



ERRAND FOR A NEIGHBOR

by Bill Bassman

Bill Bassman is a software engineer and a former teacher. He tells us he's a lifelong fan of crime fiction, but the closest he's come to real detective work is a year as health inspector for the city of Philadelphia.

The Weather Channel called it the Great Blizzard of '92. To me it was the night my next-door neighbor smashed all the windows in my house with a baseball bat. I had just come off a domestic homicide in West Philly, and I was trudging up the back steps to the deck when I saw him. He was working on the small panes of the French door. Bent at the waist, he used the bat like a pool cue, resting it on his forearm and artfully punching out each pane like he was taking a test and was going to be scored on technique as well as accuracy.

I didn't recognize him at first, a dark silhouette amid the hummingbird-sized snowflakes. I slid the gun from the clip on my belt and yelled for him to stop and put down the bat. He stepped back from the door and executed a slow-motion pirouette. When he saw the gun, he raised the bat and started swinging it in my direction, back and forth like a medieval knight wielding a broadsword. Each swing whistled against the wind, propelled by a low animal grunt. He took a small step forward with each swing until he got close enough for me to feel the desperation in each movement, but he never got close enough to hit me. Maybe he wanted to scare me into shooting him. Trying for suicide by cop. Maybe, if the bat had come any closer, I might have done it. Then I realized who he was and let my gun hand fall to my side and watched the bat swing slower and slower, the arc drooping until it came to rest at his feet.

"What the hell are you doing, Mike?" I yelled over the howl of the wind in the eaves above our heads.

He held up a hand, palm forward.

"It's okay, Ray. I'm all finished," he said, his words coming in puffs of condensation, like smoke signals. "For a minute there, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to finish before you got home, but as you can see, I'm all done." He waved a hand behind him indicating the twelve door panes he'd just finished, along with the three shattered sashes that opened out from the kitchen and pantry. I didn't find out until later that he'd broken *all* the windows on the first floor.

I studied him while the adrenalized thumping in my chest dissipated. He was illuminated by the motion-activated floodlight above the garage door and

I could see snow in his kinky brown hair and in his beard. Under his thin nose, icicles were forming on his moustache. A hooded sweatshirt with "Princeton University" stenciled across the front was his only protection from the storm. As we stood there, he seemed to deflate, the sweatshirt collapsing around him, until he looked like an old man, using the bat like a cane to hold himself up.

I slid the gun back onto my belt, then reached for the bat. When he offered no resistance, I took him by the elbow.

"Let's go back to your house," I said. He shrugged and we made foot-deep tracks in the snow across our adjoining backyards to his kitchen door.

Inside, I asked: "Is Aileen home?"

He nodded his head once and pointed upwards with his index finger. Then he pressed the finger to his lips. After that, he went completely still, melting snow dripping from his clothes as he watched me pick up the phone and press the speed-dial button with his father's name on it.

Michael is what some people refer to as a trust-fund baby. Full name: Michael Sliden, son of Philip Sliden, founder and CEO of Sliden Pharmaceuticals. Phil bought Michael and his wife Aileen the house next to mine in the West Mount Airy neighborhood of Philadelphia. The house was a mile or so from the Sliden family compound in the Chestnut Hill neighborhood. From this distance, Phil could keep an eye on Michael, and Michael could occasionally pop over to fill a bucket or two with cash which was rumored to flow from a spigot next to the garden hose.

Despite the unplowed streets and six-foot snowdrifts blocking my driveway, by noon the next day my windows had all been repaired, and a \$2,000 check for miscellaneous expenses had been delivered, courtesy of Phil Sliden. Meanwhile, Aileen Sliden, Michael's wife, had slipped a mink coat over her pajamas and disappeared. The coat returned in a UPS truck a week later but Aileen never did.

* * *

That night was ten years ago. Since then, with sporadic vacations at The Friend's Psychiatric Hospital, Michael has lived alone in the fourteen-room shack next to mine. Occasionally, we speak over the hedge about the finer points of lawn mowing, leaf raking, and snow shoveling. Michael could expound on these things with a fascination that only someone who has never partaken of such activities in his formative years can manage. Up on the Hill where Michael grew up, the unwanted byproducts of natural phenomena are paid to disappear before they can cause inconvenience. Down here in the adjoining zip code, where the houses are marginally smaller, slightly less ornate, and the gardeners seldom have their own cottages on the grounds, we take great pride in our connection to the earth and all its suffering. Here we only smother our problems in money after much soul-searching.

