



All That Money

A Novel

Steven K. Meyers



*Celebrity crimes often breed rumors that the victim was complicit. In the 1934 Lucie Spode White case, the rumors are true. An heiress with great expectations but an empty purse, Lucie enlists her handsome lover, Harry Thrall, in a scheme to anticipate part of her inheritance. Can't be a crime if she's in on it, right? A fast-moving reverse mystery, *All That Money* gives the reader a rollicking ride with Harry, Lucie-and the FBI!*

All That Money

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Praise for *Good People*,
a novel by Steven K. Meyers
(BookLocker.com, Inc.)

Good People draws readers into the world of comedy clubs in New York City in the 1980s through incisive writing sprinkled with Raymond Chandler-like similes and pace, and complicated characters whose lives and relationships you'll care about. Appropriate to a novel about comedy clubs, the author's writing style is humorous and at times biting—like the shark on the cover! Music and stagecraft are woven into the narrative along with ambition, competition, and weather imagery that reflects the tumultuous and uncertain world the characters inhabit as they pursue their dreams. A sharp contemporary novel of a neglected and important era of American popular culture.

—M. Lee Alexander (Amazon.com)

A crackling good read, a satirical foray into both the comedy club boom and the go-go business culture of the '80s. Meyers gets the details right, and you can practically smell the spandex, hair gel and cheap limos that permeated the era.

—Mark Breslin, *Village Post City Magazines* (Toronto)

A snappy story packed with wonderfully madcap characters and superb dialogue. Enthusiastically recommended.

—Gerry Burnie (GerryBurnieBooks.com)

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First Edition

I. May 11, 1936

1.

In Hollywood, when you wake up, who are you?

He tried to remember as his wind-up Big Ben trilled itself mute in the darkness. Outside, birdsong enshrouded the neighborhood.

It came to him. Both the reality and the pretense.

He yawned and leapt to his feet. Put coffee on and went back to the bedroom to wake up Julia.

"Hey, baby, time to get up!"

Julia moaned tragically, turned over on her back, covered her pout with arms and sheets, and from beneath them said in a little girl voice, "Jack, I'm *sleepy*."

"Early bird gets the worm." He pulled her toe, but she kicked.

"Cut it *out*. Staying home today."

"Julia, to play this game—"

That set her off. She sat up and tossed pillows.

"So I can't take *one day* off? Look, Jack, you've got twice the dimples of Clark Gable, but you're not getting anywhere either. It's rigged!"

He didn't want an argument. "Suit yourself, babe."

"Kiss my ass, Jack!"

He bathed and shaved and dressed with care. After eating breakfast, and getting a last encouraging glance from his mirror,

he flicked a jacaranda blossom off the hood of his Buick and drove down Manzanita, left on Sunset, right on Western. On the corner of Hollywood Boulevard he parked in front of Central Casting. The rising sun threw long, animated shadows from the actors—the movie extras—scrambling off a Red Car trolley and going inside.

As he went in, walking with a snap to his wrists, Jack glanced up at the cast cement nudes gracing the façade. One day he counted seventy-six breasts and thirty-one male members. Some law of irony decreed that the Central Casting building should also house the Hays Office—the movie censors, tense and celibate products of Jesuit schools. Jack presumed they pulled their hat brims low as they entered.

He submitted his name to Sophie at her barred window and grinned as she checked her clipboards. She usually found work for him. A young, dashing-looking guy was what the studios wanted most days, though even Jack admitted the town was crawling with handsome, well set-up youths with miraculously clear complexions. That was why he wasn't getting *lines*, too much competition.

"You're in luck, Jack," Sophie told him. "Warner's got Cagney in a kidnapping flick, they need toughs." She looked up with sudden misgiving.

Scowling, he growled, "Right up my alley, doll face."

She giggled, handed across a card and said, "Warner's, stage 12," and he was off.

Even without Julia—working together, they were often put in high-society nightclub scenes—he enjoyed his day, though he didn't get lines. The director sat him in a chair reading a newspaper on a dark set representing the back room of a bar, a spunky heiress—the kidnapping victim—tied up in a chair nearer the camera, and when Cagney looked in to ask, "How she doin'?" the other extra got the line: "Still kickin', boss!" Jack

knew he could have handled it, but that was the picture business for you. He thought it too dark, also, for him to be reading the paper, but that's what they wanted. Irene Dunne played the heiress, and at a break when opportunity arose Jack gave her one of his frank looks, but was not unduly miffed that she ignored it.

After work he stopped off for a drink with colleagues at the Formosa Cafe, but it was still full daylight when he returned home. Sprinklers drizzled over the lawns, and blossoms splashed purple shadows over the stucco of the Spanish-style houses.

He was happy. Having a good time. Getting tired of his girl, of course, but that happens, and other possibilities abounded—even if Irene Dunne had crossed herself off the list. And if pictures weren't going to make him a star, he might switch to something that would let him sleep in a little himself: real estate.

The Depression was still on, but in Los Angeles you hardly knew it. Already in Jack's year and a half there, the bean fields on the way to Metro had begun to sprout cottages. No, he sensed money could be made in California real estate. Might be time to start turning his savings into land, especially over on the west side where the stars were moving now. Had his eye on some lots on Las Palmas.

So as he turned into the driveway and walked up the steps into his house, he was mulling the idea of moving from his take-it-as-it-comes kind of life to one more concerned with the future.

In the living room, whose arched window took in the Los Angeles basin from ocean mists at Santa Monica to the *Hollywoodland* sign strung across a scrubby hill, Julia sat on the couch.

"Hey, babe," Jack said with a smile.

His smile faded when she raised a gun from her lap.

2.

After Jack left that morning, Julia had gone back to sleep for an hour, then arose in leisurely fashion. While warming up the coffee she smoked a Lucky Strike at the table in the garden. This California, with its year-round outdoor living—what was Kansas about, anyway? Why would anyone want to live where, when you drive to the far horizon, what you see is only a farther one?

Kansas was where she met John Simons. *If* that was his name. She had been looking out the window of the six-stool café at a little crossroads near Larned, across the tracks from the grain elevator where her father worked, when a Buick came purring through, turned in and stopped. John Simons stepped out to stretch his legs and have a cup of coffee.

She poured him the coffee.

He gave her a look, got one in return. He cast a sardonic glance at the surrounding wheat fields and said, "Guess you must like wheat, huh?" She blushed. He told her he was headed for Hollywood, asked if she wanted to come along. She said she might as well, dropped her apron, called into the kitchen that she'd be back in a minute, and got in his car. She was nineteen and drying up in Kansas. Nineteen was old enough to make up her own mind. Wasn't like he kidnapped her or anything.

Two years with Jack had been fun, but now she was going on twenty-one, in a town where every second woman was gorgeous and trying to claw her way into pictures. Where it seemed vertical progress on the career ladder was best achieved horizontally. She had no problem with that, if that was the way it was. But it meant Jack was almost more of a hindrance than a help.

Almost. After all, he did have an income, a lifesaver since extra work could be hit or miss.

What she needed was a stake of her own, something to let her give five years, say—the first half of her twenties—to the unremitting pursuit of what they weren't handing out on silver platters. Fine for *Jack* to play at it, but she couldn't afford to. In five years she'd be twenty-six, poised at the tippy-top of the ski jump that was the downward slope of a woman's looks. She saw the girls working the diner counters, saw how it drained them and aged them even as they still made the rounds before or after their shifts, pestered agents, propositioned casting directors. And when in Bullock's Wilshire, you're stalked by a 30-year-old woman gripping the bulb of a perfume atomizer, and despite her wrinkles you recognize her as a comer in motion pictures not that long ago. It was creepy, no clouds of My Sin could disguise the stink of failure.

