit of time to the work. She was often the winner.

“Look,” she said, leaning over the puzzle.

I looked. It was indeed a puzzle.

“It’s black and white. No color,” she said, impatience in her voice when she noticed I wasn’t excited.

I could see that was true. So what? I thought.

“All the puzzles I’ve seen are in color,” she said. “I bet my sister used an old photo Mama took with her Brownie. She maybe sent it away for them to make into a puzzle,” she said. “We always talked about maybe doing that. Expensive,” she added.

“Wouldn’t that make it easier to guess?” I said. The two women would have seen the same photographs taken by their mother.

“My sister never makes anything easy,” said Mrs. Spina.

When I later climbed the back hall stairs and knocked on Miss Santini’s door to collect her forty cents, the woman answered in her bathrobe, but it wasn’t open. I supposed Miss Santini was the prettier sister when they were girls, and I guess they were still both attractive women, except that they were forty.

I didn’t tell Miss Santini I’d seen the latest puzzle. To be honest, I felt guilty about entering her sister’s flat. But I wondered if she would tell me what was in the puzzle photo. Besides, in her bathrobe, she was kind of sexy and I found myself enjoying our little visit.

“Mrs. Spina tells me you sent her a new puzzle,” I said.

Digging in her purse for coins, she glanced up with alarm in her eyes.

“You stay away,” she said. “None of your business.”

“I wasn’t being nosey,” I said, indignant.

She handed me the coins and stood back.

“She *saputa*, my sister, a dummy,” said Miss Santini. “Thinks she’s so good. Always trying to show she’s better. Always thought she was prettier. Oh, she was so-o-o much smarter. And Angelo ... she thought he loved her the best!”

“Who’s Angelo?” I asked.

Miss Santini reached for the edge of the door and began to swing it toward me.

“Our pet,” she said, and closed the door in my face.

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That spring of my adolescence was made memorable when Jenny Swartout kissed me and moved her tongue against my lips as we lounged in the back seat of a 1939 Buick

on a Sunday afternoon. Neither of us was old enough to practice foreplay in a Buick or anywhere else, nor did either of us have a driver's license to take ourselves down a lonely road. But a junk yard sat not far from our church and the old cars attracted teenagers from our Sunday afternoon Chips & Soda group. Two by two the girls and boys sneaked out the back door of the church hall and headed across the field for the old cars. Jenny's bright and lustrous lips tasted like potato chips and orange soda. When she kissed me, she put her hand on my knee. To a fifteen year old boy, this was tantamount to tearing her clothes off. A knock on the Buick's back window by the Catholic Youth Leader ended our escapade. Although I tried mightily for a repeat engagement, Jenny never again crossed the field with me to the junk yard. But I couldn't forget those orange lips. I might daydream of other girls and their standard equipment, but when I thought of Jenny her orange lips were enough to send me off into a storm of impure thoughts.

Giving up Jenny for lost when she began dating an older boy, I fell for a new love in my life, a life largely played out in my imagination. Annette Altomare was a sweet girl with what appeared to be perky breasts beneath her roomy Catholic school uniform. I lusted for her. Without having ever said Hello to her in the school hallways or even smiled when I saw her on the bus stop, my mind soared with Hollywood movies of Annette and I at the altar getting married, Annette and I with little bambinos for whom I'd make a great father, and of course mostly Annette and I in bed, doing what came naturally but without a lot of anatomical detail I wouldn't learn for a few years.

I suppose a boiling over of hormones was responsible for my approach to life at fifteen years old. Time stretched out before me into the distant future and I yearned to finally become a man. Sixteen became a magic number for me, but that birthday was almost a year away, an eternity. At sixteen I planned get a driver's license and go anywhere I wanted without suffering the ignominy of riding a bus or hitch hiking. I'd land a real job at the grocery store after school instead of my childish paper route. I'd be making real money and buy a car and take Annette out on dates. I'd get a convertible, maybe an old Mercedes from a widow who just wanted to get rid of it. Maybe she would sell the car to me for under a hundred dollars. Then Annette's father, a burly policeman, would no longer look at me like extra-white trash, a term he reserved for Irishmen. He called me that name years before when he coached my Little League team and I never showed up for practice. I had seldom seen him since.

Meanwhile, I needed the pittance my paper route provided and so I continued to roll and fold the papers each night, toss them on front porches and in back hallways and come around on Saturday mornings to collect my due.