Nothing else has ever been said about the incident in the snowstorm, and in all that time Michael has not set foot on my property. Then, on a sunny spring Saturday, I look up after the twentieth fruitless yank on the starter cord of my old Lawn Boy mower and see him standing at the open door of my garage, looking about as relaxed as a novice fire walker.

"Hi, Ray. How are you?"

Michael is a couple of years younger than me, maybe forty-nine or so, but his hair is still thick and gray-brown. He is bearded and thin and, now that he is

taking his medication regularly, reminds me a little more of Jesus than of Rasputin the Mad Monk.

"I'm doing pretty good," I respond. "I can't say the same for the Lawn Boy."

He moves inside, squats down, and lays hands on the green plastic cowl of the mower. After a moment's meditation he takes some tools from the cargo pockets of his jeans. He removes the sparkplug, holds it briefly to his nose, waves a small tool over it, and reinstalls it. "Should start up just fine now," he says.

He stands back. I jerk the starter cord and lo, the fifteen-year-old motor clears its throat a few times and comes to life. I let it run for half a minute while Michael observes, head cocked to one side. When his thumb goes up, I let go of the dead-man lever and it gurgles to a halt.

"Thanks, Mike," I say, "Now, what can I do for *you*?"

Michael shrugs his thin shoulders then lets them sag back to their normal hunch. He pulls at his beard and stares through a cosmic wormhole that has just opened in the middle of my chest. In a millennium or two he replies: "I guess, if you aren't too busy, you could try to find Aileen for me?"

Since I retired from the police department, when I'm not mowing the lawn, raking leaves, or shoveling snow, finding people is mostly what I do. That Michael is aware of this is only mildly surprising. That Michael suddenly wants to find Aileen is the shocker.

"Why do you want to find her after all these years?"

He stares through me for a while longer, sifting through the quantum foam for an answer.

"Remember the snowstorm?" he says finally.

"Do you?" I say.

He shrugs again. "I pretended not to remember because I didn't want to talk about it. Not to you and not to the shrinks at the hospital. Especially not to the shrinks," he says.

"Okay, what about it?"

"It was Aileen. She made me stop taking my medication. She said it was a poison, that if I didn't stop taking it, I would be dependent on it for the rest of my life. She put me on a macrobiotic diet and said that she and I would work through my problems together. She said that love and purging my body of toxins were the answer, not drugs. She said that my problems stemmed from growing up without love—with money, but no love. She said that now that I had her, now that I had love, I didn't need the drugs anymore."

"And you stopped taking them?"

"I'd been off them for two weeks. Maybe a little longer."

I think about this for a while. There are more questions that I want to ask, but before I get a chance he speaks again.

"When they took me away that night it wasn't to Friends Hospital, you know. They took me down to the Foundation."

He sees my frown.

"The Foundation for Psychiatric Studies; it's on Chestnut Street, out past the university."

I try to picture it. "High fence, lots of wrought-iron spikes, big stone gatehouse?"

He nods. It occurs to me that I might have also described the house where he grew up.

“They strapped me down so that only my head could move. They filled me up with experimental drugs and left me there for two weeks’ observation before they moved me to Friends.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, “if I had known, I . . .”

“No, no, you couldn’t have known, but she knew. I tried to tell her what I was like without the medication. I told her about the time in grad school, before I met her, the first time they put me in the Foundation and strapped me down. She still wouldn’t believe me, but I made her promise that she wouldn’t let them send me there again. Then she saw for herself what I’m like when I go off the medication and it frightened her. Later, after my father arrived and you’d gone home, I guess she felt safe. She stopped cringing in the bedroom and got angry, really angry at me for scaring her and for robbing her of control. Aileen needs to be in control. She needs to be reassured that her truth is the one and only truth.” He paused for a minute, staring into the wormhole again. “Ray, she let them put me in there to punish me and I’ve been angry at her for ten years, but I’ve finally gotten over it. Now I want to tell her that I forgive her.”

