

# MISS DIRECTION

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by Rob Osler

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Rob Osler made his fiction debut in *EQMM's* Department of First Stories in 2021 with the Robert L. Fish Award winning story "Analogue." In 2022 his first novel, *Devil's Chew Toy*, appeared. It was a nominee for the Agatha and Left Coast Crime awards for best first novel and is currently nominated for the Anthony Award in that category.

Before we begin, yes, my name is really Perry Winkle. My pronouns are he/she, him/her, potato/potahto. I am a heavyset, middle-aged man who prefers wearing clothing intended for the female form, and no, I don't much care what others think about it. Last spring, while attending my niece's college graduation dressed in a smart Banana Republic double-breasted linen blazer and matching trousers, the young scamp called me an iconoclast. I'm not ashamed to say I had to look it up when I got home. While I do see my niece's point, it has never been my intention to make a statement. I simply feel more myself in women's clothing. It's how I roll.

I've been a resident here at Yucca Palms—an idiotic name, as even I know a yucca is an agave, *not* a palm—for six years. In that time, I've seen a dozen neighbors come and nearly as many go—mostly by hearse. Yucca Palms is one of the hundreds of Palm Springs condominium communities popular among retirees, golf lovers, and the elderly, who don puffy jackets when the temperature plummets to below eighty degrees. So why do I, an inquisitive go-getter in my fifties, live in what is essentially a retirement home? My mother left me the place in her will, and after trying to sell it for more than a year, I saw the writing on the harvest-gold-wallpapered wall and moved in.

Another thing you ought to know about me is that I'm somewhat of a celebrity in these parts. On the nights I'm not hostessing at Hot Tamales, a legendary local haunt, I MC its epically popular karaoke nights every weekend. And yet, despite working late, I'm an early riser. This morning, before my 6 A.M. power walk, I had popped into our clubhouse meeting room to make sure there were enough chairs for that afternoon's two-table bridge night when I stumbled upon Miss Direction lying sprawled out on the orange-turned-burnt-umber carpeting. I shouldn't have to tell you that nearly tripping over a long freckled leg is a disconcerting way to start the day. If that wasn't bad enough, a wave of disappointment washed over me; bridge night was now sure to be canceled.

The dead woman was named Helga Schrumpf—or so I thought. I first became aware of my new neighbor when seeing her unfamiliar moniker, punched out by a plastic label-maker, affixed to the mailbox for unit 3-B—two

down and one over from my own. The name had conjured images of a blond pigtailed lager-peddler in a laced blouse and knee socks. Upon appraisal of the woman, owed to a chance meeting at those same mailboxes just days later, I discovered that my imaginings of her were as far off as Bavaria is from Barstow.

With a voice that made “Good morning” sound like a curse, the middle-aged, buxom redhead had introduced herself not as Helga Schrumpf, but as Miss Direction. Despite the early hour, she had found the time to smear cakey red lipstick across her thin mouth, complemented by eye shadow the color of charcoal briquettes. As you could have perched a level on the edges of our similarly styled large gold-framed eyeglasses, it appeared that Helga Schrumpf, a.k.a. Miss Direction, and I were the same height: five foot six (we’d both been wearing flats at the time).

As Miss Direction had dislodged a *People* magazine from the aluminum mailbox, I had asked her in my friendliest keep-it-light fashion if Miss Direction was a stage name? By her look, you might have thought I’d farted the question. She turned quickly, grazing my arm with an impressively firm boob, and trounced off toward her second-floor apartment, her plastic daisy-adorned flip-flops clacking like a manic terrier.

As I’ve already said, she is now quite dead. Poor thing.

A heavy-looking statuette of a female dancer, arms provocatively raised above her head, lay beside Miss Direction’s bloodied skull. Curious, I pulled my phone from my Michael Kors purse—a knockoff, but really who’s to know?—and snapped a photo, noting the recent splattering of blood and that much of the form’s bronze leaf appeared to have long-ago flaked off the head, buttocks, and fringe that hung from the brassiere and short skirt. An empty space with dried traces of glue at the statuette’s base suggested a tiny placard had once been pasted there.