Toward the end of April I asked Mrs. Spina about the photo puzzle, but her enthusiasm had evaporated.

"Oh, it's a picture of the two of us playing on Mama and Pappa's bed when we were girls," she said.

"Did you claim the prize?" I asked, laughing.

"No prize," she said. "Who wins is the winner. You know what I mean?"

"You should have a prize," I said. "Like a cake or a dish of ziti."

"That woman couldn't bake a fig," said Mrs. Spina with a sneer.

The following week I arrived in the back hallway and found them arguing, shouting up and down the stairwell. They couldn't see each other around the bend in the stairs, but each easily heard the other as they cursed in the language their parents had used, although

probably not the same words. Mrs. Spina threw gestures up the stairs in a way that was vaguely obscene and I'm sure her sister was just as graphic up on the second floor. I tried to interrupt to get my forty cents and leave, but they ignored me. Finally the kitchen door upstairs slammed and there was silence. Mrs. Spina glanced at me.

"I'm collecting for the paper," I quickly interjected before I lost her attention. But the upstairs door opened and Miss Santini began to shout again.

Suddenly Mrs. Spina appeared to sense something. She reached out and took my wrist, pulled me into her kitchen and slammed the door. Pushing me off toward the counter, she opened the door briefly, peeked out and slammed it again. She stayed there a minute, opening it once more and looking out, so I wandered into the dining room to look at the puzzle. I thought I heard someone going up the stairs. In a moment Mrs. Spina came from the kitchen and stood beside me.

The black and white puzzle lay on the table. The right side was almost complete, as well as a small ribbon of the bottom border. Part of a bed could now be seen. A frame partially surrounded the half scene. I wondered if it was a window, but decided it was a large mirror, like the kind mounted on my mother's dresser. I made out a woman's bare leg, knee bent and pointing at the camera as she sat cross legged on the bed. The leg was bare to the hip and she had pulled a sheet up between her thighs to afford a little modesty. It continued a bit higher, but the top and side of her chest were uncovered. This was not a photo of young girls playing on their parents' bed, as Mrs. Spina said a week ago. Here was a naked woman wrapped partially in a sheet.

The one arm visible so far was held high and the elbow pointed outward as if she held something in front of her. Enough of the puzzle pieces to define her face were in position, allowing me to guess the identity of the woman.

"Is this your sister?" I said, embarrassed.

"Well ... yes," she said. "Years ago. She's playing with our old dog.

"I don't see a dog," I said.

"But I know it's the dog," she said. "Our little ... Angelo."

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Aside from Youth Group Sunday afternoon dalliances in the junk yard, which came to an end when the youth leader discovered why we were so interested in old cars, my social experiences in 1959 were mostly limited to school dances, where boys and girls showed up wearing their best shirts or dresses. If lucky, we might dance with someone, but mostly we stood around trying to look mature, and almost always walked home alone or with members of our own sex. There was no hard and fast rule in any of this, just the effects of shyness and limited funds.

Billy Callahan told me he had taken a girl out for a chocolate soda after the last monthly dance on Friday night at the high school. I was immediately transfused with enthusiasm to do the same with Annette.

"How much did it cost you?" I asked Billy.

"Forty-five cents for each soda," he said, "plus a nickel tip."

"Under a dollar," I said, my mind already at work on how to get my hands on that much money the night before I collected for my papers on Saturday morning. It was doable, I decided.

"Plus bus fare for the two of us," he added.

"What bus fare?" I asked.

“You’re not gonna abandon her there on the street once you leave the Soda Shop,” he said. “You have to take her home on the bus.”

“OK,” I said, slightly disappointed.

”You’ve assumed a responsibility for the woman once you take her on a date and buy her a soda,” he lectured. “You have to escort her home and pay her way.”

“But she would have paid her own bus fare anyway,” I said.

“Haven’t you ever heard of chivalry?” he asked. “It means the man pays for everything.”

That seemed excessive to me, but I had no other opinion to fall back on, unless I asked my father, which I surely did not plan to do. Only my little brother still asked my father’s advice, although I had warned him that by doing so he was giving up potentially useful information he should keep to himself.

I wasn’t in the habit of discussing a lot of stuff with my father. A teenage boy goes places and does things he’s knows not to ask permission for or discuss if he doesn’t want to be told to desist. I hung around a pool hall after school sometimes and my parents would have disapproved if they knew. And to save bus fare, I often hitchhiked along the major city streets. I couldn’t get over why people paid for a bus when most of us could just stick out our thumb and be given a free ride.

