

In the Christmas chill of 1944, Big Joe Welk is the hardcore crime boss in Portland, Oregon. He runs the rackets and the cronies who enforce his vengeance when he's crossed. But there's one enemy he doesn't see coming.

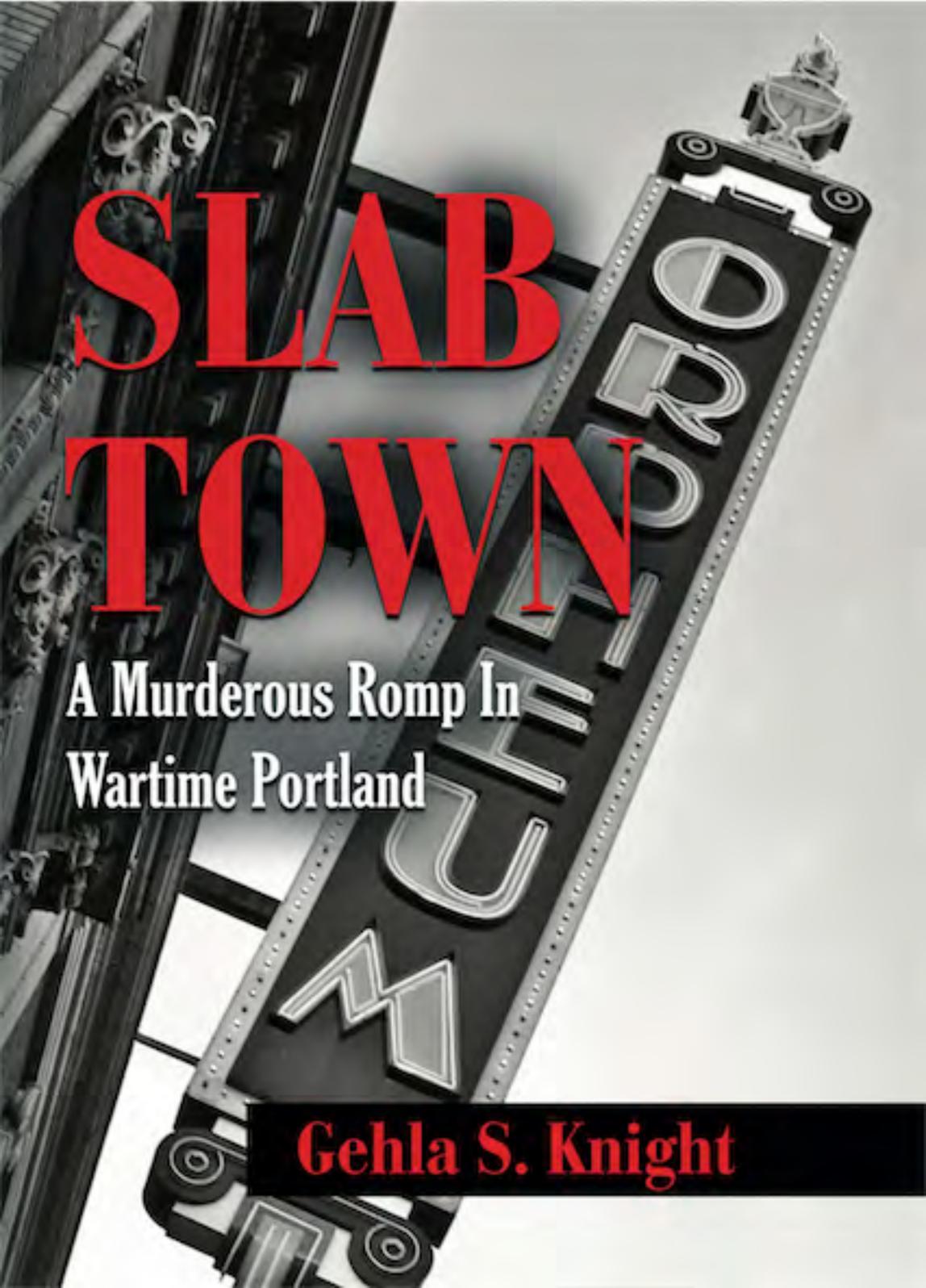
Slab Town: A Murderous Romp Through Wartime Portland

by GEHLA S. KNIGHT

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A Murderous Romp In
Wartime Portland