After phoning the police, I pulled up a folding chair to watch over the body. I didn’t think she was going anywhere; I just didn’t want anyone else to experience the shock I had. And, truth be told, I felt a sense of ownership. I had discovered the body, after all, and among the residents at Yucca Palms, I was the only one who was neither completely wackadoodle nor doddering from old age.

The thought of Palm Springs’ Finest arriving with sirens wailing gave me a shudder. The police presence was sure to lure my neighbors out from their air-conditioned apartments, most of them wearing bathrobes and looks of befuddledment. All adither, they would jabber questions to which I had no answers. So annoying.

No sooner had I taken up my station than Shelby List or Lisk—the man’s lazy tongue made it impossible to understand half of what he said—hurried past the doorway. “Oh, Shelby!” I called out.

A moment later, he poked his head into the room, looking surprised at hearing anyone in the clubhouse.

“Do come in, would you, Shelby?”

Cautiously he stepped into the room, looking disheveled—as usual—his arm wrapped around a white plastic laundry basket that rested on his least-new hip. A heap of clothing shared the basket with Target’s equivalents of Tide, Clorox, and Bounce.

“As you can no doubt see, Shelby, we have a bit of a situation here.”

Shelby gasped. Unstable at even the calmest times, the septuagenarian grabbed hold of a nearby card table to steady himself. "What happened?" he asked.

"As I am not the killer, I can't answer that, now can I? Nor, I'm afraid, can poor Helga Schrumpf, for she is quite dead. I found her lying here not five minutes ago. And before you ask the obvious, yes, I have phoned the police. Would you be so kind as to wait at the front gate and show them in?"

Much to my dismay, rather than doing as I'd asked, Shelby set down his basket and stepped so close to the body I feared his worn Church's Oxfords might tread upon the woman's appallingly age-inappropriate skirt. He knelt over the body as if examining an unwelcome weed that had taken root in the community garden. He grimaced. "Who do you think this is?"

It took some effort to unpurse my lips. "Ah. Perhaps you knew her by the name Miss Direction?"

"Then why did you call her Helga?" Shelby looked so confused you'd have thought I'd asked him to name his favorite TikTok performer.

"Good grief, Shelby." I pointed down at the body. "Helga Schrumpf *a.k.a.* Miss Direction. And vice versa. Same person. I can't make myself more clear."

Shelby grimaced again. "But this woman isn't Helga Schrumpf."

And to think only moments ago I'd been perturbed by Shelby's lingering. "Not Helga Schrumpf? You're quite sure?"

"If you ever bothered to attend an HOA meeting, you'd know I'm chair of the social committee. One of my duties is to make sure anyone new to Yucca Palms receives a welcome basket the day they move in. I handed one to Helga Schrumpf myself just a week ago. I'm telling you, this woman is not her."

Welcome basket! That my condo-association dues were going to pay for wicker baskets filled with assorted nuts and scented soaps was beyond maddening! Meanwhile, the lawn's sprinkler system constantly sprang leaks, geysering the sidewalks, and the hot tub, one of the property's few amenities, had developed a green film that I swear hissed at me the last time I passed by it.

"I don't suppose any of the items are returnable?" I mused.

The last time I'd seen Shelby look so aghast by something I'd said or done was during last Thursday's potluck, when I had taken the liberty of straightening his toupee without first asking if he wouldn't mind the adjustment. In my defense, I'd pointed out that Edna's bean dip was troubled enough without having his wig fall into it. Regrettably, Edna had chosen that of all moments to have her hearing aid turned on and didn't take well to the criticism.

The unmistakable sound of sirens whined in the distance. I'd soon be shooed out of the room by what I imagined would be a determined contingent of crime-scene investigators. I had to act fast. Interrupting Shelby's examination of the body, I asked him whether he'd ever seen *this* woman before?

He gave her another long look. "Never."

"You're quite sure?"

"I may be a bit older, Perry, but I'm not senile."

