

The Handkerchief Club Caper

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The Literary Club

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“Happy Endings Retirement Village is reporting a dead body,” Irene announced from her dispatchers desk.

Captain Pulaski chuckled and almost spilled his morning coffee. “What’s the big deal?” he shouted at Irene. “Happy Enders all graduate to the cemetery.”

Irene did not care for Captain Pulaski’s humor – particularly in the wake of the COVID19 pandemic - and barely turned her head.

“The corpse is a nurse and they’re not sure of the cause. They also asked that this be kept quiet until they could reach the next of kin.”

Dead bodies were not new to Captain Pulaski. In his 25 years of police work in three different cities, he had seen more than he might like. His first 10 years in the New York City PD were a great experience, but he never felt part of the culture since he was not Irish and couldn’t sing tenor. The next 10 in a mid-west city PD were also educational and he was well regarded, but, again, he never felt like part of the culture since he didn’t go the right high school. This job as Police Chief in the suburbs was a good fit. Except for City Council meetings, he enjoyed taking responsibility for law and order in his community. The Happy Enders were very sensitive about their image and he appreciated the need to avoid unnecessary public outcry – at least until he knew more about this body.

The Captain put his cup down and took a more official demeanor – “Call Sergeant Starling and have her call me on her cell phone.” Irene already had pressed the button to call Starling.

Sergeant Clarice Starling was budget balancing for the city on the Interstate today. Breaking the routine of traffic tickets would be a good use of her time. Picking up his phone, he told Starling to go right over to Happy Endings and be sure to call his cell phone when she appraised the situation. Her aspirations of moving to the FBI would make her visibly excited to investigate a suspicious death.

Pulaski sighed as he picked up his City Council folder and slowly walked down the hall to the monthly meeting of the Law and Order Committee. These meetings were always difficult since he usually wafted between keeping awake and palpable anger. This meeting was no different with some members concerned about a “bad element” moving to the village, a suggestion to update the officers’ uniforms with a Star Trek design, and the repeating issue of painting the police cars baby blue to soften their image. The members of the Law and Order Committee always considered it their Law and his Order.

Returning to his office, Irene informed him that Sergeant Starling had been trying to reach him.

Starling answered his call in a whisper. "Captain, I think you should come over here right now."

Pulaski was surprised that at her tone so followed protocol. "Starling, are you in a safe situation? Just answer yes or no."

"Oh, yes – no danger. But I have seven people who claim to have discovered the body, and the Happy Endings Manager may have wet his pants."

The drive to Happy Endings took only 15 minutes. Pulaski parked his official Captain's beige SUV behind the main building next to Starling's black and white patrol car. Happy Ending management did not like to see police vehicles parked where they were visible from the main road.

Starling was in a lounge room next to the main entrance with a group of what appeared to be Happy Ending residents and the Manager, Dr. Harry Whipple. This room always reminded Pulaski of a funeral home with dated furniture arrayed around the walls, plastic flowers in vases, and the soft sound of elevator music. Probably an intentional design to prepare families for the last chapter. As Pulaski stepped into the room, Whipple leaped or rather lurched his 300 pounds out of a chair. He may not have wet his pants – yet – but his shirt was wet with sweat and his eyes had a deer in the headlights look.

"Captain, this is terrible! I have to talk to you privately."

Pulaski held his hand up to stop the onrushing blob of management and took charge the best way he knew.

"Harry, we'll talk, but first I want to get Sergeant Starling's report. Just sit down with these other good folks for a few minutes. In fact, since this is everyone's lunch hour, why don't you have your kitchen staff bring up some sandwiches and coffee for all of us."

When they were in the hall, Starling started to give a rapid-fire report of events. She had called the County Coroner who had just arrived. Not wanting to simply stand there, Pulaski nodded his approval: "Let's go over to wherever the body and Coroner are and you can brief me on everything else on the way."

The body was in the nursing wing called "Restful Endings" at the bottom of stairs at the end of the building. The stairs were industrial metal emergency exit variety with a landing leading to an outside door. The victim appeared to be a female with white blouse, white slacks and comfortable white shoes. She was laying in an awkward crumpled posture with her head and neck turned in a strange angle. The Coroner, Dr. Dorothy Smitherton, called Doc Dotty behind her back, was bending over the body with her assistant taking pictures.

“Good afternoon Dorothy. What do we have here?”