Gehla S. Knight

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CHAPTER ONE

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His name was Obadiah Joseph Welk but everybody called him Big Joe. To casual observers, the biggest racketeer in Slab Town struck an odd chord – too flashy for a salesman hawking vacuum cleaners, too snappy for a college professor and much too flamboyant for a bank VP. Trailing a mistral of cigar smoke and expensive cologne, he could walk into any establishment on either side of the Willamette River and stop conversation. When he strode across the room, a motley retinue in his wake, all eyes looked away as he passed, a combination of fear, envy and admiration pasted on their faces. Any doubters of Big Joe's power and capricious mean streak had only to be caught in his stare boring like Superman's x-ray vision through skin, bone and brains.

Big Joe Welk could be generous to a fault with his pals and cronies who played ball and exceptionally cruel to those he tagged as unreliable, stubborn or not sufficiently sycophantic. But no matter what yardstick locals used to measure the man, Joe was in a category all his own.

By the time the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor in '41, Joe must have owned a stake in just about all of Portland's illegal enterprises, and he had a chunk of the legit fronts which usually had a backdoor connection to his criminal operations. He got a cut of every two-bit, penny-ante racket going down from the

pinball machines, sleazy dives and brothels on the waterfront to the high-stake poker clubs on both sides of the Willamette river. Two of the biggest clubs on West Burnside were in his pocket, and he made the Pago Pago Tiki Restaurant and Bar on Stark his downtown headquarters. If you had an in, were on the payroll or needed to grease Joe's palm, you were led downstairs to the betting parlor to meet the Big Man himself. The average Dick and Jane surrendered their packaged booze to the bartender upstairs, sat on the red-leather stools or bamboo-caned chairs beneath giant fake palm trees, sipped Pineapple Hurricanes and let the Tiki's tropical décor woo them into ordering "Authentic" Hawaiian food with Slab Town's signature fried razor clams.

Joe's muscle at the Pago Pago could crack sailors' heads like breaking eggs for an omelet. I know because I stepped in an unlucky boatswain's mate's brains once when I was waiting outside to see a dame who used to be a client of mine. Her name was Dorothy Partridge, and she had bad teeth, a nasty habit of farting when she drank beer and a seven-foot, ugly bruiser boyfriend who swiped my Parker fountain pen. And those were her good points.

Slab Town, Portland's not-so-flattering moniker, came from the jumbo stacks of cord wood piled along the curbs in the days before Mr. Willis Carrier came up with something better than smokey wood stoves and fireplaces to heat the family castle. Back in the day, it was rumored that Canadian geese gave up overhead flights across Portland on their southern trek and instead had to waddle at ground level to read the route signs through the chimney haze. Other brave city souls warned that the air had to be thoroughly chewed before inhaling.

Things took a decided upswing when the US Corps of Engineers dared to tame the Columbia River in 1909. Twenty-five years later, the Big Bonneville Dam turbines began cranking out power downstream that made electric furnaces all the rage. No more mess and inefficiency from their old sawdust burners. This was progress you could see – longjohns

hung on the line that didn't turn brown with the first breeze, building facades that could finally shed their widows' black and reflect the sunshine, what there was of it anyway.

But the brief uptick from the dour, gray cloud of the Great Depression days was darkened with Uncle Sam's WW two victory push. Pacific Northwest neighborhoods heaved with belching chimneys and smokestacks at shipyards, aircraft assembly factories, housing construction and a whole host of wartime industries and municipal projects. They all blew enough soot and smoke into the Portland skyline to make it hard to see the Cascade Mountains through all the airborne grime. But there was a bullet-proof excuse the City fathers were proud to offer any unfortunate belayed in a miasma of gusty grit – Uncle Sam's money was just as good in black as it was in green.

When Mr. Kaiser's shipyards started knocking out Liberty ships and junior carriers in yards along the Columbia and Willamette Rivers, the economy double-timed its way up the NRA charts. From laying the keel to splashing in the slipway, the merchant ship SS Joseph N. Teal was constructed in ten days in the fall of '42 as the Oregon Shipbuilding Yard was launching vessels faster than the Axis subs could sink them. In fact, Uncle Sam had so many of these merchant cargo vessels sailing across the Atlantic to supply the Allies that our troops probably could have leapfrogged from one deck to another on their way to England for the big push.