I let the "a bit older" remark slide. I was fifty-two, making me Shelby's junior by two decades. My emphasis of this fact should by no means lead one to conclude that I'm an ageist. Quite the contrary; I love old people. The older the better in my book. The elderly simply spit out their opinions in gloriously

unapologetic, sure-to-offend-at-least-someone—millennials always a safe bet—bluntness.

“What about that statuette?” I pointed a freshly polished nail at what was undoubtedly the murder weapon.

“Never seen that either. What is it? Looks like some sort of statuette.”

I sighed loudly to ensure Shelby heard me. “Doesn’t it just.” While snapping a few crime-scene photos, I went on to explain that I had crossed paths with Miss Direction just days before at the mailboxes. Why she had been retrieving Helga Schrumpf’s mail remained an unanswered question. As I was about to capture a few close-up shots of the woman’s head wound, two uniformed officers burst into the room, bringing with them a barrage of questions and commotion which concluded with Shelby and me being ushered from the vicinity.

Being the good neighbor that I am, I insisted on carrying Shelby’s laundry basket back to his unit for him, tsk-tsking at the man’s reckless intention to waste water (*Hello, we live in a desert!*) on such a light load. Still, one couldn’t help but feel sorry for old Shelby. Perhaps such mundane chores gave his days purpose. Was I to one day while away hours ironing my socks and alphabetizing my spice rack? Like many of my neighbors, Shelby was on a fixed income, lived alone, and moseyed around the grounds with a wistfulness that matched the building’s peeling paint.

“What’s all the hubbub?” Millisandra Kobb, Shelby’s next-door neighbor, stuck her curled head out from her living-room window. “Oh, my stars,” she said, craning her neck to the right and then left to see past Shelby and me. “What are the police doing here?”

Ignoring Millisandra’s reputation for histrionics, Shelby boneheadedly announced, “I’m afraid there’s been a murder, Milly.”

Millisandra’s face was like that of a toddler who had just dropped her ice-cream cone. After the initial moment of shock passed, she let loose a scream sure to set off nearby car alarms. It took less than five seconds for the police, guns drawn, to arrive at our little gathering outside her window. Fortunately, Shelby and I were known to the officers and appeared as threatening as a pair of sedated koala bears. Once the police got a read of the situation—that a crazy lady lived in 2-C—I made haste for the safety and silence of my own home.

As I was about to pass by 3-B, my Keds abruptly skidded to a stop and I found myself rapping on the door before I could think better of my action. Spectacularly disheveled, a woman I presumed to be the real Helga Schrumpf peered through the crack in the doorway, looking like a yard sale in slippers. “Yes?” she croaked, her right eye only half open.

“My name is Perry Winkle, Ms. Schrumpf. I’m your neighbor in 6-B.”

She cocked her head, taking me in from a different angle. “For real?”

Whether her remark referenced my unusual name, my puff-sleeved, belted cotton dress, or my claim to reside just down the hall was unclear. Leaving nothing to doubt was the inhospitable vibe that oozed from the woman like smoldering lava from a crater.

Spurred on by allegiance to my mission, I said, “I apologize for the early-morning interruption, Ms. Schrumpf, but I’m curious if you know a woman who goes by the name of Miss Direction?”

Helga blinked twice, then looked over her shoulder. When she turned back, she wore a look of concern. "Why you asking?"

I'd come for answers, not more hysterics, so I left the notification of Miss Direction's demise to the authorities. Instead, I said, "The other day, I ran into a woman pulling mail from your box. She introduced herself as Miss Direction. At the time, I had taken the name to be a nom de plume or stage name or some such. I've since learned that you and Miss Direction are, in fact, not the same woman. Given that stealing another's mail is a federal crime, you'll appreciate my desire to ensure everything is on the up and up." I smiled amiably. "You'll find that all of us here at Yucca Palms look out for one another. I'm only doing my small part to keep our community safe and secure." I added a curtsy to emphasize my honorable intentions.

Helga Schrumpf gave me a long hard look before saying, "Here's a tip. Mind your own beeswax." And with that, she shut the door in my face.