Julia wasn't going to waste a minute crying about anything, she'd do what she had to do, but she just couldn't go *that* route. *Couldn't*. She *had* to succeed. And *would*, if she could concentrate on the one thing only. But the only way to do that was to have a stake.

Jack (or whoever he was) said she could count on him, but catering to him alone was already a drag on her progress. Hadn't an assistant director just last week intimated he could help her, if only she had evenings free for the exchange of information?

It was possible Jack had served his purpose.

But there was one thing more he could do for her. He could give her that stake.

She smoked and looked down across the flats towards the Paramount water tower a mile off. The bus ran right past, so did the Red Cars, and to RKO and Columbia, too. But MGM required a change, it took an hour and a half just to get there. Warner's and Universal were in the Valley—forget about it without a car: two changes, two hours. And here she was,

ripening day by day. She had to move the goods in front of the eyes that mattered before they spoiled.

Five years would cost a minimum of five thousand dollars—ten thousand to be safe, to have a car. Fifteen thousand and she could buy a little cottage, be that much more secure. And security's good for the complexion. Makes a woman radiant. And stars have to radiate their stardom.

If at the end of five years she was not by way of being a star, she'd take a job at Bullock's willingly enough. Oh, yes.

So what about Jack? (Whoever.) From Atlanta, he claimed. She could hear traces—traces only. No Southern gentleman, not the way he came home late, stinking, if a girl let him. A few years older than she, but had the gall to go for women even older. Mother complex. But mother he never spoke of, or father either. Said he was an orphan. Except once said his dad was dead, his mother alive. Another time said the opposite.

Did he come from money? No, no, Dad was born to a Tennessee sharecropper, but went to college and pulled himself up.

It didn't add up.

And his money? She was secretive herself, but *still*. He wouldn't say a word. He owned the house outright and the Buick, and she'd come across two bank books, each showing an opening balance of ten thousand dollars and no withdrawals. She was sure there were more bank books. So he had plenty.

If they got married, it would be a cinch. While it lasted he'd be her security. If it ended, take him for what she could. But Jack swore he'd never marry. (But once he said marry *again*.) By the time she wore him down in that department, she'd be dishing up eggs at Barney's Beanery.

She puffed away and thought. There was something wrong about this John Simons character.

A fragment came back to her from a few months earlier. They had two days' work together at Metro, on a George Raft gangster picture. The scene was set in a New York nightclub, and they sat at a little round table, applauding the floor show, when G-Men raided the place. Melvin Sturgis, in what they called a cameo—the famous, real-life, gangster-buster Melvin Sturgis, recently retired from the F.B.I.—led the raid.

It was funny to watch Sturgis in front of the cameras. A star withstands the camera's scrutiny as though it's not there. *She* had that quality. (Had to admit Jack did, too.) Melvin Sturgis did not. Maybe he was cooler when it was guns and not cameras aimed at him, but for the camera he couldn't walk, couldn't talk, couldn't look anywhere except right into the lens, gaping. The script called for him to barrel down a staircase and interrupt George Raft's tango with, "Stick 'em up! Federal Bureau of Investigation!"

Sitting in the sun, she snarled, "Stick 'em up! Federal Bureau of Investigation!"

Easy—but not for poor Melvin.

"Stook 'em up! Oh, damn!" was the first take. The forty-fourth wasn't much better, but at least his legs didn't go spastic, and he didn't appeal wide-eyed to the camera while his tommy gun clattered to the floor. So they took it, overdubbed him for the final release.

She stubbed out her cigarette, drained her coffee cup, sliced a banana over a bowl of Post Toasties. What was it Jack said at some point during the farce? "Melvin Sturgis couldn't catch a flea—much less *me*. And he *tried!*"

Wasn't much to go on, but she had a hunch. She dressed, pulled on white gloves, put on a hat and dark glasses against the relentless glare that bathes L.A. from spring through fall, walked the block to Sunset and caught a Red Car downtown, to the mosaic-domed Los Angeles Public Library on Bunker Hill.

There she asked if they had newspapers from a year and a half, two years earlier.

They did. They sat her at a refectory table in a lofty room bright with fairy-tale murals, and soon a page rolled up a squeaky-wheeled cart piled with yellowing back issues of the *L.A. Times* and *Herald Examiner*.

She browsed through them. Nothing particularly caught her eye. Lynchings. Grave robberies. Fatal bites from rabid dogs on the loose. More bank robberies than she ever dreamed of, but Jack—*whoever*—wasn't the type.

In copies from September 1934 she read about Bruno Hauptmann being arrested and charged with kidnapping the Lindbergh baby two years earlier. Riveting new details emerged every day. But a month later, a fresh crime swept Hauptmann off the front pages:

HEIRESS KIDNAPPED! LUCIE SPODE WHITE TAKEN AT GUNPOINT!

She remembered the case—a national sensation, second only to the Lindbergh kidnapping—and at first turned pages impatiently. Three or four days into it, Jack's picture! An out-of-focus snapshot of an engaging kid with younger, thinner features, a different part in his hair and no mustache—and a smile of pure joy—was identified as Harry Thrall, object of a nationwide manhunt. But it was *Jack*, no doubt about it!

The caption plastered beneath read: "*F.B.I. Reward: \$10,000.*"

"*Aha!*" she said. Couldn't help it. She looked around to see if anyone had noticed. No one had, save possibly for the white-haired gent at the next table who, holding her gaze, flicked his

lizard tongue across his lips. (An upward lift of her chin took care of *him!*)

She read on, straight through the front-page accounts of the delivery of a hundred grand in ransom, the subsequent release of the heiress unharmed and her kidnapper's disappearance.

For days thereafter, the story lingered on the front page with reported sightings of Harry Thrall every place from Portland, Maine to El Paso, Texas to Graz, Austria.

Then the story moved to the inside pages, finally vanishing altogether, except for occasional Sunday supplement rotogravures of Lucie Spode White in an interesting condition, looking over the gunwales of ocean liners with her husband or coming out of fancy Continental hotels.

Julia thanked the librarians and, in response to their eager query whether she'd found what she was looking for, shrugged with a grateful little moué of disappointment.

Her path lay clear now. Much simplified. A hundred thousand dollars! Jack—no, *Harry*—had more than enough to stake her. And if he were disinclined, the Federal reward of \$10,000 would suffice. Kismet!

She celebrated with a late lunch in a shadowy corner of the Biltmore Hotel grille. In a sign of things to come (she hoped!) an RKO film editor pierced her woman-of-mystery persona and, though she rebuffed his first suggestion, gave her his card. She tucked it into her purse. After lunch she walked down to Broadway through the palms of Pershing Square. There she found a pawn shop, made her selection and returned home shortly after five o'clock.

When Jack—*Harry*—drove up an hour later and walked in the door, Julia was sitting on the Mission couch with her pawnshop purchase—a little silver-plated .22 pistol—in her lap.

"Hey, babe."

"Hi, Harry," Julia greeted him, raising the gun.

"What did you call me?"

"Marry me, Harry. Gee, that rhymes."

"Not marrying you or anybody else, Julia."

"You'd better, or else give me fifty thousand, or I'll call the F.B.I."

He lowered himself into a chair, eyes on hers, and put his hands on his knees.

At least he was paying attention.

"Don't be silly, honeybunny. That's all I got out of it, was fifty thousand bucks."

"Gosh, that's disappointing, when the papers call it a hundred."

"They got it wrong."

"Harry, you're boring me."