“Well Captain,” Dr. Smitherton replied, “based on her name tag, we have the recently deceased Nurse Margaret Houlihan. Pending autopsy, cause of death would appear to be a massive blow at the base of the skull around the C1 to C3 vertebrae. Possibly caused by the deceased falling down this flight of stairs and striking her head on the railing. Note the presence of blood and tissue on the railing. It would appear that the victim fell or was pushed backward from near the top of the stairs, which would have been 15-20 feet and struck the railing. A blow like this would have caused nearly instantaneous death.”

Pulaski almost smiled since the coroner was so happy being in charge of the scene. “Anything else that could be of interest?”

The Coroner nodded ; “There is the surprise that Nurse Houlihan was wearing a very high-quality blonde wig. We found it while examining the body. Rather unusual that a nurse with a full head of brown hair would go to the trouble of wearing a wig like this on duty. Who was she trying to fool?”

Chuckling, Pulaski answered: “I guess that’s why we have a crack Police Department – anything else?”

“Starling was here first and gathered some other evidence that could occupy your sleuthing mind for a while.”

Pulaski pulled Starling away from the industrious coroner. “What else should I know, Starling?”

Standing as tall as her 5’5” frame would allow, Starling pulled out her cell with a flourish: “These pics show the body as I found it. You will note that Nurse Houlihan was holding an open umbrella in her right hand and a silver-headed cane in her left.”

Pulaski tried to hide his surprise at the surreal scene on Starling’s phone. “What in hell was she doing? Tight rope walking?”

Shaking her head, Starling replied: “Beats me, but there is more. Her pockets had two items, a list of names with the heading “The Hanky Club” and a pill bottle of tablets labeled Viagra – both in these evidence bags.”

Staring at the body, the image on the phone, the note, and the Viagra, Pulaski could only shake his head and try to separate the images between a bizarre accident, a bizarre crime, or something Agatha Christie wrote. “OK Starling, let’s review what appears to be the evidence – so far. We have a corpse lying at the bottom of a flight of stairs with an apparent broken neck. Said corpse has an ID indicating that she was a nurse at Happy Endings. That part seems to be the most straightforward evidence. Correct?”

Sergeant Starling nodded her head: "Yes sir, that's the basics."

Pulaski wrinkled his brow in concentration. "Then there are these other clues – a blonde wig, an open umbrella in the right hand, a silver headed cane in the left hand, a list of Hanky Club names, and a bottle of Viagra pills. Does that complete the list of clues as we know them?"

Starling tried to look serious: "That's it and that should be enough for one case!"

Captain Pulaski put on his official face and looked directly at Starling: "Remember the rules of investigation, every observed fact or clue has a reason to be at the scene. Now all we have to do is sort it out. As a starting point, are these the names of those nice old folks waiting for us back in the parlor?"

Starling responded quickly: "Yes sir, and they're the ones who found the body."

Pulaski asked Coroner Smitherton to keep him informed of whatever else she discovered, and headed back with Starling to the parlor. On the way, Starling also reported that she had fingerprinted the victim using her portable unit and sent the prints out on to the FBI for confirmation of identity. Also, Dr. Harry Whipple was agitated because his files did not have any next of kin, so he had been trying to contact her references.

Whipple met them at the door of the parlor even more agitated than earlier with a doughnut in his hand.

"Captain, this is dreadful, just dreadful." Whipple voice was near breaking as he waved the doughnut aimlessly with powdered sugar falling like snow. "There is no record of Nurse Houlihan at any of the references she gave us. We have been very short handed and we hired her as temporary, but with very impressive credentials."

Pulaski grabbed Whipple's doughnut armed hand before he got sugar powder on his uniform. "How long was Nurse Houlihan a temp at Happy Endings?"

Whipple's eyes dilated and his sweaty skin turned whiter than normal. "Six months and 17 days."

The Captain could not contain his surprise: "You mean to tell me that this professional establishment with regular inspections by the state has had a nurse on duty for half a frigging year without verifying her credentials?"

At that, Dr. Harry Whipple whimpered, dropped his doughnut and finally did wet his pants. He mumbled something about records, files, and investigations and fled down the hall.

Captain Pulaski tried to look nonchalant as he strolled into the parlor. “Good afternoon folks. Did you leave any food for your hungry police department?”

A tall, slim woman with silver hair wearing beige slacks, blue blouse, and pearls smiled sweetly and said: “Oh my, please excuse our manners officer, we started without you. Please sit right here. My name is Mary Beth Blake, but Muffy is what most people call me. Betsy, get a plate for the officers and Randy see if they want water or coffee.”

A woman with nearly red hair wearing a flowered dress revealing ample cleavage jumped up to go to the table. Captain Pulaski tried to regain control of the meeting. “Let me introduce myself. I am Captain Pulaski of the Mt. Fairlawn Police Department. You’ve met my compatriot Sergeant Clarice Starling. Unfortunately, this is not a social call. We are investigating the mysterious death of Nurse Margaret Houlihan.”