Having developed a callus to such rudeness, I rolled my eyes. Why, only yesterday, Melba Abbott in 1-A had called me a "heartless nincompoop" for suggesting she "do the thing a favor" by putting down her horrible-smelling, grotesquely old, and utterly blind teacup poodle. The day before that, when I happened to notice Shelby barbarically mixing his whites and colors, I'd asked if he might just as well wash his clothing in the creek and beat it with rocks. His reply that I was "Satan in a skirt" only justified my stealing his box of dryer sheets.

Once inside my condo, I downloaded the crime-scene photos from my phone onto my laptop for enlarging. Of particular interest was the statuette. It wasn't until Judge Judy appeared on the television, marking the ten o'clock hour, that my online research paid off. Thanks to the figure's unusually sultry pose, using image recognition software I was able to match the statuette to an annual awards gala in Reno, Nevada. For the past sixteen years, the Association of Burlesque Professionals had bestowed prizes in a number of performance categories, including last year's Hottest Hot Performance going to a contortionist from Missoula named Twist. According to the association's website, the award statuette, nicknamed the "Shimmy," was the highest honor in the business. Unfortunately, web pages for past events and award recipients went back only as far as 2018. It took only one passing glance at Miss Direction to know she went back considerably further.

Had Miss Direction been a burlesque dancer? Could the bloodied statuette have been hers? I wasn't the type to judge, but "hottest" followed by any noun imaginable didn't pair well with the dead woman lying on the floor in our clubhouse. Then again, maybe Miss Direction had won her Shimmy decades ago, when in her prime. I'd witnessed countless individuals who had let themselves go with far more devastating effects in far less time. Yucca Palms' property manager was the first such person who sprang to mind. Paul Something-or-other had arrived fourteen months ago fit from years of rigorous CrossFit training. Only six months later I caught him—while on the clock!—lounging shirtless by the pool, his round belly glistening with the grease from three empty bags of Lay's potato chips. My remark that his "sole value as eye candy had passed its expiration date" earned me the finger and his renewed zeal in collecting my past-due HOA payments.

The next step in my investigation was to discover the connection between

Helga Schrumpf and Miss Direction. I peered out my living-room window. The three patrol cars that had first arrived on the scene had been joined by a non-descript American sedan and a large white van. I reached for my binoculars, which I kept on the side table for just such occasions. "Riverside County Coroner" was painted in sober black lettering on the van's door. What must it be like to have a job that deals daily with death? Did it become routine? Did anyone ever find themself yawning while zipping up a body bag? Or whistling a show tune while steam-cleaning bloodstains from the carpet? Or letting their mind wander to that evening's supper while notifying the next of kin? Suddenly a thought struck. I slipped back into my sneakers, adjusted my shoulder pads for battle, and locked the door behind me.

The property manager's office was the first door inside the key-coded gate to the property. Paul Something-or-other kept indeterminate hours, so I was more than a little surprised to find the door open and him sitting behind a messy desk.

He pulled the straw of his Big Gulp from his lips. "What do you want, Perry?"

"A pleasant good morning to you too, Paul."

"The police told me you found the body, so I don't need to tell you it's the furthest thing from a pleasant morning."

"I take it that's why you're here? Finally found a reason to drop by your place of employment?"

"The police called me, if that's what you're asking. Again, what is it you want?"

My unscrupulousness was one of my most winning qualities; that talent was about to take full flight. "I need to update my emergency-contact information."

"Now?"

"If you'd be so kind as to point me to the right cabinet?"

"The files are confidential—as I'm sure you know. Besides, this really isn't the time—"

"If only you were right, Paul." I placed a hand on my heart. "But I'm sorry to say *my* emergency contact has recently passed away."

"Oh," he garbled through a mouthful of Twinkie. "Sorry to hear that."

"Don't be. I had cautioned my uncle about riding a recumbent bicycle in spandex shorts for aesthetic reasons. In the end, it took a cement truck to right that wrong. Anyhoo, you'll understand that other more proximate events have emphasized the importance of keeping such particulars updated. Don't you agree?"