"My money's *mine*. After what I went through to get it?"

He looked disgusted and angry – even, for the very first time, a trifle ugly. The shadow of a hawk's wings brushed the window.

"Just giving you a chance to beat the F.B.I. reward, Harry. Sure you won't reconsider?"

He sprang forward. She winged him mid-leap. *Bang!*

The noise was brutal and dogs started barking.

He fell back into his seat, grabbing his left arm with that ineffable *You shot me!* expression.

"*Shit*, Harry, now it *has* to be the F.B.I., or the cops'll arrest me."

"Go to hell."

She picked up the phone at her elbow and asked the operator to connect her with the Los Angeles office of the F.B.I.

While she waited she said, "I'll admit, you got balls: Parading your face in front of the cameras with nothing but a haircut and mustache between you and a million newspaper photos?"

His good hand smoothing his hair back, he said, "Nobody ever sees what's right in front of their face."

3.

Joe Albright was about to go home from his dusty official quarters on Hill Street after another long day grinding away at redemption.

L.A. was thronged with criminals hard at work—*thronged!*—but as the juniormost member of the local Bureau, and known to be in the doghouse with the Director—personally exiled by J. Edgar Hoover, after being given the slip by Lucie Spode White's kidnapper!—Joe got the worst jobs: the stake-outs of Chinese laundries, the follow-up interviews with Filipino pimps or the nuts who claimed they'd just seen Harry Thrall driving down Sunset big as life in a supercharged Cord next to two platinum blondes. Fine for Melvin Sturgis to come to town, dine at Ciro's, dance at the Cocanut Grove and do his cameo—Joe snorted at the grapevine's insistence it took fifty takes for him to utter "F.B.I." without a mistake—but Joe was spinning his wheels in Los Angeles.

He was heading for the door when the phone rang. He sighed, and went back to answer it.

"F.B.I., Special Agent Albright speaking."

"Hello, Special Agent Albright," Julia said. "Are you still looking for Harry Thrall?"

"Yeah," Joe answered.

"Keep my name out of it?" No one wants to be called a tattletale.

"Sure."

"And the reward's still good?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"I just shot him. 2213 Manzanita, top of the hill above Sunset. My name is Julia Breese."

Whenever she said her name it sounded like she was whispering.

"Be right there."

Joe made a quick call to Rampart Station. On learning that the police had a report of gunfire at the same address, he requested backup and sped two miles up Sunset in a battered Bureau Ford. He arrived to find an ambulance and four squad cars' worth of shotgun-toting cops holding back, waiting for him.

Drawing his regulation .38 Special, Joe walked onto a porch latticed with wisteria vines and banged open the door with a forceful "F.B.I.!"

"Come in," said Julia.

"Hello, Harry. We meet again."

"My name is John Simons, and this bitch shot me."

"You're under arrest for the kidnapping of Lucie Spode White."

"Shit," said Harry.

Joe slipped a handcuff on Harry's wrist like a groom ringing his bride's finger. He started bleeding again. A medic fixed a tourniquet on his arm, and Joe led him away.

As the sun sank behind Santa Monica, Joe's colleagues and the police questioned Julia and searched the house. Up in the hills thousands of lightbulbs began to flash, one word at a time, their urgent

HOLLY

WOOD

LAND

- ALL THAT MONEY -

When they took her downtown, the moon was knifing the sky with a scimitar's edge, the whole circle of its wafer palely visible. She knew the moon would be down when she got back, but that the sign would abide.

A good night's work: \$10,000, and no more Jack.

II. Two years earlier: March 1934

4.

Falls City—*Falsity* in the charming local drawl—sprawled beneath the Spode Tower, whose height afforded a sweeping prospect of it lying along the broad silver slash of the Qwattata River, hemmed in on every side by primeval forest. The great river's unhurried wash set the Southern tempo that Falls City luxuriated in.

But in his office in the tower's gothic crown—fourteen stories high, it was the tallest structure (excepting steeples) between Cincinnati and St. Louis—Robert Spode, Jr. saw only the letter lying on his desk. He read it again:

Dear Bob,

It is with confidence in your generous character that I write to beg a favor.

You will remember when we raised your fine Tower several years ago that my son Harry was proving a trial to me. He has since left Vanderbilt Law School under a cloud. He is at heart a good young fellow, so quick in his parts that I retain my fondest hopes for his future.

But given the dismal business climate here in Memphis, not to mention the residence in the locality

- ALL THAT MONEY -

of the young lady in question, might I ask your help in finding Harry a job in Falls City? Whatever be the work, however humble, I promise he will perform his duties well. Occupation and a change of scene will help my boy grow up.

Please, Bob, make everlastingly grateful

Your humble
servant,

Vergil Thrall

Spode pressed a button and addressed a speaker: "Miss Overby, please take a letter."

Miss Overby came in and sat down, demurely crossing her legs. Spode handed her Thrall's letter and, while she copied the address, got to his feet and frowned outdoors.

He dictated:

"My Dear Vergil: It is a pleasure to hear from you, although a pleasure shadowed by your son's—*um*—vicissitudes. As a father I sympathize. Fortunately my daughter Lucie since her marriage has ceased giving me cause for worry. I recommend marriage for your son.

"Paragraph. 'Although I wish I could help, given present business conditions—'"

Miss Overby cleared her throat. Spode looked at her and said, "Thrall's a good man. Wish we had a place for this cub of his, but distillery's only place we've hired since the Crash, and it's full up."

"Things are so slow, Mr. Spode," Miss Overby said. "But I did hear that Charlie at the Spiral Garage found his day man siphoning gasoline, and let him go."

"Oh! That might do," said Spode, nodding. "All right: 'By all means, send Harry to me, should he be willing to work as—' What do we call it, Beth?"

She blushed at the working-hours lapse of formality.

"Parking attendant?"

"—parking attendant at the Spiral Garage. Compensation is slight—two dollars a day, plus tips, and as you might imagine, tips have fallen off since Wall Street brought these hard times upon us. Still, should Harry work hard, he will be able to keep body and soul together for as long as it pleases him so to do.

"Paragraph. The Spode Tower continues to answer every purpose we had in mind for it, although had we foreseen the current business depression a smaller structure might have sufficed.

"I remain *et cetera, et cetera.*' Type that up right away, please."

Against the sound of typing, and in the glow of benevolence, Spode looked over his city of limestone.

It was a local joke that Falls City was named for the Fall of Man, the lamentable state of its morals and wide-open character of its amusements advanced as proof.

In reality, its lapsarian name derived from the Falls of the Qwattata River. The sole interruption to navigation between Pittsburgh and New Orleans, for a half-mile stretch they lash the slow Qwattata to rapids over a rocky drop of thirty feet. From earliest times the Falls necessitated the transshipment of cargo along the shoreline. Falls City came into being to take advantage of the fact, roosting there like a highwayman on a rock above a turnpike: He *will* be paid. He *will* take his cut.

When the Falls City Canal was built as an aid to navigation and commerce, river traffic was shunted clear of the rocks, transshipment no longer necessary. But the city still collected its toll; rather, the Falls City Canal Co. did.

Spode's father built that canal. The idea for it was old, the need obvious, but it was Bobby Spode, scion of prosperous local planters, who acted on it. After his return from the Civil War, a young Captain of the local Union regiment, he conjured up the necessary funds by every scheme and dodge a fertile mind not burdened by honesty could devise, and never faltered through the difficulties of completing the work.

Once gouged through limestone, the canal gushed money for the city and region – and especially for Spode. And by selling the quarried limestone detritus of the canal excavations cheap, he insured that Falls City rose dignified and handsome.