Betsy smiled sweetly as she picked up the tray of sandwiches: “Of course you are. All we have left here are turkey on brioche bun or roast beef on wheat bagel. Also, there is some slaw that is reasonably fresh, some cut-up fruit, and some stale doughnuts. What can I serve you two keepers of the law?”

Before Pulaski could answer, a man wearing strange colored pants and open collared shirt highlighted by a gold chain poured some coffee, brought the cup to his lip and smiled: “Actually the coffee is still kinda warm or we have bottled water.”

Pulaski reminded himself that these old folks may not have heard him, so he raised his voice slightly: “The sandwiches are welcomed, but, to be clear, this is a possible criminal investigation.”

Mary Beth straightened herself and touched her hair: “Yes, we know why you are here. We are the ones that reported the body. Please have a sandwich, and Sally Ann brought some of her chocolate chip cookies when you want them.”

“Coffee or water?” from Randy as carried the carafe and water bottles across the room.

Betsy was holding the tray in front of the officers. “Sergeant, I recommend the turkey on brioche, and Captain, I bet a big strong man like you wants the roast beef.”

Giving in, Starling did take the turkey and Pulaski the beef, with both playing it safe with water. Before he took a bite of his sandwich, Pulaski asked the group to introduce themselves. Starling reassured him that she had their full names in her report, but the four women and three men rather cheerfully introduced themselves.

Pulaski realized that trying to eat and talk in front of this group of senior citizens reminded him of being scolded by his mother for talking with food in his mouth. He self-consciously quickly swallowed his first bite before speaking again.

“Who would like to start telling us what you saw when you discovered the body?”

Randy looked nervously around the room before starting: “Well, there she was kinda crumpled at the bottom of the stairs. So, we called Security.”

Pulaski tried to picture the scene: “When you say ‘we’ do you mean all seven of you?”

Randy glanced at the others quickly and continued: “Yep, we were at the top of the stairs and it didn’t seem necessary to walk down to examine the body.”

Pulaski continued: “What were you all doing at the top of the stairs in that building? None of you are living in the nursing wing.”

Now Randy looked perplexed. “Well, we were going to – ah – talk to Nurse Houlihan.”

It was Captain Pulaski’s turn to look perplexed: “Why would you be going to the Restful Endings wing to talk to a nurse?”

Randy shook his head: “Muffy, might as well tell him everything or we will be here all day.”

Muffy Blake looked to the group for support and took a sip of water. “You see Captain, we formed a sort of club a year ago that required a certain pharmaceutical product. When Nurse Houlihan heard about it, she offered to supply the pharmaceutical product for a much lower price.”

Pulaski swallowed another bite of roast beef sandwich quickly: “Wait a minute. Surely, all of you are on Medicare or Medicaid and get your drugs at good prices.”

Muffy actually squirmed a bit in her chair: “This particular item is not covered by most insurance and the retail price was quite high.”

Pulaski decided to ask a leading question to move this discussion along; “Am I correct in assuming that this pharmaceutical product was Viagra?”

Muffy just nodded and said ‘yes’ quietly.

Looking uncomfortable himself, Pulaski asked: “What kind of Happy Endings club requires a supply of Viagra?”

“Well, this is bit personal and kind of embarrassing” Muffy actually blushed slightly but the group were nodding approval. “You see, people think that just because we are older, we don’t have emotional and – ah – physical needs for – um - intimacy. Since there are many more women than men here at Happy Endings, the men felt like they were being hounded “

“..and exhausted!” chuckled Randy.

Muffy smiled her sweet smile and continued: “So a small group of us got together and decided to organize ourselves so that everyone had an opportunity for --- ah --- intimacy without causing embarrassment or jealousy. Sally Ann was very good at computer stuff so she created a spread sheet with appropriate men and women’s names. On an agreed frequency, a man would find a lacy handkerchief with a woman’s initials in his mailbox. Because age does have some limitations, and to share the cost, the handkerchief would be wrapped around a Viagra tablet. The gentleman would then arrive at the woman’s apartment to return the handkerchief and enjoy dinner or whatever they wanted and could – um – enjoy each other’s company.”

Pulaski could not hide his astonishment. “You mean you had a sex club here at Happy Endings?”

“Oh, now Captain, sweetie, we do try to maintain decorum and dignity. We call it simply ‘The Handkerchief Club.’”

Pulaski noticed that Starling was blushing even while trying to take notes. He hoped he did not look flustered – but failed.

