

WHITEOUT

by G. M. Malliet

G.M. Malliet's latest novel, *In Prior's Wood*, belongs to her Max Tudor series, starring a former MI5 agent turned vicar in an English village. The American author's first three books also employed British settings—but with Detective Chief Inspector St. Just as sleuth. Both series have received critical and award recognition, including a Malice Domestic Agatha Award.

“Mary, don’t worry. I know we’ve been through some ups and downs, but I really think the business is turning a corner now. George says this deal in Costa Rica is a sure thing.”

Mary felt that somehow she had heard a version of this before, but they hadn’t even been married a year and she thought she should give Jack some time to prove himself. Isn’t that what her faith taught her, to be a supportive wife? She and Jack had actually met in church, forging an instant bond. Love at first sight was truly true, after years of waiting for the right man to come along. Handsome—but not too; dashing—but not too; reliable—but not too. Jack felt like a reward for good behavior and patience, and living proof of the power of positive thinking. Even her mother loved him, and she had approved of no one Mary had brought home before. Besides, some of Jack’s deals *did* come through. Not all, but enough to keep them going in relative comfort. Mary had been happy to quit her job at the mall and let Jack see to all the money matters, as her mother and pastor agreed was right.

She took off her dressing gown and pulled on waterproof hiking pants, two sweaters, and a padded jacket. Today she and Jack were snow-shoeing, which had to be a lot easier than downhill skiing. Yesterday she’d tumbled off the lift in the raspberry red snowsuit she’d borrowed from a girlfriend back home, and Jack had declared that was it, they would stay with tamer sports from then on. She wasn’t exactly decrepit at thirty-six, but downhill skiing was a sport you really had to pick up as a youngster, and her parents had never had the kind of money needed for ski camps and away-sports. Besides which, she’d grown up in Florida.

“Come on,” said Jack. “Let’s get out there in the snow. We’re here to forget the business and have fun.”

“Almost ready,” she said, tying a scarf at her neck as her husband settled a light backpack at his shoulders.

“You’re not goisng to need that for long,” he said. “It’s cold but you won’t believe the workout you’ll get snowshoeing.”

“Good. Maybe I’ll work off some of that breakfast. Whoever heard of fried pineapple?”

* * *

According to Travelocity, the TipTop Inn of Vermont was at best a three-star affair. Reviewers, to be kind, emphasized the friendliness of the owners and the quirkiness of the furnishings. Its trifold advertising brochure, printed on flimsy paper and looking as homemade as the inn’s website, played up the laid-back aspects of the place and the fact that the price included a “continental breakfast.” Which continent, Roger was never able to determine. The inn also offered a snowshoe path out back, but Roger wasn’t interested in that, or in cross-country skiing. He was a downhill man all the way.

The TipTop was hardly the Trapp Family Lodge, but for someone broke and recovering from a divorce, two conditions not unrelated, it was fine. Roger wasn’t going to be spending a lot of time in the room, anyway. He would take the shuttle to Stowe, use his day pass, and save several hundred dollars by staying at the TipTop. Pushing paper as an insurance-adjustment clerk didn’t pay that well. Being Pauline’s ex paid even worse. His dream now was to get out from behind a desk, hang out his own shingle, and go into private investigations. For sure that would suit him better. He just had to pass the exam, and that would be a piece of cake—he had a good memory. He was fit for his age, in case he had to tackle any bad guys, and he’d always been . . . well, inquisitive was the nice way to put it.

He was out on the slopes so much each day he barely noticed the other people staying at the crowded inn, and only caught a glimpse in passing of the couple in the second-floor room next to his. From a distance they appeared youngish, but to sixty-year-old Roger everyone under forty looked youngish these days. He heard the man call the woman Mary. She had a soft voice and he couldn’t hear much of her reply.

Roger’s routine never varied: He’d wake up early, grab breakfast at the inn, shuttle over to the slopes, ski all day, eat dinner at the resort, catch the shuttle back to the inn after dark, and fall asleep exhausted. He loved to ski, and the deep, powdery conditions that February were ideal. Nothing else turned off the hamster wheel inside the head like a day on the slopes, and this time alone to *not* think was just what the doctor ordered.

He could hear his neighbors through the paneled walls when they returned late at night from dinner out somewhere but the sounds were faint and muffled. The man—Roger assumed it was the man—smoked a nightly cigar out on the deck. Roger could still smell the smoke at daybreak, but at least it was an expensive-cigar smell.

On the morning of his third day at the TipTop, Roger was on the balcony taking in the view when he saw the couple emerge early, carrying snowshoes and poles and headed for the trail out back. Just then a blond woman in a white Lexus drove into the rear parking lot. They greeted her with surprised hellos. She asked the couple how married life was treating them. They were all smiles.