But these were only the beginning of Spode, Sr.'s enterprises. His son gazed past the pennants snapping above the Spiral Garage to where the breeze lifted plumes from the tailings overhanging the Spode quarries and cement mills. Sun glanced off the water towers and warehouses of the Spode distillery, while the neighboring Spode pipe foundry belched gray smoke; before the Depression, when the foundry had operated at capacity, its inky smoke obscured the whole valley. Nearer, a spider web of train tracks bridged the river; the Falls City & Atlanta Railroad was not solely a Spode enterprise, but father and son held large minority positions in it.

Away off to the west, Spode traced the fine neighborhoods stretching along the Qwattata, especially the bluffs surmounted by Indianola Farm, the old Spode slave plantation where he and his father still lived. The roof upheld by great white columns was all that could be seen of the mansion, next door to the patterned brick chimneys of Overridge, where his daughter lived with her husband. A spyglass might possibly have disclosed his impossibly ancient parent, clinging to life at the age of 97, sole survivor of his regiment, soaking up sun beside the boxwood hedges, leaning against his nurse from his Bath chair like a suckling babe against its mother.

Miss Overby carried in his letter and he signed it. However satisfying the view, there was work to be done.

5.

The following Monday morning when the elevator operator heaved open the brass doors onto his aerie, Spode saw Miss Overby giggling. Against the wall opposite slouched a young man in a dark, close-fitting suit. Merely by adjusting his cuff—but doing so with a dazzling smile—he raised a blush on her that she tried to finesse by reaching a hand to the back of her bun.

Noting her boss's entry, she stopped giggling and frowned.

Spode strode into his office. Miss Overby followed and helped divest him of hat and coat.

"Who's that boy out there?" he asked.

"Mr. Harry Thrall to see you."

"Send him in."

The young man grinned his way into the presence a few moments later. Spode recognized him as the sort that ladies like—possibly an advantage for a parking attendant. Not the sort he himself took to, however. He was perhaps 23, 24, slender, with intensely black hair slicked down with some art, and good features that shone with the conviction that, by golly, they *were* good, weren't they? They supported an insinuating manner, easy and confident.

"Mr. Spode, sir? I'm Harry Thrall."

Spode stood up and extended his hand. He judged a man by the firmness of his handshake. Harry darted his own fingers forward and put them into the elder man's like a girl venturing to hold hands, giving Spode a sensation of warmth that made him suppress a shudder as he withdrew his hand and sat down.

"My father said to give you this."

"Thank you," said Spode, rocking forward to take the proffered envelope. He opened it and read:

Dear Bob:

This accompanies my son Harry. I am grateful for your assistance, and stand personal surety as to Harry's ability and energy.

If ever I might be of service to you, do not hesitate to contact

Your humble servant,
Vergil Thrall

He couldn't help snorting. Thrall was a capable contractor, and Spode felt every confidence his Tower would not soon topple over, but that any return of services might be required was not likely.

"Well, well," he said. He did not care for Harry's handshake. Nor for his manner. Nor for his person. But Harry, he thought, albeit with distaste, would have his uses. Everyone has his uses. "Glad to be of assistance. Your father's a fine man. In good health, I trust?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"Please give him my regards. Well, I imagine he told you what we have in mind for you? We have a parking garage over on Fifth Avenue—Fifth and Jeff Davis: The Spiral. That's two blocks upriver, one block south. Go over there and see Charlie."

"Sure thing, Mr. Spode." Harry smiled, and with the shift of his jaw dimples formed. *Dimples!* "Thank you, sir."

6.

The Spiral Garage was only a five-minute walk from the Spode Tower, but it took Harry several hours to arrive.

First he returned to River House, his hotel, the best in Falls City (and another Spode property). He hoped to see again the maid who showed him memorable kindness upon his arrival the previous afternoon, but she was not on duty. The difficulty was that, consulting his wallet over breakfast, he found that the temptations he succumbed to on his arrival—even on Sunday night, Falls City offered an illicit saloon that lubricated Harry's way to a poker table—had put it into an embarrassing condition, and he needed assistance in removing his suitcase from the hotel, as he had no money to pay his bill.

So he returned and freshened up, and had the extraordinary good fortune of making the acquaintance of one Miss Etta when she knocked on his door to make up his room. The fetching Miss Etta proved amenable to his suggestion that they improve their acquaintance. The upshot was that after Harry strolled out of the lobby dining room after lunch, having signed the meal to his room, and stopped at the desk to extend his stay another night, he darted up the alley to find his suitcase behind a trash can, just where Miss Etta said it would be. He carried it off with him to the Spiral Garage. Too bad for her, she also loaned him a dollar, which meant she would not be seeing him again.

A prophecy of Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum, the Spiral Garage was a pioneering structure built in 1919, the creation of a cranky old architect named J.J. Gaffney. Its concrete ramps spiraled to a height of thirty feet, branching off to three floors that accommodated thirty automobiles each. Patrons dropped off their cars at the entrance and went on their way. Charlie or another attendant would park them upstairs—driving past Mr. Spode's cream-colored Packard, in its niche just inside the entrance—and return downstairs at the double via the manlift, a continuously moving cable: grab the cable and step onto one of the chocks fitted into it and fly downwards. When a

patron returned, the attendant flew aloft like an angel on the upward cable to fetch the car again.

Business was not what it had been in the Twenties, but solo lunchtime duty ran Charlie off his feet. He gave Harry the big hello, put him into blue coveralls, and demonstrated the easy trick of stepping onto the manlift. Eyeing the suitcase, he also told him about Mrs. Good's boarding house farther down Jeff Davis, promising she would offer credit until payday.

Harry's sole disappointment that day was the scarcity of tips. Men felt a nickel was ample, however dismayed his expression at sight of the lowly coin. And the ladies, instead of tipping, let their eyes go out of focus as they screwed their lips into, "Thank you."

Still, at day's end as he rode the trolley down Jeff Davis beside his suitcase, his pocket jingled with a hard-earned sixty cents.

7.

Mrs. Good, charmed by him, and impressed by his claim of his father's personal acquaintance with Robert Spode, Jr., gave Harry a comfortable room and promised patience with the rent.

Falls City, it turned out, suited Harry. Work at the Spiral Garage involved little that resembled labor. Washing cars came closest, but on a fine day with sun flooding the bay where he did that task, even that was easy, particularly with young women passing by and taking notice of his taking notice of them. After work he pursued them at the movies—he loved movies—or the vaudeville theaters or in the parks. On his days off, he attended games of the city's minor league baseball team, *The Night Riders*. He soon had a favorite tavern or two.

And soon he undertook almost daily explorations of the countryside. The midafternoon doldrums were his boss's

naptime, when Charlie would set his office door ajar and lean against it in such a way that his feet were visible, alertly positioned under the desk, but anybody opening it would wake him up before he could be seen to be sleeping. That became Harry's time to borrow cars.

One afternoon he was driving a Plymouth along Falls Road, which hewed close to the river beneath the bluffs surmounted by great houses. Flowering trees – pear, apple and cherry, dogwood white and pink – brightened the riverbanks. A yellow Auburn Phaeton convertible rushed up behind him and with a blare of its horn swerved past. The glimpse he got told him only that the driver was a young woman. She half raised her hand in passing, but stopped the motion when, Harry guessed, she realized the Plymouth's driver was not the person she expected to see.

He stepped on it, and soon drew abreast.

"Thought I knew you," he called over from the other lane. "Sorry!"

She frowned over at him, and slowed up – frowned very prettily, beneath her bell-shaped hat. But the frown relented at his steady smile, her blue eyes widened and she giggled.