He looks up and, for the first time in the fifteen years that I have known him, we make real eye contact. Until now, I don’t think I could have told you the color of his eyes. They are turquoise, the color of some Navajo jewelry my wife Dahlia once brought back from a trip to Arizona.

But despite the eye contact, an ex-cop’s sixth sense tells me he’s lying. The big question in Michael’s case would be whether *he* knows he’s lying.

“Will you do it?” he says.

I pretend to think about it for a second or two.

“Sure, Michael, I’ll do it.”

He disappears again. Five minutes later he’s back with a package about the size and shape of a hardcover book wrapped carefully in manila paper and secured with string.

“When you find her, please give her this.”

* * *

Aileen and Michael met at Princeton when he was a grad student in theoretical physics and she was one of the few pioneering female undergraduates to enter those historically all-male halls. They got married and, like most professional couples of that era, put off even the thought of having children. Aileen was busy with law school at Penn and later with preparing the world for the onslaught of empowered women. Michael, unwittingly, was preparing the world for the revelation that much of what it knew about the nature of matter, the properties of strange little particles that compose the nucleus of atoms, had been gleaned by lunatics. Unlike most couples of the era, Aileen had retained her maiden name: McGorkle.

According to Google an Aileen McGorkle-Freeman—she had evidently remarried—worked for a small public-service law firm in Boston. It takes only one call to an old friend in the police department to get a home address and phone number.

* * *

A female voice answers the telephone and I tell her I’m calling from AT&T

with a special offer on long-distance service. She tells me that the phone subscriber will be home sometime after seven P.M. This means that I swallow my fear of flying and Michael Sliden coughs up the six hundred dollars for last-minute airfare and I am on the one-thirty flight to Boston.

I wheel out of the Avis lot at Logan airport into early rush-hour traffic and in only an hour and a half I have traversed the eight miles from the airport to Aileen's house in the suburb of Winchester. I sit in the rented Buick and do the two crossword puzzles in the airline magazine that I have liberated from the plane and then another puzzle from the *USA Today* that came compliments of the Buick's previous driver. While trying to remember the four-letter name of a river in Tuscany that intersects with six letters for the winner of last year's PGA, I thumb idly through the rest of the paper. Unlike life in general, to a detective on a case there are no coincidences. This is why I have to fight to bring my heart rate down when I see the page-three photo of Phil Sliden waving a semiautomatic pistol from the front portico of his mansion. According to the accompanying text, Sliden Pharmaceuticals has just released a new morning-after abortion pill, and evidently Phil has been receiving death threats from some of the more militant "right to life" groups. Even with an extra detail of company security manning the parapets of his humble abode, he is taking no chances. By the time a silver Volvo station wagon rounds the turn into Aileen's driveway and disappears behind the house, I have forgotten all about Tuscan rivers and PGA winners.

I count off the seconds it should take her to park the car, fumble with her briefcase and keys, go inside, and kick off the Ferragamo pumps. I pick up Michael's package and make my way across the street and up the front walk. It's 6:35, and the sun has fallen behind some rust-colored clouds on the western horizon. It's still technically daylight but dark enough for a motion-activated floodlight to signal my approach to the front door. I punch the button and listen for the chimes inside. I squint through the beveled-glass window in the top quarter of the front door. Seeing no activity in the entrance foyer, I'm about to try the bell again when the door swings open.

"Hi, I'm Amy," comes a voice from below. I look down. A girl, maybe nine years old, is looking up at me with one of those fearless smiles that are impossible once the last of the grown-up teeth come in. Before I can reply, the SWAT team arrives. From the stairway at the rear of the entrance foyer a large dark woman is charging with her hands palm-up in front of her, like she is already warding off invisible blows. From the rear of the house, Aileen pads barefoot in a gray business suit, no more of the floral shifts and Birkenstock sandals that I remember her wearing. The two women converge in a protective phalanx behind Amy, reminding her, in calm tones impelled by panicked thoughts, that she is not supposed to answer the door for strangers. Finally, Aileen looks up at me. Recognition fails to calm the fear in her eyes.