To keep this supply miracle going, thousands of Dixie blacks and Midwest Oakies, hucksters, gamblers and con men flocked to Portland and it's little sister Vancouver, Washington, to suck up the juicy fruits of wartime production we could thank Herr Hitler and Hirohito-san for jump-starting. For every grifter looking for a score, there were a dozen marks among the working hordes that flocked to the Northwest in search of good jobs, new housing and a brighter future than they faced back in the dismal backwaters of wherever they came from. Henry Kaiser, Uncle Sam's army, Navy and Marines, Bible Belt

transplants and all their kith and kin crowded the Portland city limits and beyond with over a hundred thousand new faces. The shipyards alone employed almost that many, and by 1944, Slab Town was taking on the looks of a bona fide metropolis with over half a million souls. A thirsty defense worker or sailor never had to go more than a block to find a watering hole ready to take his money and his common sense for a quick ride

By Christmas week of 1944, Portlanders had forgotten their invasion jitters and shook off the last of the doldrums its denizens grudgingly tolerated before the war by mostly ignoring the dim-outs and reveling in the glitz along Broadway. Mr. Roosevelt had teased us with the hope we might be bringing the boys home for the holidays, but the Wehrmacht's December surprise offensive had caught our generals with their pants down. No matter which way the *Oregonian* and *Journal* newspapers tried to throw a good slant on the news from Belgium, our GI's weren't expecting a boat ticket back to the States anytime soon as 1944 wrapped up. Seems like the Krauts had thrown everything but the last of their knockwurst at us for their closing act on the Western Front. The genuine good news was the Russkies giving Hitler's armies a Red gut punch all along the Eastern Front.

Despite the brief setbacks In Europe and the fierce fighting in the Pacific, most Portlanders knew the Japs and Jerries were just prolonging the inevitable. And that wasn't good news for everybody. Fact was, a whole lot of Oregonians had seen their economic ships rise on a high tide of prosperity with more jobs, higher salaries and better opportunities since war clouds came over the horizon. Especially for the little housewives who tossed their aprons in the hamper and went to work in the war plants. You know the saying: How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm, or the kitchen, once they've seen Paree? A lot of ruptured ducks would come home to find the little missus not all that keen on turning out meatloaf and apple pie instead of machine guns and half-tracks.

As the year came to a close, Big Joe had all the downtown clubs padding his pockets. Booze, dope, nookie and gambling paid for posh digs, flashy women and all the trimmings a mobster dreamed of. For every bottle of beer, shot of rye whiskey and two-bit dance with one of his chippies, a nickel went into Joe's pocket. He was doing all right – better than all right even. He was plush, living on the top, skimming nothing but cream. His gin mills, dance halls, cat houses and card rooms were fuller than a tick on a pig, and there didn't seem to be anything or anybody who could stop him from being the number-one player in Slab Town until Melba messed things up. Melba Malone – now that was a piece of work. I ought to know. She reassembled a few parts of my own before I closed that case.

It was a Monday, damp, drippy and cold – normal for this time of year. Almost any time of year actually. Ducks weren't the only ones with web feet in this town. You either got used to the drip and drizzle or you headed south for the California border where the Rexall sold suntan lotion and dark glasses instead of Vick's VapoRub and Kleenex. After a scorching summer by Northwest standards broke records with a heat wave that made us question whether air conditioners really were a superfluous luxury in the Rose City, Mother Nature was balancing the scale. December was soaking the city with bone-chilling temps well below average.

I was in my office a short hop from Burnside Street, polishing off an egg salad sandwich, leafing through a back issue of *True Detective*, hoping the phone would ring with a new client before the landlord showed up.

I'm Miles M. Brodie, Attorney at Law. My practice isn't much to brag about, but it pays the rent most months with enough left over to keep Fern happy. She's my secretary. Fern can type faster than a pigeon pecking popcorn, knows how to con the building manager out of a parking slot for my old clunker, and she's got hellish street smarts. The real kicker in her resume is her knack for getting enough goods on who's

being poked by the Multnomah Circuit Court Bench to count for a few favors, and we know how to keep out of each other's way.