“I suppose Nurse Houlihan was providing the Viagra.”

Muffy nodded: “Yes, apparently she was able to get into the Happy Ending computer and order Viagra, but then label it as aspirin when it was delivered. Those silly little blue pills were costing us \$60 a tablet and were straining our miscellaneous budget. Nurse Houlihan supplied us with all we needed at \$20 a tablet.”

Again, Randy blurted: “At first she did!”

Muffy shifted in her chair and leaned forward a bit: “All was great, but then she started raising the price - \$25, \$30, and \$35 – and we discovered that she was giving us the much cheaper generic version. When we complained, she threatened to tell our children that we were misbehaving. Misbehaving! Can you imagine, worrying our children who think we spend all our time in shuffle board or card games. She was going to tell them the most horrible lies about our -ah- activities in what she called the Hanky Club.”

Clever policeman that he was, Pulaski could see that this death investigation could well be more complicated. “So, she was extorting you for the added cost of the pills?”

“Sort of. As soon as we unwisely gave in and paid the higher price, she came back and demanded \$100,000 to keep quiet – and still supply Viagra.”

Randy stood up and shook his fist: “Outrageous – a common criminal, not a nurse!”

Pulaski tried to clear his mind of questions by asking: "OK, I understand that Nurse Houlihan was something other than Florence Nightingale. But what do you suppose she was doing with an umbrella and cane in her hands at her demise?"

There was complete quiet in the room except for the rustling of the seven residents squirming in their chairs.

Finally, Randy sighed: "Might as well admit the obvious."

Quick glances between the seven Happy Enders until Mary Beth Blake leaned forward: "Captain, we didn't just discover the body. We tried to push her down the stairs."

General nodding among the group of seven with "that's right" and "damn right" comments.

A startled Captain Pulaski rapped the table: "Mrs. Blake, stop right there."

"Oh, please call me Muffy."

"Starling, read them their Miranda Rights before we go any further."

The Sergeant shrugged her shoulders; "Captain, I did read them earlier."

"Do it again so I can hear it."

Sergeant Starling pulled her Miranda card out of her uniform pocket and dutifully read the Miranda warning.

Pulaski continued: "Now, Mrs. Blake... Muffy, we know the beginning and the ending of this story, can you or anyone here explain exactly what happened?"

A distinguished man with swept back gray hair and nicely fitted striped shirt with pressed khaki slacks, obviously a retired lawyer, raised his hand and Muffy gestured toward him: "Go ahead Ben, tell the rest." And Muffy leaned back into her chair.

"I am Benjamin Pierce and can take the blame for hatching our little not-so-clever scheme. We decided that the only way to rid ourselves of Nurse Houlihan was to get rid of Nurse Houlihan."

Pulaski put on his mean police look: "You mean you decided to murder her?"

"Captain, don't lead the witness. Let me continue. Houlihan wanted to meet us at the end of the hallway on the top floor of the "Restful Endings Building." There is a wide-open space for future expansion at the top of the stairs. An area that few people use, and she wanted to meet

us there to – in her words – ‘get the money or get us disgraced and get our asses kicked out.’ The seven of us are her main contact for the club so it was up to us to do something.”

Starling was trying to take notes while her laptop was binging with messages. Pulaski frowned at her, but turned back to Ben Pierce: “You mean there are more people in the Handkerchief Club than you seven?”

Ben fixed Pulaski with an icy stare that caused the Captain to look away. “We are the only ones you need to talk to about Nurse Houlihan’s demise. Of course, there are more than us on our spreadsheet. However, although we will not mourn the loss of Nurse Houlihan, we did erase the spreadsheet so no one else can be incriminated. Don’t ask – don’t tell.”

Ben continued: “If I may go on, we can finish this before Wheel of Fortune comes on?”

Pulaski simply nodded and waved his hand.

“Thank you, Captain,” Ben said in an almost condescending voice. “We decided to take this opportunity to stop her racket before more people were hurt. You may laugh, but we decided to form a half circle and push her till she fell down the stairs. Betsy and Sally Ann were to open umbrellas while Randy and Chuck used their canes to drive her back hoping the surprise would cause her to fall the 20 feet down the stairs.”

Pulaski remembered the image of the body of Nurse Houlihan with an umbrella in one hand and a cane in the other. “Well, how did she end up with the umbrella and cane?”

“I must admit to you Captain that our plan was ill conceived and badly deployed – although more effective than we had hoped.” Ben looked toward the group who all nodded.