He wiped yellow crumbs from his chin with the back of his hand. "I'll pull your file. But please be quick about it. I expect to be called in by the detectives any minute. They've started to interview people in the conference room."

Conference room! Was the man *trying* to push my buttons? Three months back, our moronic condo board converted the community kitchen into their conference room, claiming the space was underutilized. The land grab didn't fool me. Loath to spend money on anything—other than gift baskets, apparently—the board needed a smoke screen to avoid replacing the nonworking appliances from the seventies. I took a deep breath; the moment demanded I stay on message.

"Be done in two shakes of a lamb's tail." I raised two fingers. "Scout's honor."

Paul made a show of lumbering to his feet. He bent down, flashing me his butt crack, and pulled a manilla file out from the lowest drawer of a metal cabinet. I had no intention of either hurrying or changing anything on my contacts sheet. I had only to outlast Paul.

Ten minutes later, I was rudely interrupted by him saying, "Seriously? There's one sheet of paper in there, Perry. If you're going to change your information, change it already, will you?"

As I opened my mouth with a ready retort, a lanky man wearing a dandruff-dusted brown jacket ap-peared in the doorway. "Which one of you is the property manager?"

I tilted my head toward Paul. "He would be the holder of that illustrious title."

"And you are?"

"Perry Winkle. Resident, 6-B. I've just dropped in to update some paperwork."

"Winkle?" He consulted a small notebook he pulled from his jacket pocket. "Yeah, Winkle. You found the body. You, I want to talk to. Just as soon as my boss gets here. 6-B, you say?"

"At your service." I tipped my invisible cap.

After giving me a quizzical look, he returned his attention to Paul. "Would you mind coming with me, sir? We have some questions."

Paul hesitated at the doorway and swept an arm toward the exit for me to precede him.

Doing my best to appear confused, I said, "Oh, I'll only be another minute. I'm nearly finished."

"Damn it, Perry. I don't have time—"

"Sir?" the detective called from the sidewalk. "Do you mind?"

Paul growled, "You're on my list, Perry. Lock the door on your way out."

Thankfully, Paul had alphabetized his files and made prolific use of folder labels. Finding Helga Schrumpf's file was as easy as borrowing rolls of toilet paper from the clubhouse bathroom. My initial disappointment in reading that Helga Schrumpf had listed her emergency contact as Darcie Pembroke, a daughter in Amarillo, was mollified by finding a recent entry in the guest-parking folder I knew to be in the wire organizer on the corner of Paul's desk. Four days ago, Helga Schrumpf had requested that a one-week guest pass be issued to a red Camaro with Arkansas plates reading "MISSDEE." The car's owner was listed as Heidi Schrumpf. Given the Schrumpf women's closeness in age and not too dissimilar proportions, dispositions, and names, I presumed they were sisters.

Had the police identified the murdered woman? If they had, surely they had informed Helga of her sibling's murder. But not since Millisandra Cobb's banshee howling had I heard any outburst from anywhere on the property. Perhaps Helga met tragedy with a stiff upper lip? Or perhaps she was in shock? Or could it be she was untroubled by the news of her sister's gruesome death?

Now that I knew Miss Direction's real name, who might want her dead? When it came to murderous desires, a family member was always a safe bet, but with only one to choose from, would Helga be so obvious? So reckless? While I couldn't rule it out, I had my doubts. But if not Helga, then who?

Being nothing if not an ideas person, I opened the office's desktop computer.

I'd be the first to admit I was no tech whiz, but no such skill was required. Paul had stuck a jam-stained Post-it Note with his password onto the edge of the monitor. After clicking on the icon for the Nest camera—remarkable for its being a reasonable purchase by the HOA—I rewound the recording of the comings and goings of anyone through the front and only entrance to the property. Starting at midnight, I sped through the video and watched for anyone arriving during the early-morning hours. At 6:22, I pressed pause. It had been at that moment the police had arrived. My breath caught at the realization: removing myself from consideration, of course, one of my fourteen neighbors must be the killer.