I met Fern at the Central Bus Depot. Funny place to run into Slab Town's best secretary and Girl Friday, but that's the way it came down. She was waiting for her sister to step off the Northbound bus from Sacramento, and I was there to get a quick shine on the way to Union Station to meet a client. So she was coming out as I was coming in, and we ran into each other – literally. She stooped down to pick up her bag at the same time I made a move, and our heads banged together. The second meeting of great minds I liked to call it. Fern compared it more to a garbage skow plowing into a yacht. You can guess which one's the skow.

Anyway, by the time we got through the apologies and mated the right bag to the right arm, she was smiling at me with a pair of melted-fudge brown eyes and lips like sliced plums. When she turned around to check the Greyhound pulling in, sunlight bounced off her chestnut waves, and I inhaled her apple blossom perfume.

I stuck my hand out. "They could use some stop lights in this zoo."

She ignored my peace offering. "It's the war. Everybody trying to get somewhere all at the same time."

Then she walked off without a glance in my direction and pushed through the doors to the farting Greyhound stinking up the bus garage.

So it wasn't a successful first encounter you could say. But the kicker was a month later when I walked into the lobby of Berman and Schwartz, Attorneys at Law, to drop off a complaint against one of their cushy clients. As I swung the door closed on my way out, it smacked a cute, little dish with freckles on her nose. She was wearing a gray, gabardine two-piece and platform pumps that showed off her gold ankle chain.

"You again," she sighed, as she bent down to pick up the papers I'd knocked out of her hand.

"Must be fate." I smiled and stared at all five-feet three of her.

I trailed her to the elevators, and because some schnook held the door at the sixth floor, I had a chance to make friendly. And even better, it had started to pour spring rain outside, and she'd left home *sans* umbrella.

Turned out she had come to apply for a job. So I offered her a ride home in my new Plymouth coupe, and by the time she got out of the car, I'd hired my secretary. A secret to this day is the fact I had to borrow a couple C notes from my client trust account to keep the lights *on*, the landlord *out* and her payroll check good. She was worth every cent. The first thing she did was clean all the ashtrays and evict the stray cat I'd adopted who peed in every corner of the office. After a week it started smelling like a law office instead of a Union Avenue flop house. After a month, we'd settled in like an old married couple. She knew when to nag, and I learned when to say uncle.

Fern came along with a welcome uptick in business for my law practice. With the war about to usher in a new year, Red Cross hospital ships crowded the Swan Island pier. Wounded GI's, war-weary fly boys lucky to have earned their relief from Jap fighters and sailors hauled from the drink after watching their ships sunk by Kamikazes were bringing boatloads of our boys back home. They were all eager to reunite with their sweethearts, wives and kiddies. My office stood a good chance of being the first stop after the veterans' little tykes wanted to know who the homecomer was and why he was wearing Uncle Charlie's slippers and using the gas man's shaving soap. Seemed like half of Uncle Sam's finest wanted to split the sheets with their missus before the cleaners returned their mothballed serge.

So my legal chops should have been at the top of the public-demand menu. But having willing clients and having *paying* clients turned out to be two very different varieties. So while the fat-cat law firms with potted plants, mimeograph machines and Esquire stenciled on their doors corralled all the flush cases, I was stuck representing waterfront dames with

bad bleach jobs and their one-stripe hubbies wanting to split on the cheap.

“Hey, you gotta call.” Fern stuck her head in the door and snapped her gum. She always had a wad in her mouth, helped her kick the weed she’d tell me whenever I lit up. I figured her desk anchored with all the dried Wrigley’s stuck underneath must weigh more than my mother-in-law’s buxom Buick. “I said you just got back from court.”

“What kind of case am I winning?”

She grinned. “This time it was the heart breaker – the triplets’ mom whose lout of a husband moved his lover into the upstairs spare bedroom and screwed her silly while the poor little wifey rinsed the dirty nappies downstairs. Gets ‘em every time.”

“Fern, remind me to give you a raise next payday.”

“You still owe me for the last payday.”

I ditched the egg salad and made a grab for the telephone. “So who is this poor, wronged woman?”

“Name’s Melba Malone, and she’s got a sweet voice, Brodie. Be gentle.” She flashed a thumbs-up for luck and closed the door. Before I wiped the mayo sauce off my cuff, I heard her typewriter clacking.