"Thought *you* were Edna Chance."

"She drive a car like this?"

"Very like," she returned. "You steal it?"

"Who wants to know?"

"You must be new here," she called.

"Just gassed it up for her," Harry said, "back at the Spiral Garage."

"Oh *really*?" she said, her voice sliding up an octave. "Did Daddy hire you?"

"That depends. Who's your Daddy?"

Laughing, she accelerated, and in front of him made a squealing, two-wheeled turn through gateposts bearing a wrought-iron arch that spelled out *Override*.

Next afternoon, returning downstairs, Harry saw ascending on the other cable a woman! A petite young beauty who, equally startled to see him, still had the wit to shift her weight from one hip to the other and flash a naughty look. Harry leaned out to look up her dress, and heard her laugh.

At the bottom he stepped across and flew upward in her wake. Too late. He got back to earth again as the Auburn turned onto Fifth Avenue amidst honks and screeching brakes.

He woke up Charlie.

"Charlie, Charlie – Who's the girl drives the Auburn?"

"She here?" said Charlie, leaping to his feet.

"No, just left. Got her car herself."

"Everything OK?"

"Yeah, sure. Just wondered who she is."

Charlie sat down again. "That's Mr. Spode's girl Lucie – Lucie Spode White."

"So she's married?"

"*Yeah*, she's married. Married a White."

"Is that good?"

"Boy next door," Charlie said noncommittally. "Old lumber family. See a guy driving along in a fire engine shiny as an apple, that's him. His hobby. But look, her Daddy don't like her parking her car by herself and riding the cable, so next time you see her, stop her."

"Sure thing."

Charlie sighed and re-positioned his door. "Then again, she's got a mind of her own, that one."

"That's the idea I got, seeing her," replied Harry.

8.

Far, far the richest man in Falls City – having made himself so as a young man, more so now that he is also the oldest – is rolling

down the gravel paths of Indianola Farm in a Bath chair. His hour sitting in the sun is the highlight of his day. He says nothing, however, for strokes have left him mute.

Ever since little Bobby Spode—Robert Spode, Sr.—marched his 18th Volunteers home from bloody victory at Chickamauga (slaveholders the Spodes might have been, but they stood with the Union), it was said of him that he had his fingers in everything.

When slavery ended, Robert Spode pushed with Northern energy to organize and exploit the recalcitrant landscape, and take a great fortune out of its resources, even as his cohorts—less apt for labor, less adaptable to the new circumstances—gave themselves up to the drinking of juleps and nostalgia for when their fields rang with slaves' happy singing. Postwar Falls City relaxed into a slower, actually more Southern stance than it presented before what local ladies still delicately referred to as "the late unpleasantness."

But then, its founding families were Virginian in lineage, younger sons who pushed across the Alleghenies to transplant an even more gracious version of Old Virginia than Virginia itself could any longer afford them. They claimed the Qwattata Valley—*Qwattata* an Indian word variously translated as "dark and bloody ground" or "heart of darkness"—and built it into a secret kingdom (or a lost one; geography helped preserve its relative isolation). The hemp and tobacco fields worked by their slaves gave them wealth, enabling them even after Emancipation to devote so much thought and care to their way of life that, in a manner otherwise unknown to the world, except perhaps in Japan, it came to consume as well as to define them.

Miss Willis, the new nurse, pushes the Bath chair in the strengthening April sun. She is a blooming girl of twenty. The Old Man, his hairless head wobbling atop a wizened chicken neck, doesn't know how long she will stay. Most do not stay

long, for he *will* put his fingers where they don't belong. And whenever the girls leave, old Mrs. Shea comes back to make his life a misery until a new nurse is recruited. Mrs. Shea is ill-favored and ill-tempered, red in the face, as loud as she needs to be, and brooks no nonsense.

But Lily Willis, pretty and young, has not yet proved herself uncomplaisant.

She finds the garden that he favors, one protected by hedges. He licks his dry lips. She positions him in the sun and takes the end of a stone bench beside him. Through the balustrades she watches the foaling meadow, where fine colts graze and run with their mothers. The Old Man leans into her. A crablike hand grazes her shin, as if by accident.

She slaps it away.

He will not be deterred. Robert Spode, Sr. gets what he wants, and always has done. *Always.*

But Miss Willis can choose. She has a job, a good one for a time when none can be found. And he happens to know – she's told him, some nurses talk out loud as though he were an old dog, incapable of understanding – that her father and brothers are out of work, her sister crippled. She is the breadwinner for six, living expense free away off here, in the room next to his (but, providentially for her, up three steps). So she needs the job, but if it doesn't suit her, she can leave. It's a free country.

He sends his hand crawling back up her leg, while libidinous eyes drill her, present her with her alternatives. It takes time, but he lodges his fingers. Miss Willis, upset, looks away, and the Old Man, trembling, closes his eyes and brings the thumb of his other hand to his mouth, and works at it as if it were an all-day

9.

A few weeks after his arrival in Falls City, Harry finally laid eyes on Lucie's husband.

A charity ball took place at the River House. The Spode Packard went home promptly at four o'clock as usual, but at seven-thirty Spode, accompanied by his wife, returned downtown in the rear of a grand old Minerva. A liveried chauffeur commanded the uncovered front compartment. Lucie Spode White and her husband followed in his chauffeured Cadillac.

Harry worked overtime helping to park guests' LaSalles and Lincolns in a shuttle operation between hotel and garage, catching glimpses of high-life as he did so. The Spode drivers and a few others passed several hours in Charlie's office playing gin and drinking bourbon. Late in the evening the shuttle reversed direction, and Harry started delivering cars to the River House curb. The chauffeurs packed away their cards, shared packets of Sen-Sen and went off to pick up their charges.

Harry happened to be dropping off an Imperial when Robert Spode, Jr. pushed out through the revolving door. Immediately behind strode a woman in a fall of black silk broken only by ranks of diamonds worn like medals for long service. They said nothing to each other. Obviously she was his wife.

Next out the door tripped Lucie Spode White in a more colorful if daringly diaphanous confection. The squiffy tuxedo behind her stumbled and got slapped in the rear by the door. While Spode snapped his fingers for the Minerva, Squiffy Tux made an extra revolution, helplessly shrugging his shoulders, even becoming a little panicky as he pushed the door around again. Lucie meanwhile rose up stern next to her mother, pulling at her pearls as though she wished to throttle the man. Her father laughed good-naturedly, the couples that piled up behind

tittered, too, and sidewalk spectators guffawed. But Lucie pressed her lips tightly together in just the way her mother did.

The hapless figure who finally cleared the door was Pearl Gossamer White. Although it sounds to Northern ears an odd name for a man, Pearl, if uncommon, is a perfectly respectable man's name south of the Mason-Dixon line. Losing his hair and putting on weight, her husband was fully ten years older than Lucie, and twice her size.

Funny world, Harry thought, trotting back to the Spiral, when a girl like that ends up with a mug who can't even get himself through a door.

10.

A few days later, Harry smoked at the garage entrance while Charlie caught forty winks. Though barely May, a foretaste of the jungle humidity that rots Falls City in the summertime squatted over it. The Auburn roared in. Harry stood in its way, but had to make a quick jump sideways.

"That's OK, Miss Spode, I mean Mrs. White," he said. "I'll take care of it."

Lucie gave him a balked look, but said nothing, got out and hurried up Fifth Avenue on high heels. Harry's crotch lumped as he watched.