Coming back from a school basketball game the night after I discovered Miss Satini in the picture puzzle, I walked along the town’s main thoroughfare with my thumb stuck out, hoping to hitch a ride. A car slowed down and stopped. With the headlights shining in my eyes, I could not tell the make or model of the car, but as I opened the door the vehicle began to look familiar. By the time I jumped in, I knew who was driving, but saw only a pair of long nylon stocking-ed legs beneath the steering wheel. Miss Santini said hello to me.

“Don’t you know hitch hiking is” ... and here she hiccupped ... “dangerous? You could be taken advantage of by a desperate woman.” The last two words came out quite slurred, followed by a cackling laugh.

I tried to make conversation ... about my paper route, I think ... but was terribly distracted. Her white blouse was open down past the edges of her bra and her skirt was hiked up beyond her stocking tops. She drove me to my street and parked the car three doors away from my home in front of a house where all the lights were off for the night. She turned the ignition off and slid over next to me, her clothing covering even less by the time she arrived on my side of the car.

Resting her head on my shoulder she said, “Do you want to kiss me?”

I don’t know why I didn’t. She was very sexy, although her breath smelled of a sickly sweetness. Call it instinct, but I sensed I might lose something that night. And although I couldn’t name it, I did not want to lose it. Not with this woman in this car on this warm night in April at age fifteen. I wanted to save it for someone my own age, someday. Or maybe I was just scared.

Attempting to change the subject as my hand searched for the door handle, I said, “I saw the puzzle.”

She immediately sobered and sat back from me.

”She showed you?” Miss Santini all but screamed.

“Well, no, I was--” I began.

“*Va gootz*,” she said loudly. “The stupid c\*nt!”



“Hey, wait a minute.” I said. “You shouldn’t say such--”

“*Fancul!* I’ll kill her, the dumb bitch!”

She was so upset she scared me. Her face was awful, like a little girl wanting to kill the older sister who took away her doll. The hatred erupted from her like bottled up poison as she continued to curse and tell me things would be better if her sister were dead.

“Oh, c’mon,” I said, in an attempt to calm her down. “You’re just upset. She’s your sister.”

“She’s the devil and I should have gotten rid of her long ago,” Miss Santini said, and the slurring returned. “I’ll cut her heart out, just like a chicken.”

From somewhere a small pearl handled knife appeared. She may have kept it for protection when she was out for the evening. Miss Santini passed it under my chin, the point scraping my skin as a chilling smile took over her features.

“Look,” I said, “she didn’t mean for me to see the puzzle.”

“Get out!” she said. “Go home.”

One can’t reason with a drunken woman, especially if she has a weapon. I left her and walked the half block to my house. My mother waited at the door.

“Did you just get out of that car down the street?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “Couple of old people lost and asking directions.”

”To where?” she asked, suspicious.

“The cemetery,” I said brusquely and walked by her to the bedroom. My little brother lay peacefully sleeping on his side of the room, so I gave him a good punch in the shoulder just to remind him I had rights of primacy as his elder.

I was upset with the ferociousness of Miss Santini. I never knew anyone who would seriously hurt a brother or sister, but I wondered if I had finally met someone evil enough to do so. In the morning there was blood on my pillow from beneath my chin. My brother remarked that only a space alien could bite himself on the chin.

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After school on the following Friday I walked along my paper route and made up my mind to ask Annette out for a chocolate soda after the dance. I pictured the two of us on the gym floor as I issued the invitation and received an enthusiastic response. Maybe she’d throw in a full body hug and make it worth the double bus fare.

At the Santini’s, I threw the papers in the back hall and noticed Mrs. Spina’s door ajar. It seemed odd. No sound came from inside the flat when I knocked. I knocked again, wishing Mrs. Spina would open the door. I had tried to not let my imagination work overtime since my ride with her sister. But this was not good. Mrs. Spina seldom left her flat, except for Sunday Mass, and certainly never with the door left open. I told myself Miss Santini could not have been serious about hurting her sister.

I pushed the door open a little farther and stuck my head in the kitchen.

“Mrs. Spina?” I said, my voice beginning to quaver.