I was hoping this prospective client was another weepy-eyed, vengeful dame eager to ditch her cheating hubby who’d given her the clap after a three-day Honolulu liberty when he and his shipmates poked the entire front line at Madam Maui’s. These days most of my divorce clients were referred by Doctor Freibold, the gynecologist on Flanders who handed them a sulfa-powder prescription with one hand and my calling card with the other. So this dame was either just back from the drugstore with fire in her drawers or she was some horny honey hot for the milkman or the 4-F furnace repairman.

“Miles Brodie,” I said once my fingers were unstuck. “What can I do for you, Mrs. Malone?”

“Call me Melba,” she purred like a tabby toting a belly full of fresh tuna. Fern had pegged this one.

I swung my legs off the desk and straightened my tie. "So you're interested in filing a divorce action against your husband?"

"The bastard ran off and left me. What else can I do?"

"I see. Let's get a little background first, if you don't mind."

"Oh, but I do mind, Mr. Brodie. I hate all this legal business – it's so intimidating . . . and so impersonal. Why don't we meet for cocktails, and I can tell you all about my situation. If you're free, that is."

Free? Hell, I was practically up for grabs by nearly a dozen sour-faced ex-clients and creditors. And that wasn't even mentioning Lorraine. But why spoil a good thing bringing up ex-wives when I had a real live one on the wire? If Melba looked half as good as she sounded, I was thinking her Mister would have to be certifiable to take a dive and leave her to the mercy of down-and-out shysters like me.

"I thought maybe we could meet and discuss this in a more private setting, Mr. Brodie. I've never been to a lawyer's office before. Frankly, it all seems so stuffy and official. Couldn't you make it a little easier for me to get through this?"

"Easy is my specialty."

"How about someplace private where we can discuss my case. The Pago Pago Club? Say seven o'clock?"

The joint was about as private as Union Station. My least favorite pick for intimate conversations. The club's booze was thinner than J. C. Penney serge, and the bouncer had no use for roaches, brawlers, cops and lawyers.

"You work there, Mrs. Malone?"

"I'm just a bookkeeper, Mr. Brodie. Shall we say seven then? Come upstairs to the office and just ask for Melba." *Click.*

I rubbed the receiver on my cheek and waited for the mercury to hit bottom.

Fern was standing in front of my desk before I could brush the breadcrumbs off my shirt. "So is this a keeper?"

"Bookkeeper at the Pago Pago," I mumbled with a mouthful.

She cocked a penciled brow. “Oh, yeah? Figures. This one sounded like she had a brain. How about the dough?”

“Huh?” I knew what Fern was getting at. I hadn’t paid her salary since the Thanksgiving turkey was shoved in the oven, and her carbon paper was as punched out as her Saturday-night date.

“The fee, Brodie.” She crossed her arms in a steely defense and honed in on my jugular. Fern Nipplethorpe was not a woman to cross daggers with, especially on an empty stomach. “Does she have the retainer? No dough, no divorce. If you don’t come through with some legal tender, I’m gonna send my three cats, all their fleas and ringworm along with my cousin Artie who hasn’t worked since WWI over to your place for the duration.”

I suddenly lost my appetite and offered her the sandwich. “Here. Lunch’s on me, Doll.”

“Dammit, Brodie, if this is another one of your deadbeat clients who thinks she can get freebies just by twitching her tush under your nose –”

I was already late for the door and safely out of range. “Sweets, how’s about you go out and buy yourself a bottle of that tiger piss perfume that drives men mad?” I flipped a fiver on her desk and beat a retreat to the elevator before she figured out my generous display of gallantry had left me dead-flat broke on a payday.

In my own defense, I calculated that Melba must have the cold, hard cash to pay a healthy retainer. Bookkeepers were funny that way – they could track a loose nickel like a hound on a coon. If things went according to Hoyle, I should be able to tap my Pago Pago client for enough to square things with Fern, spring my wristwatch from the hockshop and still have a little left over.

There was one talent I and most lawyers excelled at no matter which rung of the professional ladder we landed on – sniffing out fresh fodder. Low-rent, legal beagles tracking the spoor of their next client usually beat the cops to the scene of

the accident. “Just happened to be walking by, Ma’am. Looks like you might need some good advice before those insurance crooks try to cheat you out of everything you deserve. Take a card. And, by the way, did anyone ever tell you that with that hat you look just like Carol Lombard?”