He drove the Auburn around and around to the top level and left it at the farthest, darkest spot there. Did it by instinct. He had no plans. Harry was no plan-maker. Checking to see that Charlie still slept, he repaired to the customer toilet and washed his face and combed his hair. Gave himself a good look in the mirror.

And got a good look back: Looking *good*.

Charlie woke up cranky, as always, and hustled Harry around to wash a Studebaker and wax a Chrysler. He

accidentally soaked the front of his coveralls, and came close to telling Charlie what he could do with his job.

Charlie yelled, "Harry!"

Harry appeared, wet down his front, a walking reproach to management.

"Harry, get Mrs. White's car," Charlie said, and jumped on the cable to fetch another customer's. Lucie stood by, her expressionless eyes on the clinging front of the coveralls.

Harry gave her a very frank look.

She returned it. Without breaching the lacquer of her surface—only melting it a little—appetite glowed like a breathed-on chunk of charcoal. Harry wiped his hands and grabbed the cable without looking at her.

She was right behind.

At the top he leapt off and made for the Auburn, keeping ahead of her steps clicking briskly on the concrete. Led her there and opened the passenger door. She got in and he pushed the Bakelite lever that dropped the seat back flat. He was getting on top of her when her splayed fingers stopped him.

"Get that wet thing *off!*" she commanded.

He took off his coveralls. She snapped her pocketbook open and withdrew a foil. He presented himself and she deftly unrolled the lambskin on him, then lay back, hiked up her dress and grimaced as he tore her underwear aside and entered her. Within moments—she as energetic as he—they had the springs squeaking in a frantic rhythm.

When it ceased, Lucie looked at her diamond-faced watch.

"Oh shit," she said.

She got out momentarily to pull her dress down and smooth it and to repair her face (looking *good*, she noticed; but then nothing so nourishes the skin). Harry could have said something, but didn't, and she was not there to elicit his

conversation. Men have their limits, she was all too familiar with them. Their uses, too, of course.

It amused her, taking the wheel, to put out her hand. He took it and didn't squeeze; only held it while he produced his set of dimples.

She laughed with great good cheer, and rushed her car down the ramp and into the street, so recklessly a delivery truck sideswiped a bus.

As for Harry, he had no idea what had happened, but he definitely liked it.

11.

Lucie Spode White's upbringing was the most proper money could buy. An only child, she was educated at home by an English governess until the age of nine, when she entered the Falls City Female Seminary. At seventeen she graduated to a life of charitable pursuits.

Yearbook photographs display her developing self. At nine, Lucie was an ethereal creature with a gauzy, indistinct gaze. Even lined up with her dewy classmates, similarly wreathed in Alice-in-Wonderland tresses, Lucie projects a pixie-like set-apartness. An observer trembles to turn the page lest he find her name gracing a monument of weeping cherubs in Heaven's Mead, the cemetery her grandfather laid out in waste land he could not otherwise develop.

But Lucie thrives. As she enters her teenage years, personality begins to emerge from beneath her great golden arc of hair. She peers out frankly. She bobs her hair, and pins her uniform so as to show some leg and bring her bosom—more full than the age's ideal—to prominence. The others continue to vie in the eternal sweepstakes for best little girl, but Lucie looks like a girl from the future Photoshopped into the antique pictures.

Her gladness of the flesh is irresistible. She appears to have figured out some things. First – for sure – that she was heiress to the richest family around. Second, whether from classroom study of Poe’s *The Purloined Letter* or through instinct alone, she discovered how invisible fearlessly open behavior can be.

For henceforth her openness alternately shocked and amused, while always misdirecting attention. People’s eyes lighted up at mention of Lucie Spode’s latest saying, even as no one seemed to realize that her flamboyant language was no pose adopted for effect, but that her speculation in august company about a waiter’s endowments signaled her intended investigation of same, or that her lauding the charms of a River House porter was based on personal knowledge.

After she married, this hypersuggestiveness of talk that never slept began to wear on her husband, especially since she so seldom slept with *him*, but he never realized that her ready account of seeing the most handsome devil walking down Jeff Davis was her self-absolving mode of confessing that later she did a crazy thing with that devil at the Falls City Overlook. *The Purloined Letter*, combined with the French letter, gave Lucie all the freedom a cultivated young lady could wish.

In her last class pictures, a French letter already secretly resides in her pocketbook. Representing perfect possibility, her prized possession – acquired from her best friend’s brother – radiates powerfully from its small square printed envelope. It primes her, arms her, makes her as tense and self-aware as though she carries a vial of nitroglycerine the least knock might explode, to leave her but a smoking crater in the landscape.

In the event, it became a wearisome possession, too, for it was not until almost her seventeenth birthday that she tore it open. The Spodes were at their thirty-room summer cottage in Harbor Creek, Michigan, when, sitting on the sun porch, reading stock market tables in the paper, her grandfather suffered his

first stroke. In the confused aftermath, even as the Old Man was being propped up in bed and fixing his family with an angry gimlet eye, Lucie allowed the caretaker's son to comfort her in the attic.

Thereafter her supply of condoms was assured; she required them of her boyfriends. They were the price of admission.

12.

One day in May Harry tabulated his troubles as he scrubbed a Marmon's fenders.

Charlie was making him wash more and more cars, but judging from the dribble that came Harry's way, pocketing the bulk of the tips. And on the home front, there were tensions with his landlady and her medieval standards of behavior.

Why did Mrs. Good rent to both sexes if she was adamant against their getting to know each other? It was embarrassing to be threatened with eviction for being found in the room of Mrs. Brown—forty if a day, a motherly sort plying him with cookies because that's what women of forty, their own lives over, *do*. They were sitting on the couch separated by a plate of said cookies when Mrs. Good burst in and at the top of her lungs ordered Harry back where he belonged "*or else*," and further informed Mrs. Brown that she knew better and ought to be ashamed of herself.

Now on a Wednesday at three o'clock, he had three hours to go before—before what, going home to another scolding from Mrs. Good?

The Auburn darted into the Spiral and up the ramp. Harry leapt for the cable.

"Harry, come back here!" Charlie yelled. Harry ignored him.

The Auburn was poised at the top of the down ramp, waiting. Lucie pushed the passenger door open. Harry got in

and could hardly close it against the centrifugal force of their spiraling descent.

At the bottom it stopped.

"Charlie, you don't mind if I kidnap Harry for a little, do you?" Lucie purred.

"Well, now –" Charlie said.

"I want him to listen to my motor."

"Well, I guess it'll be all right, Miz White. Just bring him back safe and sound."

"Oh, he'll be better than ever," she assured him, and sped into traffic. Harry heard a crash behind them.

"Engine sounds fine, ma'am," he said.

Laughing, she revved it. "*Thought* you liked how it goes," she said. "C'mon, want to have some fun?"

"Sure."

In the welter of Smoketown, the black neighborhood, she found Falls Road, and within minutes they were out of town, passing big brick and clapboard boxes set atop the bluffs.

"Who-all lives out here, anyway?" Harry asked.

"Newspaper," Lucie snapped, pointing to one house. "Falls City *Truth*?" At the next, "Hartford Flour? One of the Hartford places."

"We going to your place?"

"*Not* my place. Never *will* go to my place. Wouldn't be proper. That's Mr. White's house."

"Is he home?"

"And what's that got to do with the price of tea in China? I don't keep up with him. Might be home, might be at one of his timber camps. Whatever else you can say about him, at least the man owns timber all over the South. 'Course nobody's buying, so he comes home cross as a bear."

"Guess times are tough all over."

She glanced at him.

"You don't talk like you're from around here?"

"I'm from Memphis."

"Tennessee? What do you do down *there*?"