As Helga Schrumpf was off limits, I needed another way to learn about Miss Direction. I revisited Helga's emergency contact, Darcie Pembroke, and jotted down the number. As Darcie was Helga's daughter, and if I was correct that Helga and Heidi were sisters, then Darcie was Heidi's niece. After returning home, I phoned said niece, hoping the police or Helga or some other family member hadn't gotten to her first.

"Hello." The voice on the other end of the line sounded like Helga's but with the rough edges lightly sanded.

"Good morning. I'm calling for Darcie Pembroke. Might you be Ms. Pembroke?"

After a perfunctory exchange of pleasantries during which I introduced myself as Marshall Cromwell, senior entertainment reporter for the *Burlesque Times*, I got down to business. "I am doing a story on your aunt, Heidi Schrumpf. I don't need to tell you the woman is something of a legend on the burlesque stage. I am hoping that as a family member you might be able to tell me something interesting about your aunt that I haven't heard from her professional colleagues."

The long silence didn't bode well. Did I have it wrong? Had Heidi not been a Shimmy Award-winning performer? I waited, committed as I was.

"I really can't help you. I'm sorry."

Channeling the spirit of Bob Woodward, I said, "And why is that, Ms. Pembroke? Surely you must have an entertaining anecdote? A humorous recollection? A heartwarming memory?"

The woman scoffed, "None of the above. My aunt and I were never close. I'm Pentecostal and my aunt . . . I have no interest in that type of show. Not to mention all that unpleasanthess."

Having not the foggiest idea what she was talking about, I aimed for an ambiguous yet empathetic reply. "So regrettable."

"Regrettable? It was all her own doing." A lengthy silence was broken by her saying, "You do know what I'm talking about . . . don't you?"

"Yes, yes, of course. But I'd be most interested to hear your side of the story." When too many seconds passed, I added, "Off the record, if you'd feel more comfortable."

"I'd rather not. You might try talking to my mother. She knows the story better than I do."

With nothing to lose, I said, "Oh, but it was your mother who suggested I phone you. How do you think I got your number?"

"She did what!"

That Darcie and Helga might not themselves be close was something I

hadn't considered. But in fairness, I hadn't had time to think any of this through. I grabbed a stack of papers from the kitchen table and ruffled them against the receiver. "Let me just check my notes . . . ah yes, here it is. Your mother said, and I quote, 'Darcie never stopped believing in her Aunt Heidi's good-heartedness. You'd have to ask her why.'"

"My mom said that? Was she drunk?" Darcie produced an exasperated grumble. "Listen, my aunt used her boobs and high kicks to swindle old men out of their life savings. She hasn't been seen in years. Not even my mother knows where she is. If she ever does reappear, I want nothing to do with her."

"Reappear? So you're saying—"

The line went dead.

Andy Griffith as criminal-defense attorney Ben Matlock had taught me that along with evidence, proving a suspect's guilt required motive and opportunity. Stealing someone's money would surely make an enemy of them. Now that the motive box had been checked, I needed to discover the opportunity along with some evidence. And yes, I was still short a prime suspect. Another of my role models, Miss Marple, achieved her peerless crime-solving track record by employing her impressive powers of observation and knitting together seemingly unassociated events. For that I would need absolute quiet and a half-cup of lavender bath salts.

Holding my breath, I closed my eyes and sank beneath the water's silky surface. *Miss Direction . . . Miss Direction . . .* the woman's name somersaulted in my brain. I replayed the scene in the clubhouse as it had unfolded: my discovering the body . . . Shelby's arrival . . . the confusion about her identity . . . him nearly stepping on her skirt . . .

Suddenly the various fragments coalesced. As if to confirm my thinking, Miss Direction's spirit reached out from the great beyond and thumped her approval. Excited—and a good bit spooked!—I bolted upright, splashing water over the side of the tub. I now heard the sound for what it was: Someone was knocking on my front door.