Fact was, I had a shill at Two and Oak, aka Central Precinct, who tipped me to fender benders, crack-ups and little old ladies falling off the lunch-counter stools at Woolworth’s. I considered myself a very reputable member of the state bar in good standing even though my practice specialty was mostly in domestic dissolution – the two-dollar word for divorces. My card said “Miles Brodie, attorney at law. Fifty-Dollar Divorces. Call CApital 277.”

Every time a fresh portrait of President Grant was slapped in my palm, at least a dozen takers were primed to beat me to the bank. Maybe Melba Malone had more in store for my legal talents than the quickie-split package. I was sure eager to find out.

Feeling pretty good about my new case, I walked around the corner to the Heathman’s next-door barbershop and asked Slap for a trim and a shave – on my tab, of course.

“Brodie, you got balls, you know that?” He whipped the towel around my neck as I settled back in the squeaky leather. “When you gonna get clients with bank accounts bigger’n their tits?”

“Slap,” I said, closing my eyes as he lathered my cheeks, “I got definite prospects – a client who keeps books for one of Joe Welk’s joints. And she sounds like Lana Turner just before the lights go down.”

He was impressed for once. “No kiddin’? Well, don’t forget who you owe first when the check clears.”

“And I haven’t even mentioned the referrals. So how’s about a trim while you’re at it?”

“Forget it. A two-bit shave and a dab of Brylcreem is all she’s worth until I see some cash.”

“Okay, okay. But you can forget the tip, Slap. And trim the womb broom this time, will ya?”

“Yeah, yeah.” He pinched my nose and got to work.

While Slap spruced me up, I had a quick look-see in the mirror. The reflection showed a guy who almost hit the top of the charts for looks and suave. The suave bit required a fresh press on my three-piece worsted, a mustache more like Gable than Gabby and a few less wrinkles on my shirt. On the plus side, I was still on the sunny side of forty and owned all my own teeth which I racked up to rinsing daily, or hourly, with Jack Daniels.

With most of the desirable males overseas or stuck in GI camps around the Northwest real estate, I was considered prime livestock. With more hair than I needed, unfortunately everywhere except my head, a body built for love not labor and a brand new Stetson Fedora, I was within shouting distance of passing for a successful barrister. Yodel distance maybe. But after Slap worked his magic, my prospects for impressing the new client were a sure bet.

My life wasn't that complicated. My bio would hardly fill a shot glass even if my ex Lorraine and her mother The Hun threw their six bits in. Except for having a billfold as thin as my hairline, a car that only seemed to run on days of the week that started with Q, I didn't have a legitimate beef. Hard to complain what with the mess the whole world was in these days.

December of 1944 found the war and its stateside prosperity had left me running dead last in the pursuit of fame and fortune. But since the fall of 1940, I had done *pro bono* work for the head of the draft board and got him out of a very messy situation with two ex-wives and a pregnant girlfriend. So when I called in an IOU, he made sure Big Joe's nephew Wilbur and his godson Frankie never had their numbers come up. As a result, Joe made sure Uncle Sam never called me up either. I let on like it was a big, beautiful favor Joe had laid on me, but I was a reject even if I had got “Greetings” from Uncle. Heart murmur. Anyhow, that's how I got in with Joe Welk and

received the referrals from the dames at Joe's dance halls whenever they had a beef or wanted to split the sheets with their old man. It brought in the rent money for the law office on Twelfth Avenue and paid for my digs at the Roosevelt Hotel plus Lorraine's alimony.

I also got another sweet deal from one of Joe's cronies on the Ration Board. My E gas ration sticker meant I could run around town whenever I felt a need to "attend to important legal business". Except nobody told my old wreck, and it refused to run anywhere except under rare occasions when the Cubbies were playing in the World Series, Mount Hood was erupting and Alf Landon was bunking in the White House.