There was no response. The kitchen seemed unused. Often there was a dish cooking on the stove or ingredients lined up on the counter for a later meal. I called her name again. I was reminded of a fellow paper boy’s experience a few blocks away. He had found an old man dying in a kitchen the year before when he heard moaning and opened the door. I didn’t want to find a dead or dying woman. I had no idea how to handle such a catastrophe.

Maybe she was on the second floor, although I'd never seen her up there with her sister. I leaned back out of the kitchen doorway and turned and headed up the stairs. At least this delayed going into Mrs. Spina's flat and searching for her. Hopefully it would prove unnecessary when I found her upstairs.

Halfway up I saw red streaks on the wall of the hallway. I wondered if Miss Santini might have brought down a dish with red sauce and spilled some on the way. I should say that's what I hoped. It really looked like blood. When I saw a smeared bloody palm print, the shock almost sent me reeling over backward down the stairs. I don't know how long I stared at that palm print, but finally I allowed it to tell me I must go back down the stairs and search for Mrs. Spina.

"Mrs. Spina?" I called as I passed through the kitchen. I saw more blood on the yellow wall telephone and red drops spattered on the linoleum floor beneath. My stomach was about to heave. In the dining room more blood had dribbled on the floor.

The puzzle lay on the table and was almost complete. In the photograph, Miss Santini sat naked in bed, a sheet partially covering her. One arm held a cheap Brownie camera just below her smirking face. Her other arm was raised and so was her middle finger. Miss Santini had taken the photo in the mirror that sat atop a low dresser across from the bed. She must have first tipped the mirror down like my brother and I did with Mom's mirror when we were little kids and played in our parents' bedroom.

A man with a head of curly hair lay in bed with her, on his back and evidently sleeping, most of his face away from the camera. I wondered if he was Mrs. Spina's late husband. Her sister's middle finger and the look of triumph on her face said everything about who was a winner and who was a loser. Who wins is the winner. That's what Mrs. Spina had told me.

Was this the first that Mrs. Spina knew her sister slept with her late husband? Why would Miss Santini send the photo to her sister, and why have it made into a puzzle? Why now?

I must have said the word "why" out loud, because a man's voice answered.

"Good question," he said. "What the hell are *you* doing here?"

In a bedroom off the dining room Annette's father, a police detective and my former Little League Coach, sat on the foot of a bed. He stood up and walked toward me.

"I'm their paper boy, Coach," I whined.

"And the worst right fielder I ever had on my team," he said. "Now you're a woman killer."

A thick leather patch hung from the pocket of his sport coat. On it was a silver badge that must have weighed three pounds.

"I didn't kill her," I said, realizing I was accused of Mrs. Spina's murder. And maybe both sisters. Detective Altomare simply shook his head. Up and down or sideways it was impossible to tell. He just moved it around a little.

"What happened?" I asked, my voice an octave higher than usual.

"Did you know the women in this house very well?" he asked, using the past tense for both sisters.

"I just deliver the paper," I cried.

"The lady in the puzzle," he said. "Who is she?"

"I don't know," I said. I tried to stop my chin from trembling.

Detective Altomare sighed with impatience. He glanced down at the floor, shifted his weight from one foot to the other and quickly back again. Then he moved close to me and continued to stare into my face.

“Who’s the guy sleeping in the bed?” He gestured toward the puzzle on the table.

“I ... I don’t know,” I said.

He leaned even closer, towering over me. I easily understood he owned the air I was breathing.

“Why don’t you just start telling me everything you know, punk,” he said, quietly. “And if it’s helpful, maybe I won’t arrest you for murder or breaking into this flat. And maybe I won’t send your sorry little ass off to jail for anything I can think up.” He ended his statement with a much louder, “Huh?”

I told him everything I knew ... almost. Everything I considered possible. I even began to tell him I thought it could be Communist agents who wanted the house for a radio listening post. After all, we were only 15 miles from a Strategic Air Command air base, and there were always suspicious looking men hanging around the barbershop down on the corner. The Polish barber, Pete Warblowski, was a newspaper customer listed in my collection book as Peter Wabbit. Who but a spy would use such a fake name? I stopped in mid sentence when he glared at me with an evil eye. He didn’t want speculation. I didn’t tell him the lady in the bed was Miss Santini. I might be the prime suspect, so I don’t know why I tried to save the woman from prosecution. The paper boy’s code of silence, maybe, or I might have been still thinking of her trying to kiss me a few nights before.

Detective Altomare let me go after 45 minutes.