"Grew up. Went to Vanderbilt Law in Nashville."

"Car jockey with a *law* degree?"

"Didn't quite finish. Girl got pregnant, seemed a good idea to go away for awhile."

She laughed long and loud. They passed the matching white fences and great gates of Overridge and Indianola Farm. Harry glimpsed a rambling Jacobean manor and a whitewashed mansion with columns.

"Where we going?" Harry asked.

"Someplace we can take our clothes off."

She soon turned off the Falls Road, and for twenty minutes they swept through green countryside, passing several fine old inland houses, each commanding a swath of land from atop a knoll. On the outskirts of a little country town she turned into a collection of rundown cabins behind a sign reading *Commonwealth Tourist Camp*.

She put on the brake and dark glasses, dipped into her pocketbook and withdrew a \$20 bill, which she folded and refolded and handed to Harry, saying, "We're Mr. and Mrs. Smith. Don't forget my change."

Harry stepped into the house adjoining the cabins, paid, signed the register *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, received \$17.00 in change, and came out with the key to cabin No. 4.

"This way, dear," he called, and Lucie moved the car down the line and joined him inside. The room was furnished with only a bed and clothes hooks on the back of the door, its walls the roughly plastered inner surface of the exterior siding. As a concession to the proprieties of the situation, she sent him back outside to fetch the empty suitcase she happened to have in the

trunk. The trunk opened and closed with the sound of a hound dog's yawn.

"My change?"

He counted out \$15.

"Two-dollar tip?" she said. "That for them or for you?" She wasn't pleased but, when he produced the two dollars, said, "No, keep it, I insist. Yours if you earn it. You must think I'm made of money, everybody does, but it's not true."

"They tell me that between them, your Daddy and your Granddaddy own half the state," Harry said.

"True," she said, sitting on the bouncy bed and taking off shoes and stockings. "*They do, and I don't.*"

She was still waiting, after all, at the bottom of the funnel down which the money must eventually come rattling. Her father stopped her allowance at her marriage, and the Crash shortly afterwards did her no good at all, for her husband cut her pin money—her only income—in half. Poverty had a deplorably straitening effect on her; like somebody starving, she was monomaniacal, intent upon the one thing only. Later on she would be *rich rich rich*. But later on is always later on.

"Harry, probably you have more cash money on you at any given moment than I do. What my husband gives me? 'There's a Depression on,' he keeps saying. So tiresome. Don't get anything of my own until I turn *thirty*."

She said it as though thirty lay an eternity away. She was twenty-five.

"Poor little rich girl," mocked Harry.

She looked at him, and said, "Get on with it, Bub."

He was happy to oblige. He stripped off his shoes and coveralls, was standing there naked when she disencumbered her head from her dress.

"My, my," she said as she unfastened her bra.

"Not so bad yourself," Harry replied, surprised at the fullness of her unleashed breasts. She leaned back and pulled the covers out from under her. She was unexpectedly ample in the ass, too.

Leaning over, she withdrew a condom from her pocketbook, ripped the package open and expertly unrolled it on him. In dulling his color and flattening his contours, there was something to the procedure akin to wrapping day-old fish. But it was the price of admission.

He entered—she had no use for preliminaries—and saw her face undergo a change, an inward arrest of attention, which intensified and deepened until—the bed's insane squeaking the only index to what was going on—together they burst jaggedly and loudly.

When they had their breath back she said, "Mr. Thrall, the State of Tennessee taught you how to treat a girl right."

"Wish I knew about you Falls City girls before now."

"So I'm a typical Falls City girl? Where do you live, anyway?"

"Memphis—"

"Here."

"Mrs. Good's boarding house, Jeff Davis and 12th."

"One room?"

"One room, Confederate generals on the wall, bathroom down the hall. Dinner if I pay extra. No visiting the lady boarders in their rooms—strictly enforced. Lights out ten o'clock, eleven on Friday and Saturday, *nine* o'clock on Sunday."

Lucie laughed.

"Just wishing you had a place," she said. "A little house of your own."

"Know of any?"

"No."

"Couldn't afford it anyway, on what your Daddy pays me."

"That's a shame," she said. "Hand me my pocketbook."

She took out another rubber, and they went at it again, but this time he turned her over, and soon, what with the headboard's chattering against the wall, a fine rain of plaster dust was powdering her back.

Harry's shift was over by the time they were finished with each other. There was no use rushing back to the Spiral. She dropped him off at an Interurban stop and he rode it downtown, and walked home, whistling.

13.

Charlie was gruff and stone-faced the next day. If he wanted to know how Mrs. White's motor was running, Harry was prepared to boast that he got it to purr, all right, all right. But Charlie said nothing until Stan the night man was changing into his coveralls in the staff toilet.

"That Miz White," Charlie said, out of the blue and not looking directly at Harry. "She's a fine lady. Thoroughbred. Finest we got, and it's not for the likes of us to question her ways."

"Huh?"

"She's a handful, always has been," Charlie said. "First to her Daddy, and now to her husband."

"That the truth?"

"Stay away from her, Harry," Charlie said. "My last word."

Harry didn't like being chastised for pleasing a girl. Let Charlie worry about whose daughter she was. Let her *Daddy* worry. Let her *husband* worry, or polish his fire engines, or whatever he was used to doing after five years of being married to her.

It was a week before the Auburn came by the Spiral Garage again, and Harry didn't see it when it did. Charlie reluctantly came to find him, and said, "Miz White wants you."

Indeed she did. She was idling at the curb, dark glasses on, hat pulled low.

"How 'bout it, Harry? D'you have three bucks?"

He dug into his pocket.

"Paid rent yesterday. Got seventy-five cents to my name, Lucie, and it has to last till Friday."

"Shit," she said, and pulled away and was gone.

A few days later she parked at the Spiral to go shopping, and Harry confronted her on the upper level.

"Lucie, don't treat me like I'm something you point to in the butcher's window. I'm poor, but I can hold my own. I just don't have the money to—"

"That's just it, Harry, *exactly* the problem. It's fun and all that, but Pearl expects his hundred a week to pay for everything from stockings to gasoline—*everything*—and he won't give an inch. So I can't either."

Her heels tap-tapped toward the cable, past motors dinged-up or pampered.

Harry called, "They tell me it's forty million dollars."

"Oh, I hope it's more than *that*," she scoffed over her shoulder. She turned, seized by the injustice of it all, and hands on hips lamented, "But I can't lay my mitts on *one thin dime* of it. One beau? Robbed a gas station just to spend a weekend with me. I gave him the idea—but I didn't think he'd *do it!*" She laughed at the memory. "But that was a time, I'm telling you."

"What happened to him?"

"I'm sure he still thinks it was worth it." She came up close and reached for Harry's crotch. "Real gentleman. My name never came up."

"That's just crazy."

Her hand was kneading bread. Which rose. He touched her, too.

"Jesus," she said. "Jesus, not *here*. OK, come on."

They hopped in the Auburn, but Harry took the wheel, gunned it down the ramp, past Charlie's, "Cut it out, Harry, you don't have time—" and into the streets.

Her hand pushed them right. "Turn here."

They squealed onto a parkway.

"There's a place in Welshman's Park, at least it's free."

A few minutes later they parked beside a pavilion that overlooked a field of daisies. Bringing a blanket and her pocketbook, they went down a path to a beech grove beside a stream, lay the blanket on soft earth between big rocks, and went at it.

After the first bout Harry said, "You know, this is crazy."

"Broken record," said Lucie.

"I know, but— *Cheez*, here we are, hot for each other, but we don't have two nickels to rub together, no place to go."