When I married Lorraine, I had assets – real property, some savings bonds, a spanking new, powder-blue Plymouth Deluxe coupe and professional prospects. I hung my hat in a tidy little bungalow on Fremont Street. My new missus had a Harlow physique and all natural Betty Grable curls. Sadly, the idyllic picture of marital bliss didn't last as long as my can of tooth powder. The Plymouth got hit by a locomotive in Albany, and the wife turned out to be a champion knob-polisher on her way to setting a regional record. I represented myself in the divorce, and Lorraine hired a wily rat named Hiram Baumgartner who wore his hair rug backwards. Didn't matter. Either way he looked like Humpty Dumpty with a dead possum on his head.

The kicker was that it turned out Lorraine had been balling the judge for two months before she filed the petition, and when I left the Courthouse, I had to unzip to make sure I still had my skivvies. She got the new car the insurance company gave her for the totaled Plymouth, the bungalow, the furniture, the savings account, and I got to pay for it all.

The best part was my mother-in-law testifying in court about how I sneaked floozies into the house when Lorraine was in the hospital with influenza, guzzled whiskey in my orange juice, my coffee and probably in my oatmeal and beat the stuffing out of Lorraine when I got tired of being just an ordinary

bastard. The judge swallowed the whole dish of malarkey and burped sympathy like a parish priest mooing over Granny's casket.

Hizzoner leaned across the bench, ogled Loraine's cleavage and peered all the way down to the bottom of the Grand Canyon before she readjusted her wrap.

"Don't worry, Sweetie. Your Uncle Freddie will take care of everything." He returned her smile with a lusty wink.

Then they both looked over and smirked at the poor schmo in the wrinkled, two-piece seersucker – me, already feeling like the Christmas goose about to be plucked.

"Poor little honey-bun," he whispered in a steamy sidebar that only me and the clerk could hear when Lorraine sashayed up to the witness stand. "You just leave all your troubles to me. I'll make sure this ape can't scrounge a nickel to call a cab when this is through, Toots."

"Oh, thank you, Freddie – uh, that is, your honor. It's been a horrible experience for a naïve, innocent girl like me. I only hope my life can start over once I'm free."

Before the ink had dried on the divorce decree, the ex and The Hun moved their baggage, piddling Pekingese and Rudy Vallee records into the bungalow, and I trolled the YMCA for a single *sans* crapper.

Three months later, my new ex sold the house, pocketed four grand and took a cruise to Los Cabos. I only tumbled to the deal when I got a post card with lipstick exes and o's and a circle around a golden beach with water the color of my Aqua Velva aftershave.

So I was on my own at thirty-six, broke and not real happy about it. I'm an only child – two brothers died in the big epidemic of 1918 when they were toddlers so I had a small clan available for backup. I lived a pretty normal life with college and law school at Willamette, stalling for time to keep from having to join my dad's sweatshop. He was a butcher. I can't cut into a bloody beefsteak without wanting to toss my cookies at the thought of what it was like standing up to my knees in

offal, whacking off snouts and digging through entrails to come up with a chuck roast. If it doesn't taste like, look like and smell like chicken or get charred until it could pass for a lump of coal, I'll opt for the meatless special. When I see a rare steak, I think of entrees that don't get served up on china plates with plenty of horsey sauce

Both my folks were gone by the time Lorraine kicked my ass out, and I got used to having nobody to answer to. Freedom grows on you after awhile. When I get to feeling lonely, I drive across the river to see a maiden aunt who lives in Sellwood. Her name's Mathilda, but she goes by her professional moniker Madame Zorona. She has a fortuneteller's hole-in-the-wall spot with a big neon sign that says " CHIC READER". The first three letters burned out years ago. Crazy as a squirrel high on reefers, but she's family, and I like to keep company with her from time to time. Makes me grateful when I consider most of her crackpot traits got passed down to my cousin Schubert who slept in a coal chute on Fremont Street, worked part time as a sweeper at the Vaughn Street ball park and subsisted on Muscatel and White Castle burgers. A few years back he was run over by a crosstown bus.

Although my law practice has its ups and downs – it's mostly downs since Lorraine drains my bank account every month. Sometimes I get lucky and reel in a client with enough dough to put me in the black. And I've learned not to ask where the money comes from.

A while back, I had a client named Spiny Pool, a small-time goon for one of Big Joe's Westside lieutenants. Spiny was missing some valuable property, and he wanted me to sue the asshole who had cost him two large when he had to write off his investment.