“The Grand Jury may want to indict you,” he added. “Don’t leave town.”

Where would I go? I probably had enough money only for a bus ticket to Albany. I didn’t know anyone there, but I had read Legs Diamond hid out in a downtown hotel when the police were chasing him. Even if I borrowed two dollars, after the bus ticket I’d have about 35 cents to pay for a hide-out.

My mother asked me twice at supper why I was so quiet. Even Dad looked quizzically at me, and he was never in the habit of worrying about the moods of teenage boys, having been one a long time ago.

Half of my thoughts concerned the killing. How could such a terrible thing happen and who killed the sisters? I was also trying to come to grips with the idea of being accused of murder. How could anyone think I would do such a thing? I had often smothered my little brother, but I knew when he stopped moving he was faking it. What if I was convicted? If I got out of prison in 20 years, would Annette be waiting? And how would she look as an older woman of 35? What about college? What about turning 18 and being allowed to drink beer? Did they have beer in prison? Was prison as bad as I had heard? At least I might get my own room, even if it was a small cell.

There was a guy in the paper a year before who had his murder sentence upped to life because he raped his victim. Would I be accused of that and never get out of jail? How could I prove I was a virgin? Was there a test, or would a string of witnesses do? Maybe I could get the Girls Choir at school to all sign a petition or a greeting card testifying I’d never even tried to look down the fronts of their blouses. And would anyone believe that?

My father went out to a church meeting and my mother began to quiz me, following me into the living room, where I had planned to turn on the TV to see if I was on the Six O'Clock News.

"You can always tell me anything," she said. "I know something is bothering you."

"No, I'm OK," I said. But I knew if I didn't confess, she would hound me to tears.

"Nothing is ever that terrible," she said.

"Nothing is wrong, Mom," I said. "I'm just a little tired tonight."

"If you'll just tell me I'm sure we'll both feel better about it."

"I've been accused of murdering two ladies on my paper route," I said.

If someone had walked into the room and whacked the woman over the head with a baseball bat, the instant look of shock on her face would have been no different.

"Two sisters," I added, helpfully.

She tried to speak. Her jaw moved, but no sound came out.

"They were older, almost forty," I said, wondering what other details might be of interest.

Recovering a bit, she squeaked, "Were they Jewish?"

"I'm not a Nazi, Mom," I said.

"No," she said, "I meant the only two sisters I know on your route are the Fineberg girls."

I told her about the Santini sisters, the puzzle, Detective Altomare and Angelo the dog, who of course I had not met.

Poor Mom. As she sat opposite me on the edge of her chair, she seemed to shrivel up as she drew her knees up, practically to her chin.

"We can get through this," she said. "Don't worry," she repeated several times.

But she looked more worried than ever and her forehead was knit with concern.

"I have to leave," I said.

"Don't run from the law!" she pleaded. "We can get through this."

"I have to go to the dance," I said.

She was incredulous. "You can't go to a ... a d-dance. You're a suspected murderer for God's sake!"

For Mom to ever use the word God without being deep in prayer was a shock to my ears. She might as well have used the F word.

"I didn't do it, Mom," I said in my calmest voice..

"Well, I mean ... this is serious," she said. "Wait for your father to come home."

"I'll be home early," I said. "I really have to go. Really!"

I stood and walked toward the back door.

She turned and followed me with sad eyes as if I was walking toward the gallows.

"Is your picture in the Post Office yet?" she asked.

"It just happened today," I said.

"And you were in school, weren't you?" she said. "What time? You didn't skip Geometry again, did you?"

"You can't kill two people and get back for fourth period, Mom," I said with some exasperation.

She nodded slowly, as if she would give that opinion some consideration.

"I'll be home before Dad gets back," I lied again. I walked through the kitchen and left the house.

I forgot to wear my best shirt. And tonight might be the last time I'd see Annette. I doubted her father would allow her to visit me in the basement of the city jail while I awaited trial. I remembered I needed to make a few early collections on the paper route for the two dollars to take Annette out and pay her bus fare home. I ran the three blocks between my house and the paper route. It was getting dark and I looked for lights in the windows to signal who was at home. Mr. and Mrs. Rigley Field overcame their surprise and gave me their 40 cents. So did a few other customers as I worked my way up the street until I had two dollars.