Roger stepped back so he was shielded by the plaid curtains at his balcony window. He wasn’t eavesdropping, he told himself. He just happened to be standing where he could overhear. The woman in the Lexus was of the tanned, Nordic, white-blond type he’d always had a weakness for. Apparently

her name was Ava. The shrink he'd been seeing had pointed out that if you only see the surface of a woman you can never connect with the whole woman. He was sure that was true. But after Pauline was done with him he didn't want to connect with anyone, ever again.

The husband and wife, now that he could see them clearly, were unremarkable compared to the blonde. Both were dark-haired, fair-skinned, and slender-built—she quiet, he more outgoing. He wore high-end outdoor gear in shades of black and gray; she had on black pants and a hooded red jacket that was too big for her but may have been the latest thing in ski wear when Princess Di was alive. Her husband carried a daypack.

The couple, whose names turned out to be Jack and Mary, invited the blonde to join them on their outing. She said no, she was going to grab something to eat but might join them later. She'd have to fetch her snowshoes first, she said. Roger watched the couple head off down the trail, which disappeared into the trees after about a quarter of a mile. The wife tripped and fell almost immediately, landing on her back and flailing about like a beetle, unable to right herself. Her husband retrieved her fallen scarf and demonstrated how to stab the ground with the poles and pull herself upright. They finally shuffled off, laughing.

Roger raced downstairs to catch the morning shuttle.

* * *

That morning Roger twisted his ankle taking a spill on the slopes. They wrapped it at the first-aid station but he knew he was out of commission for the duration.

He took a taxi back to the TipTop. He supposed it was lucky it was his left ankle and his car was an automatic so he could drive himself home. The owners of the TipTop lived up to their reputations for niceness but also nicely pointed out their no-refund policy. He said he understood, even though his little vacation was now thoroughly spoiled.

He didn't have to be back at the office until Monday so he thought he'd hang out and try to read and relax, rather than let his entire great outdoors adventure go to waste. The only "silver lining" was that forecasters predicted a major snowstorm was headed their way. The sun of the past few days followed by freezing nights might mean a rockslide or two if the snowfall was significant. He would dodge the worst of it if he left before noon Sunday. He told himself the ankle might turn out to be a blessing in disguise.

Still, the sunny weather held steady, and that afternoon he saw Ava and the couple head out together on snowshoes into a light snowfall. Ava wore white to match her Lexus; in a blizzard, he thought, she might blend into the background, if not for her tan and bright makeup. Roger felt left out, somehow, but he knew that was the ache from his ankle and his divorce kicking in. He took deep breaths to relax, as the shrink had taught him to do, and a pill or two to dull the pain.

The couple returned as evening drew in, the wife now managing the snowshoes with aplomb. Snow had begun to fall in earnest. Roger turned off the TV and hobbled his way out onto the balcony. Jack saw him and stopped, calling up.

"I say, you haven't seen a woman out here on her own? Wearing white snow gear?"

“The Woman in White?” Roger said jokingly. “No, I haven’t seen her.”

“That’s odd. She should have been back by now.”

“Perhaps she is,” Roger said. “I wouldn’t know. I’ve been napping off and on.” The pills had made him sleepy. He knew he should only have taken one.

“Yes, we heard about your ankle. Rotten luck. Can we bring you anything?”

Roger thanked him, adding that the inn’s owners had brought him some bread and cheese and sandwich meats, and that would do for his supper. As Roger stepped back into his room he heard the deck window sliding open next door; Mary’s dark head emerged as she retrieved a pair of boots from the wooden deck. Not wanting to be caught spying, Roger two-stepped quickly back into his room, sending a shot of pain through his ankle.

“Mary, we told them we’d be packed and out of here an hour ago,” he heard her husband say. “Hurry up or we’ll be charged for an extra day, even with late checkout.”

“Ready in a tick,” she said, closing the window.

* * *

The blonde in white must have made it back, because a few minutes later Roger saw her drive away from the inn in her white Lexus. He thought she may have been headed into the village for supplies, or to grab a bite in the little cafe, but he never saw her return. Finally, he realized she’d probably checked out of the inn.

Roger told himself it was just as well. He’d be gone tomorrow himself, and nothing good ever comes of a vacation romance. Hadn’t he met Pauline on the slopes?

Later, resting his ankle on a footstool as he watched a game show on TV, he saw Jack and Mary leave the parking lot in their Toyota. Roger was starting to feel like the guy in *Rear Window*. He made himself a sandwich, wishing he had some mayonnaise.

He left early the next day.

* * *

By the following year, Roger’s fortunes had taken a turn for the better. His ex had married the guy she’d been sleeping with the whole time she’d been married to Roger, thus freeing him from alimony payments. He decided to splurge: no TipTop Inn for him this time. With his ankle fully healed and a spring in his step, he headed for the ski-in/ski-out pleasures of Vail, Colorado.