In plain English, I learned Spiny had bought a hot mink for Lucille Wiggins, a redhead he was sweet on who had a top-hat routine at a Portland Road strip club. The hat wasn't on her head, and it ended up flying over the bar when the last drum

bump ended her performance. So you can see why Spiny was sweet on the dame – she had nothing to hide. Anyway, he called in a favor and asked an Eastside stoolie named Monk to take the fur from the warehouse on Couch Street to Lucille’s place on Ankeny. On the way, Monk gets pinched by Big Joe’s mob for muscling in on Westside turf, and he’s taken for a ride. The mink coat is ruined when they truss up Monk with baling wire, chop off his head and hands and toss him and the mink in the trunk of a Caddy roadster. So Spiny wants me to file a lawsuit for property damage against the s.o.b. who whacked Monk and totaled his fur coat.

We settled the affair by having a meet at the Multnomah Hotel bar where Spiny got a silver-fox fur coat with the tags still on it, a box of Cuban cigars, and I got tickets for the Rose Bowl game. Not bad for a bonus. The kicker to the story is that when Big Joe’s enforcer pops open his trunk to lay the tickets on me, he moves a hefty package wrapped up in butcher paper and tied with twine. It’s leaking pink juice, and it smells like Pop’s shop.

“My bowlin’ ball,” he smirks. “Gotta big game comin’ up.”

All they ever found of Monk was a finger sporting a pinkie ring with his initials that floated up in a storm drain after a big rain. Rumor has it that one of the city sewer workers still wears it. It’s a great bragging bit for the measly little prick who swiped it.

So the moral of this woeful saga is that I keep my head down and know when to keep my mouth shut playing high-stakes games with Joe’s crowd. But the payoffs outweigh the downside, especially when my ex sends out her monthly dunning notices threatening to attach my Argyle socks and the gold-plated cuff links she gave me for Christmas, charged to my Meier & Frank account.

Slap cranked the chair upright and spritzed my cheeks with his cathouse cologne. “Okay, Brodie. I got payin’ customers waitin’.”

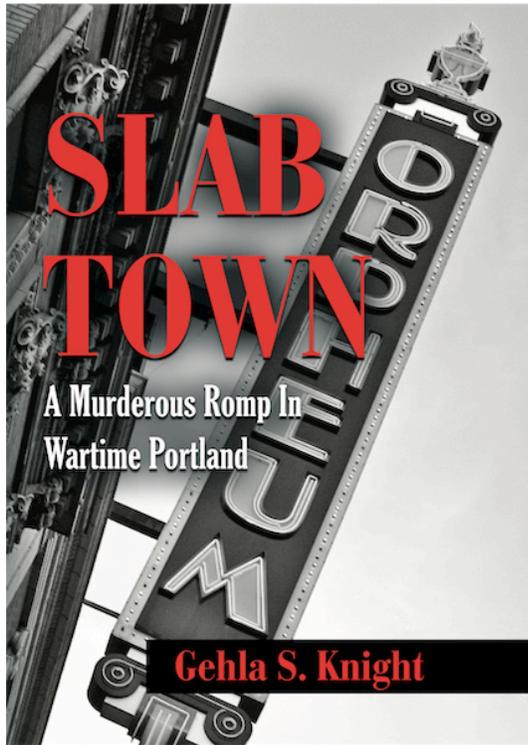
Slab Town

I stood up and punched both arms in my jacket sleeves. “Nobody in the joint except me. You oughtta be grateful I bring in my business.”

He spat into the sink. “Yeah, sure. Stop in again sometime when you got some real dough.”

I waved a clumsy salute. “See ya, Slap.”

Checking my reflection in the window, I slicked my part and rubbed a pinkie over my front teeth. Not bad – getting a little sparse on top, a little long over the ears, coulda used that brush trim, but still it wasn’t bad. Once I got the retainer from Melba Malone, I’d have the double-breasted pinstripe cleaned, get a shine on my high-mileage Florsheims and be as good as it got for Miles M. Brodie, Attorney at Law.



In the Christmas chill of 1944, Big Joe Welk is the hardcore crime boss in Portland, Oregon. He runs the rackets and the cronies who enforce his vengeance when he's crossed. But there's one enemy he doesn't see coming.

Slab Town: A Murderous Romp Through Wartime Portland

by GEHLA S. KNIGHT

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