“When she screamed at us about pay now or else, we moved in as planned. But we did not figure her agility and determination. She knocked down Sally Ann and grabbed her umbrella, kicked poor Chuck where it hurt and snatched his cane. She became like a person possessed – dancing around us, waving the open umbrella over her head, and pirouetting around the cane. Screaming at us the whole time.”

Randy leapt from his chair: “it was more of a cackle.”

Betsy added, “Her voice was demonic and she was singing an ugly song – ‘a little bit of Viagra makes the xxx go up.’ It was awful.”

Ben waved his hand for quiet: “Now our backfired plan became brilliant. When she was dancing around, she did not notice where she was and virtually leapt off the top of the stairs. Umbrella above her head like a malicious Mary Poppins. She screamed ‘oh sh...’ and then we heard a rather sickening thump and complete quiet. It didn’t take a doctor to verify that we were looking at the former Nurse Houlihan.”

As Ben sat down, the room was quiet and the neat and prim seven residents of Happy Endings looked like they had missed their nap. Muffy interrupted the silence:

“As you can tell, we certainly feel like we were the cause of Nurse Houlihan’s demise even though she brought it on herself.”

Sergeant Starling touched Pulaski’s arm: “Captain, it is important that we talk --- privately.”

The two perplexed officers moved to the hallway.

“OK Starling, I need a break from this for a few minutes anyway. What’s up?”

“Captain, for the last 20 minutes, my email has been alive with news about the alleged Nurse Houlihan. “

“What do you mean – alleged?”

Starling gestured toward her lap top: “The fingerprint people were very quick today and have ID’d the deceased. Margaret Houlihan is not her real name. The victim was a properly Registered Nurse in Oregon, but not named Margaret Houlihan. She actually is or was Nurse Mildred Ratched. Apparently, Nurse Houlihan is or was really Nurse Ratched who has been making a very nice living bilking elderly people. From her home base in Oregon, she is wanted in at least six states for stealing, extortion, and questioning about mysterious deaths of patients in her care. Her persona changes from place to place, but always as a nurse in retirement communities. Our Dr. Whipple and Happy Endings are not the only place that isn’t careful about checking references.”

Pulaski shook his head: “Just when this case couldn’t get much weirder, we have a most wanted corpse on our hands! This explains the blond wig and the missing credentials. Actually, Whipple might feel a little better knowing that he is not the only one who was fooled. Let’s review our list of clues with the facts as we now know them.”

Starling glanced at her note book and cleared her throat: “It appears we have a fact – of sorts – to match each clue. The body at the bottom of the stairs was employed by Happy Endings with a false name, a fall down the stairs seems corroborated as the cause of death, the wig was part of a disguise by a wanted criminal, the umbrella and cane were likely in her hands by her choice, and, although the witnesses were involved, they do not appear to have actually pushed or otherwise forced her down those stairs.”

Pulaski nodded vigorously: “Good summary Starling, the FBI might have a future for you.”

Sergeant Starling stood holding the evidence bag with the container of Viagra and the “Hanky Club” list from Nurse Houlihan/Ratched’s pocket. “Well, Captain what do we do now with our seven would be killers.”

Half smiling, Pulaski replied: ‘I was just wondering the same thing. On the one hand they certainly admitted to attempted murder. On the other hand, their rather plausible story does match the evidence that Houlihan/Ratched fell due to her own actions. Also, the only sadness about Ratched’s demise is that several prosecutors will miss putting her on trial. What do you think?’

Starling furrowed her brow and slowly shook her head: “It is hard to ignore the threat they made, but hard to condemn the result.”

“Well, Starling, even if we charged these good folks with a crime, the wheels of justice will move more slowly than the ticking of their remaining years. By the time this case would reach a judge, these Happy Enders will be Celestial Enders. I think that we should file our report about an unfortunate accident at Happy Endings Retirement Village, and the surprise about the true identity of the victim. You OK with that?

The Sergeant nodded: “Under the circumstances, I don’t see these folks as a threat to other citizens, and justice would not be served by trying to prosecute them. Heck, the crime would be planning violence against a wanted criminal who died as a result of her own action. Can’t see the County Prosecutor building his re-election campaign on this case.”

A smiling Starling rattled the evidence bag with the Viagra bottle: “But what do you want to do with the evidence – the note and pill bottle?”

Pulaski shook his head and smiled, “I don’t think that this evidence was the direct cause of Nurse Ratched’s fall, and doesn’t have to be part of our accident report.”

He crumpled the Hanky Club note and crammed it into his pocket. Smiling more broadly Captain Pulaski chuckled: “Let’s go back and share our conclusion with our eager Handkerchief Clubbers. When we finish, just leave the Viagra bottle on the table. After all, these good folks deserve a Happy Ending.”