"Harry, I have an idea. What we could do. *If* you have the balls."

Harry guided her hand below to weigh and assess.

"*Hmmm*, just maybe," she said. "Came to me back when the poor Lindbergh baby was kidnapped. I knew right off that if somebody kidnapped *me*, Daddy would pay a ransom of—well, of anything at all, to get me back safe."

"Lucky kidnapppers."

She sighed. Men *are* slow.

"We'd split it. Say it's a hundred. How long would it take you to spend *fifty thousand dollars*, Harry? That's more than most men make in their whole lives. You could buy a house and car, put the rest in the bank and live off the interest. Be on Easy Street."

Harry's mouth fell open as he looked at her. Was she serious?

"More like, *you'd* be on Easy Street, and *I'd* be on Death Row."

"No, Harry, there's no risk, 'cause I'm in it with you. Won't catch us in the first place—I'm too smart for 'em—we *both* are—but if they *do*, there's no crime: Can't be kidnapping if it's the so-called victim's idea. They couldn't *do* anything to you, and that's if the worst happens. *And* we'd have fun in the meantime."

Men, when they think at all, do so at their own pace, and Lucie was used enough to the phenomenon to suppress her impatience. She reached to caress the small ears curled tightly into his skull. They reminded her of a lapdog's tail.

"See, Harry, my cut would get me to my inheritance. One trust fund comes when I'm thirty, then the big one when I'm thirty-five."

He was still looking at her.

"*Fifty thousand dollars, Genius,*" she said with asperity. "Have to figure it out, though, every detail. No point getting caught."

"So you have a plan?"

"No, I have the *idea,*" Lucie answered. "The *plan* is your department. Work out the details yourself, and don't tell me, don't say anything at all, 'cause if they figure out I'm in on it, no one gets *anything.*"

Harry tore his eyes off her and lay back against his arms and looked up at the azure sky filtering through leaves, bough lifted against bough in veils that obscured the bright sky beyond, and considered.

He was hooked. She knew it.

"When do you want—?"

"Surprise me, Harry," Lucie said, revisiting her pocketbook. "*Astonish* me. And in the meantime, please fuck hell out of me."

As always, Harry did as he was told.

14.

Their affair continued hot for another month. There was no more talk of kidnapping—Lucie wouldn't allow it—though one day Harry, parking a phone company truck on the Spiral's upper level, with absolutely nothing in mind relieved it of a shirt hanging in the rear and some wire and tools. As funds allowed they went back to the Commonwealth Tourist Camp, or rented rooms at a dubious tavern near the canal locks or at a certain notorious rooming house overlooking the train yards. A few times they returned to Welshman's Park.

At Lucie's bright-eyed insistence, one night Harry even smuggled her into his room at Mrs. Good's. It was an exciting if nerve-wracking hour, doing what they always did but in whispers, trying to dampen proclamations from the floorboards and the bedsprings' commentary, stifling laughter and groans.

Disaster threatened afterwards when, sneaking Lucie down the stairs, they ran smack into Harry's cookie-baking neighbor, who was stealthily heading for his room with a plate of warm Toll House. A ferocious scene ensued *sotto voce* and, though in the end Harry was somehow able to fix things up, for days Mrs. Good exclaimed at finding cookie crumbs and smears of chocolate in her stair carpet.

Harry pressed for a reciprocal visit to Overridge, but Lucie turned the idea down flat. It was insulting. For while Harry preened himself on being her secret lover, their relationship existed entirely on her terms. Harry it took into account and pressed into service only as the tool of her indulgence. Generations of Spodes before her had done the same; it was a function of social aspiration in Falls City that no one ever looked askance at what the Spode girls or Spode boys might be up to, how they were risking their social standing by flouting the standards of behavior. There was no risk. Harry grew to resent

it, especially as the affair kept his pockets as empty as Lucie's purse.

But it was Charlie who took the decisive step. By the end of June he felt so frazzled with the responsibility of knowing what the boss's daughter was up to, so fearful of blame should husband or father cotton to what was going on—and was losing out on so many naps—that he fired Harry.

"Hate like hell to do it, Harry, you're not a bad fellow and times are hard," he said. "But you just can't work at a job like it's something you do in between paying attentions to a lady friend."

"Not me, Charlie, it's *her*, that's the way—"

"And I warned you, too. So I'm letting you go."

"Letting me go?" Harry smiled at the idea. "I don't think Mr. Spode will—"

"Told him already. Oh, I kept *her* name out of it. Told him I caught you driving Mrs. Prettyman's Reo back in the other day from one of your joyrides. He was *shocked*. Insisted I fire you."

"Well, let me tell him I'm fucking his daughter, see what he says *then*."

"Get out, Harry. And with talk like that, you'd best leave town, go back to Tennessee."

"I fucking well will!"

Harry walked the whole way home. Felt calmer by the time he got there, for all that sweat was soaking his shirt. Thought he'd give Lucie a call.

There was a phone beside the stairs. He put in his nickel and dialed 3. The single digit was a relic of her grandfather's founding the Qwattata Valley Telephone Company fifty years earlier.

"Hello, may I speak to Mrs. White, please?" he asked.

"Miz White ain't home," said a woman in a rich African timbre. "Who should I say called?"

He gave his name and dictated the boarding house's number, and the rest of the evening chased fellow boarders away from the phone. But Lucie didn't call.

The next day Harry dressed up and went to the Spode Tower. Miss Overby permitted him to sit in the outer office, but paid him no mind as she gravely sorted the mail.

Spode strode in on the dot of ten.

"Hello, Thrall," he said. He didn't offer his hand. "Bad business over at the Spiral. Charlie told me."

"Yes, sir, it was a bad thing to do, and I apologize and won't ever—"

Spode was already moving toward his door.

"Well, Thrall, if you learned anything from it, that's all any of us—"

"But Mr. Spode, sir, I *need* that job, sir. I'll be good after this."

"Should have thought of that before," said Spode, entering his office. He closed the door so firmly its engraved glass rattled. Miss Overby glared at Harry over the top of her spectacles, impervious to his rueful offering of dimples.

Harry made himself saunter back to the elevator. As he waited, trefoil windows afforded him a last grand view of Falls City's dense limestone growth catching the morning sun. The Falls boiled furiously. Mist hid the wooded banks opposite.

When the red-coated attendant muscled the elevator doors open, Harry, head down, started to get on. Derisive, but familiar, laughter backed him up.

"Falls City manners, sir, are to let the lady *off* first," Lucie said.

"Lucie!"

"Thank you, Patrick," Lucie said, frozen-faced. The operator closed the doors, and the cab dropped from sight.

"Lucie, I lost my job," Harry said.

"Careless of you," she returned. "Times like these."

“I—I— Do you have ten bucks you could loan me?”

It wasn't even what he meant to say.

Lucie blushed and her eyes flashed. She snapped open her pocketbook, found a five-dollar bill in it, and threw the bill on the floor. Across the room Miss Overby stood up in shock.

“For services rendered?” Lucie sneered.

She walked toward her father's office. Harry picked up the money and pressed the elevator button. He offered Miss Overby a toothy, never-say-die smile.

But he realized that to Lucie he was nothing — nothing at all.



*Celebrity crimes often breed rumors that the victim was complicit. In the 1934 Lucie Spode White case, the rumors are true. An heiress with great expectations but an empty purse, Lucie enlists her handsome lover, Harry Thrall, in a scheme to anticipate part of her inheritance. Can't be a crime if she's in on it, right? A fast-moving reverse mystery, *All That Money* gives the reader a rollicking ride with Harry, Lucie-and the FBI!*

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