Although the detective's visit was inevitable, I would have preferred more time to put myself together. The thrill of solving a murder didn't happen every day. A pink cashmere sweater-and-scarf set paired with animal-print tights was hardly an on-brand look for me, but what can I say—I was rushed. As the detective in the regrettable brown jacket escorted me into the clubhouse's kitchen-turned-boardroom, poor old Shelby shuffled out. He winked mischievously as if we were in cahoots. The unmitigated gall.

The detective pointed to an empty chair beside his equally serious-looking colleague. As I lowered myself onto the tattered upholstery, I couldn't suppress the smile that spread across my unpainted face—nor, in truth, did I try.

"I don't suppose you gentlemen would like to know who killed Heidi Schrumpf?"

Sensing the men's eagerness, I cut to the chase: The man they had just let amble from the room, Shelby List or Lisk (would I ever know . . . or care?), had done it. I explained the three elements that established his guilt.

First, Shelby had been rich in a previous life. When he'd nearly stepped on the victim's skimpy skirt, I'd noticed his worn Church's Oxfords. The shoes were those belonging to a once-wealthy man with the means to afford a pair of thousand-dollar English wingtips.

Next was the matter of Miss Direction's identity. Shelby claimed to have first met Helga Schrumpf one week earlier when delivering a welcome basket to unit 3-B. Even if he hadn't known that Heidi had a sister named Helga, given the unusual last name of Schrumpf—and the women's similar first names—he must have suspected they might be related. Then when Helga had swung open the door, revealing her resemblance to Heidi, he must have known for certain. If Shelby had used the occasion to ask Helga about her sister, there was little she could have told him; Darcie Pembrooke believed her aunt's whereabouts were unknown to even her mother. Still, from that moment on, I believe Shelby had lain in wait for the possible appearance of the woman who had ruined him financially. He hadn't waited long. When Heidi arrived at Yucca Palms soon thereafter, Shelby exacted his revenge.

That morning when I had told Shelby the dead woman was Helga Schrumpf, he had immediately set down his laundry basket and moved in close to inspect the body. He then asked, "Who do you think this is?" When I suggested that he might instead know the woman by the name "Miss Direction," he'd looked utterly perplexed, and said, "Then why did you call her Helga?" At the time, I had mistakenly attributed Shelby's confusion to my using two names for the same woman. I'd been wrong. Shelby's baffled reaction was because I had thought *Helga* Schrumpf was Miss Direction. At this point in my story, I would have expected a well-earned attaboy or attagirl or whatever one says to a nonbinary amateur sleuth with an uncanny ability to solve a confounding crime. No matter. I was about to serve the detectives the *pièce de résistance*.

When Shelby had appeared at the clubhouse that morning on his way to the laundry facility, his basket had contained not just a small heap of clothing, but also detergent, bleach, and dryer sheets. I'd not given it a second thought at the time. But later I recalled how the day before I had given him a ribbing for mixing his colors and whites. What would drive Shelby to abandon what was likely a long-established routine by suddenly introducing bleach into his washing? And why would an inactive and solitary man like him need to do more laundry the very next day? I supplied the answer to save the detectives the trouble of guessing. After luring Miss Direction to the clubhouse, he had bloodied his clothes while bashing the woman's head. Shelby had then urgently needed to wash the evidence from this clothing. Whatever doubts the detectives may have had at the end of my own little TED Talk were erased when they found a blood-stained shirt and trousers buried at the bottom of the laundry basket sitting inside Shelby's front door.

Doing the neighborly thing, I waited by the front gate to say goodbye to ol' Shelby as he was escorted from the property. Pressed between the two detectives, his expression turned sour when he spotted me. "You do realize, Perry, that you are an insufferable busybody."

"Tell me, Shelby. The Shimmy. Had it been in your possession all these years?"

He nodded. "It was the one and only thing she left me. I was happy to finally return it."

"How poetic," I said, delighted by the exchange I was certain to recount at the next condo potluck.

As the detectives opened the back door of the sedan, Shelby turned back. “I really thought I had you fooled.”

“And indeed you did,” I crowed. “But I’m afraid Miss Direction proved once again to be your undoing.”

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