"Ray? Ray Zino?"

"How you doing, Aileen?"

She turns to the housekeeper. "It's okay, Maria."

Maria looks doubtfully at me and then back at her boss, an action she repeats twice as she reascends the stairs.

"Come in, Ray. I'm sorry, I just got home. I'm a little flustered."

"I understand," I say. "It's been a long time."

I move through the doorway and into the foyer. The house is a typical New England colonial, living room to the left, dining to the right. The ceilings are low and the walls start to close in on me immediately.

"You already met Amy," she says, smoothing back the girl's light brown hair and holding it in a ponytail behind her head. Amy smiles up at me again. She has one empty front-tooth socket and the other with a brand-new tooth about half grown in.

"I'm Ray," I tell her.

She holds out her hand. We shake and I smile into her turquoise eyes.

Aileen says to Amy: "I tell you what. As a special treat, why don't you go watch one TV show before dinner."

"Really?"

Aileen nods and Amy pivots and streaks across the living room towards the enclosed sun porch where the TV evidently lives. About halfway there she stops and turns back to me.

"Nice to meet you, Ray."

"Nice to meet you too, Amy."

And she is gone.

"Listen, I was just going to have a glass of wine. Would you like anything. Scotch? I don't remember if you drink. I'm sorry."

"Bourbon," I say, "Jack Daniel's if you have it. I seem to remember that you didn't drink."

She shrugs and I follow her back into the kitchen. On one wall of the foyer, lit from below, is a formal portrait in oil showing Aileen sitting on the arm of a chair next to a husky, balding man I assume to be her current husband.

The kitchen is large, recently remodeled, with the obligatory granite counter-tops reflecting little halogen lights suspended from a cable in the ceiling. There is a restaurant-sized stainless-steel stove and a Sub-Zero refrigerator that could hold a Honda Civic.

"Nice."

"It doesn't really compare with the house in Philly. They just don't build them the same way up here, but it did cost about three times as much."

"Yeah, I heard about the real-estate market up here," I say.

Without replying, she bends down and pulls a bottle of Jack from a cabinet, then she takes a tumbler and a wineglass from another.

"Ice?"

"No, thanks."

She pours some whiskey into the tumbler and hands it to me, then she goes to the Sub-Zero and retrieves an already open bottle of white wine. The shelves inside are overflowing with wrapped cheeses and processed foods. On the counter next to the sink someone, probably Maria, has begun to prepare a prime rib. I don't see a juicer or a flat of wheatgrass anywhere. Macrobiotics has certainly evolved in ten years.

After she fills her glass and takes a few sips, she looks at me over the rim. Her new diet has smoothed the sharp angles from her face and her dark hair has eruptions of gray where it is brushed back from her temples.

"Michael sent you, didn't he?"

I nod. "He wants to tell you that he forgives you."

She stares at me and her face becomes a weapon, the cheekbones turn to flint, the long nose is the blade of a battle-ax.

“He forgives me? He forgives me? To hell with him!”

She tosses down the rest of her wine in a single gulp and refills her glass. I take a swallow from my own and stare at her, waiting to see if the conversation is over.

“My whole life came apart that night,” she spits. “Do you have any idea how frightening it is when the person you love, the person you depend on—the one you’ve built your whole future around—suddenly turns into a monster, a wild man?”

“Did he hurt you?”

“He pushed me! I told him to sit down and we’d talk through whatever was bothering him. He just pushed me out of his way. I fell onto the bed. I called out to him but he just kept going, charging out of the house, out into the snow.” She sounds about Amy’s age, petulant, like she’s tattling on a school-mate.

“So,” I say, “he has nothing to forgive you for. Why do you think he sent me to find you, now, after all these years?”

She is quiet, maybe thinking of an answer when the theme music from *The Simpsons* filters in from the TV.

“Is Amy Michael’s daughter?”

No answer.

“You never told him, did you?” I say. “Could he have found out?” It isn’t really a question; I am thinking out loud. Of course he could find out. If you have enough time and a little knowledge you can find out almost anything on the Internet.

Now, when I see the anger and pain sharpen Aileen’s features, I think I know why I’m here, and it’s not to deliver a message of forgiveness.