He had just checked in and was carrying his bags upstairs when from across the vast lobby he spotted the couple from last year. Jack and Mary—right. Ordinary, memorable names. Jack had grown a beard, but Roger, with his memory for faces, recognized him right away. He started over to greet them when he froze, realizing as she turned toward him, that the woman with Jack was *not* Mary, just someone of a similar type. Slim with dark hair and pale skin, dressed in an ill-fitting snowsuit that looked brand new but bunched in all the wrong places. It would appear Jack had jumped out of the frying pan and into the flames, losing Mary in the process and replacing her with this look-alike.

But as Roger stood frozen in place, undecided how to handle the awkward social situation, the couple was joined by the tanned blonde of the year before. The woman in white from the TipTop. He’d forgotten her name until Jack greeted her.

“Ava!” he cried.

“Bruce! What are you doing here?”

Bruce?

“Ava, I’d like you to meet my wife, Nancy.”

Roger’s head spun in confusion but finally he jolted himself into action. He did a quick pivot and headed for his room, ducking his head and hoping he hadn’t been spotted. Once upstairs, he set up his computer on the desk, connected to the free WiFi, and started searching the *Sun and Snow*, the Vermont ski region’s online paper, for the past year’s articles. The paper consisted mostly of advertising, with a few bits of news slotted in to make it look good. He made a few attempts with the search bar, like “woman missing,” but came up with a ton of links to nothing relevant. Then he tried “woman Mary ski resort body found.” When that didn’t work, he added the word “dead.”

And there was a picture of a smiling Mary Staunton. No question, it was Mary. The paper said her husband, Jack Staunton, had reported her missing last February, but because of heavy snowfall her body hadn’t been found until the spring thaw. She’d been discovered by hikers inside a cave at the bottom of a thirty-foot cliff near the inn’s snowshoe trail. *Most* of her had been discovered, anyway. It appeared wild animals got to her first. Her skull had been positively identified through dental records.

The odd thing was, her husband had reported her missing from an inn miles away in New Hampshire, not Vermont. The article indicated the police would like to talk with Jack Staunton but had not yet been able to locate him.

Roger thought back to the thing that had bothered him last year, when he watched Mary set out on the trail with her husband. She had been totally inept on snowshoes. It was a learned skill, like any other. The woman who had returned with “Jack” was expert, moving across the snow with quick assurance, her scarf masking the lower half of her face. Snowshoes weren’t as hard to get the hang of as skis, but no one learned that fast.

Ava—with a change of clothing, her fake tan washed off, and wearing a dark wig—could certainly pass for Mary in the gloaming as the snow fell, returning to the TipTop with Jack in view of the inn’s guests. All Ava had to do then was reapply her tan, remove the dark wig, and drive off in the Lexus as herself. She could hide the car nearby, snowshoe back, resume her Mary disguise, and be seen driving off with Jack in the Toyota. Their man-and-wife conversation about packing to leave was for his, Roger’s, benefit. Jack had to have dropped Ava off at the Lexus and driven on to New Hampshire. Once there, Jack would report Mary’s disappearance *from* there, sending searchers off to search the wrong area. Buying time to adopt a fake ID and disappear.

While the real Mary lay dead, hidden at the bottom of a steep drop-off near the TipTop Inn. However she’d died, Ava and Jack or Bruce or whoever he was had a lot of explaining to do.

But, Roger realized, the timing made no sense. Once Mary’s body was found in Vermont, the phone call from her husband saying Mary had gone missing from New Hampshire would certainly raise a red flag. Jack could change his name and disappear, and clearly he had done so, but he couldn’t easily collect insurance without a body. And Mary’s body hadn’t been found for months.

Unless . . .

Unless the whole point was that the body *never* be found. What if “Jack

Staunton” planned to turn up again in seven years to have his wife Mary declared legally dead so he, as her beneficiary, could collect? Turn up, perhaps, with some story about how he’d gone to live overseas meanwhile to recover from his grief?

What if . . . what if “Jack” was in reality some sort of Bluebeard, with a new bride going “missing” every year or so? What if, with Ava’s help, he wedded and murdered, moving frequently to avoid detection? After the first seven-year wait, it would be like some macabre annuity paying out. An endowment funded by gullible women with no close family around to ask questions. He’d be willing to bet Mary’s family, if she had any, had failed to see through Jack until it was too late. Had her body not been found, they might never have caught on.

It would help explain why “Jack” was now able to afford something better than the homey old TipTop. Or perhaps, his new wife Nancy was rich. And insured. Or perhaps all the above things were true, with Jack growing progressively richer with each kill.

The murderous scheme would take patience and cunning, but those were the hallmarks of the consummate con artist.

Roger was reaching for the phone to call the police when there came a knock at the door, followed by a woman’s voice calling, “Maid service.”

Of all times, he thought.

He went to answer.

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