Coming away from Mr. Charles Tuna's house, I noticed a light shining from a window in Mrs. Spina's flat. Detective Altomare was still at work, which meant he hadn't told Annette of my future indictment. My stomach was churning, but if I didn't want damaging testimony at my trial about my lying, I had to go in there and tell the detective the woman in the puzzle was Miss Santini.

I knocked on the back door and Mrs. Spina opened it. Quite a large dressing sat above one eye, held in place with a band around her head.

"You're alive!" I exclaimed. "I'm glad you're OK," was all I could think to add. A thousand pound weight lifted off my shoulders.

"That *puttana!*" she spat. "She can't kill me!" She stepped out of her door and turned to the stairway.

"*Sfatcheem!*" she bellowed up the stairs. A muffled stream of invective I couldn't understand came back down the stairs, but I could imagine Miss. Santini's reaction to have been called a shitface.

Satisfied to have that out of the way, Mrs. Spina turned back to me with a gentle lady-like smile.

"I went up to discuss her disgusting puzzle," she said. "She threw a water glass at me! Hit me in the head," she said, pointing to her scalp where the bandage covered the hair line. "I tried to have her arrested, but the police wouldn't do it."

"They thought I killed the two of you," I said.

She laughed and then looked apologetic.

"I'm sorry about all of this," she said. "The detective, he told me you helped him."

"Well," I answered, "I guess so. Sure."

"You saw the puzzle after we went to the hospital?" she asked.

"Well, not very well," I lied.

"Did you tell the detective you saw Angelo in the picture?" she asked, looking at me intently.

"There was no dog I could see in the photo, Mrs. Spina," I said.

She nodded her head, as if in understanding.

"I told you Angelo was a dog before you saw the whole puzzle," she said. "Angelo was the man in the bed with my sister."

I was embarrassed, but I couldn't stop myself from saying, "Was that your husband?"

"Oh, no. Poor Marco, he died in the war. So young. No, this was all after the war."

"I'm sorry," I said.

“After the war, my sister and I went to dances together. We met Angelo and he came back here. One night downstairs, other night upstairs.” She giggled, then said, “Finally, Angelo chose her. She won, she was the winner. It was OK then, none of us were married.

She looked at me earnestly and said. “Married changes things. Terrible sin. Not right.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“She still rubs my face in it,” said Mrs. Spina. “I can’t believe she did such a picture. And to have it made into a puzzle. She knew it would get to me, even if it took a while for me to figure it out.”

It was getting late. I needed to leave for the dance.

“I have to get going.”

“If you see the detective again,” she said, “you tell him you saw Angelo in the picture,”

I wondered why she wanted to involve Angelo with the police.

“Are you sure you want me to tell that to Detective Altomare?”

“Oh, yes,” she said. “You tell him about Angelo.”

“But all I saw was a head of hair. I don’t even know the guy.”

“You tell him,” she said.

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With my arms loosely around Annette in the middle of the gym floor at the school dance an hour later, I popped the question. To my stunned amazement she said yes, she would accompany me to the soda shop afterward.

The place was busy when we arrived and found a table. I now felt bad I’d left Mom at home to announce to my father their boy was accused of murder. I should have found a pay telephone and called her, but that was another dime and I was afraid if I left Annette alone for one second, she would bolt out the door and find her own way home. The money I’d save on her bus fare was not worth the shame of having my first date run out on me.

It was a rather quiet date and not very much like what I had hoped for on my first. I could think of absolutely nothing to say to Annette as I sat across from her at the soda shop. I ached to tell her I’d been accused of a sordid murder and was now exonerated, but given her father’s role I had the sense to not bring it up. And of all the dumb stunts, I feigned disinterest because I’d rather appear bored than tongue tied. She was probably insulted. I just couldn’t think of anything to say that wouldn’t sound stupid. I sat there rigid and it occurred to me there was nothing for me to brag about, except I could tightly roll a newspaper and throw it thirty feet from a moving bicycle with accuracy ... most of the time. I could solve a quadratic equation and I could swallow air and burp the longest of any boy I knew. I suspected she wouldn’t be interested in any of these accomplishments.

Finally, on the bus ride to her house, Annette erupted in chatter. Maybe she tired of my silence or didn’t want to appear in public with a boy who was no more lively or talkative than he would be on the day of his funeral.

At her door, she asked me to come in to meet her parents.

“Oh, no, I can’t,” I said. I never wanted to see her father again.

Annette huffed in annoyance. “It’s customary for you to meet my parents.”