“He wanted me to give you this.” I take the package out from under my arm and slide it across the counter. For a long time she just stares at it, like it’s just another unwanted visitor. Finally, her curiosity overpowers her anger. She puts her glass down and claws at the packaging until the cover of a book is visible. Her expression goes slack, the anger draining from her face, leaving it flaccid.

In weak, almost listless movements, she smooths the wrinkled wrapping paper back around the book, then the twine. Once it’s covered again, she regains some of her strength. She shoves the package back at me. Tears are welling up in the corners of her eyes.

“Take it! Take it away!”

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They have closed the doors for the final boarding when I huff and puff my way to the gate of the eight-thirty flight back to Philly. Only my most pathetic, self-deprecatory smile convinces the agent to let me through. The plane is only half full, so Michael’s package and I settle into an empty row near the back. After a brief flirtation, I nudge the wrapper off and pull the book free. The coal-black eyes of some bearded acolyte of Sigmund Freud pierce my psyche from the cover. It is titled *Path of Genius, Road to Madness: The Hereditary Origins of Intellect and Psychosis*. The blurb on the inside cover says it provides evidence that scientific genius and various forms of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder are genetically linked. Inside there is a whole chapter on Michael Sliden and his mother, Silvia Stein-Sliden. I’ve lived

next door to Michael for fifteen years without knowing that as a grad student at Princeton he had proven one of Einstein's more vexing postulates. It was evidently his mother from whom he'd inherited his gifts and his curse. She'd been a mathematician at Barnard College when she shot herself in 1954, not long after publishing a paper on a similar topic. On the acknowledgments page the author, Dr. William Samuelson, Director of The Foundation for Psychiatric Studies in Philadelphia, gives special thanks to Sliden Pharmaceuticals for "financial and intellectual support in the writing of this book."

* * *

When I get home the morning paper is still on Michael Sliden's front porch and a rubber-banded packet of mail is still wedged inside the screen door. I try the bell and then wait for what seems like the proper interval before proceeding to the only other place he might be.

The security man at Phil Sliden's front gate is an ex-vice detective. He remembers the old days when we used to get high on the stuff he confiscated, and so I drive through the maze formed by rhododendron and azaleas that leads to the main house. On emerging, I see Phil Sliden sitting on the bottom step below the main entrance with his elbows on his knees and his face buried in his hands. There are husky guys stuffed into business suits looking uncomfortable on either side of him. One of them is holding what looks like the same gun I remember from the picture in *USA Today*. He is holding it by the barrel, like he has taken it away from Sliden and now isn't sure what to do with it. The guards look up at my approach, but Phil is frozen in that position. I park behind a Ford Explorer with blue emergency lights flashing and SLIDEN PHARMACEUTICALS SECURITY stenciled across the tailgate. As I climb out of my car, another guard stands in my path like a human wall.

"Excuse me, sir," he says, "I don't know how you got in, but I'm afraid you'll have to leave. We have a situation here."

I show him my ID and tell him that I am working for Michael. When he hears the name, his expression softens, and he turns to face the house, where a body lies spread-eagled over a low privet hedge. The body is dressed in white coveralls splattered with red like a painter's dropcloth. One arm dangles almost to the ground. Just under the hand is a shiny cylindrical object. Even at this distance, I recognize the aluminum baseball bat that he used on my windows years before. The window just inside the hedge from where the figure is sprawled has been smashed. I look to the left and then to the right. I can see that several other windows adjacent to the portico are in similar condition. I have mixed feelings about going any closer to the body, but none have anything to do with disturbing the crime scene.

I walk around the guard toward Phil. I'm standing directly over him when he finally lifts his face out of his hands. He doesn't look up; he just stares straight ahead into the night.

"I should have known it was him. Who else could have gotten past the guards? Who else would do such a crazy goddamn thing?" Finally, he looks up at me. There is no recognition in his face, nor should there be. I have met him maybe twice and each meeting lasted no more than seconds. Tears are beaded on his cheeks. When he makes eye contact, I wonder if Michael really did get all his genius and madness from his mother. Maybe all he got from his father were the turquoise eyes.

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