“Yes, but—“

The door suddenly swung open wide and Detective Altomare filled the door frame. His surprise at discovering me outside with his daughter would have been hilarious if I hadn’t recently been a murder suspect.

“I didn’t know you two were out tonight,” he said, blocking the door.

“Daddy, let us in the house,” said Annette.

“Well, honey,” her father said, “your date and I have to go outside and talk business for a minute. You come inside and I’ll be right back.”

A woman I remembered from the ball games as Mrs. Altomare came up behind the detective and said, “Angelo, is everything all right?”

Angelo? His name on the baseball program had always been A.C. Altomare and all the adults called him Ace. The detective’s hair had grayed a little, but this could be the same head of curly hair I’d seen in bed in the picture puzzle.

He hustled me off the porch and guided me to the sidewalk and then down the street.

“We need to talk,” he said.

“Mrs. Spina told me to tell you I saw Angelo in the picture puzzle,” I said.

“I’ll just bet she did,” he said, spitting out the words with anger.

I stopped and looked up at the man. He was obviously uncomfortable.

“Was that you?” I asked.

“That was many years ago,” he said. “Before I met Annette’s mother.”

I remembered hearing someone on the stairs the day I was in Mrs. Spina’s dining room. She had roughly pulled me into the kitchen when she noticed something or maybe someone behind me.

“That was you,” I said. “Sure, that was Angelo. The day Mrs. Spina pulled me into her kitchen. You must have been out on the back porch. And then you went up to see Miss Santini.”

He looked crestfallen and guilty, caught.

“I can explain that,” he said. “I can also cause a lot of trouble for you and your big mouth.”

“But you can’t charge me with murder,” I said.

\*

When I got home that night, my father made me tell him everything, twice. He was upset, and advised me to keep the story to myself.

“Don’t get into any more conversations with Mrs. Spina or her sister,” he said. “Or any of the Altomares.”

“That’s not right,” I said.

“You let me decide what’s right in this case,” he said. “Concentrate on your school work.”

My mother said nothing, but the steely look in her eyes told me she was upset.

Not sure why I was apologizing I glanced at her, “I’m sorry, Mom.”

“You go out on your first date,” she said, “and you don’t tell your Mother?”

Annette immediately began to ignore me in the halls at school. Poor kid, I can’t imagine what she went through, because her father’s car was soon showing up regularly

in the Santini sisters' driveway. I heard later he divorced Annette's mother and took up with Miss Santini, who I guess was the winner. But as a prize, Detective Altomare struck me as a distant second to a cake or a dish of ziti

I left the paper route a short time later when I lied about my age and went to work for an advertising specialty company delivering soap samples to people's homes. It paid better, but wasn't as much fun. You definitely couldn't throw bars of soap against people's doors. Two years later I went off to college and seldom returned to my home town, except for family disasters.

In my thirties, I flew back for Aunt Lily's funeral. My aunt was known throughout the city and the church was quite crowded. For over thirty years her outlandish newspaper columns treated a range of subjects far beyond her analytical abilities but well within the grasp of her acerbic wit. She had fought and won three libel cases.

I sat up near the front of the church behind the immediate family of cousins and when the pews emptied out after the service I was one of the last to leave the church. An older woman approached me and said Hello. It took a moment for me to recognize her.

"Mrs. Spina," I said. "My gosh, it's been years. You look well."

"And you're all grown up," she cooed.

"And how is your sister?" I asked, carefully.

A cloud seemed to cross her features.

"Oh," she said, avoiding my eyes, "not so good."

I saw myself as a youngster and a feeling of dread echoed from the past and pulled on my stomach. Instantly, pity rose in me for the kid who had been subjected to these two women so long ago. A delayed anger accompanied it.

"You know," I said evenly, "that was a lot for a fifteen-year-old to be put through."

"I am truly sorry," she said, with compassion in her eyes. "My sister died ten years ago."

"I'm sorry to hear it," I said, but I could not have sounded sincere.

A man came up behind her and she turned as if familiar with his footsteps. As he approached us I recognized him, Detective Altomare. He didn't even glance at me. I could imagine why, after Dad spoke to the District Attorney.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked her.

Mrs. Spina's face reddened and she smiled up at me. But it was not a smile of embarrassment. The elder Santini sister had the smile of a winner. Who wins is the winner, she told me long ago. Sometimes it takes a while.