

A Death at the Club

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Act I

Fifty-seven members and four guests passed the slumped figure between 7:30 and 9:45 one Monday evening not so long ago. Shortly after ten, the Steward tried to rouse the slumbering gentleman. When his gentle urging failed, the Steward felt the chilled forehead then dialed the police. Three uniforms accompanied Detective Arthur Crompton to the Club. Detective Crompton hoped to conduct interviews but by the time of he arrived the Steward was at the Club alone. Because he had spent the evening behind the bar and in the pantry, the Steward could give only a partial accounting of who was present and suggested that Crompton return the following Monday. Crompton requested and received, the Club's membership list.

Waiting for the coroner, Crompton reviewed the list and recognizing some of the names as notable geezers in our fair City, he felt comfortable making his preliminary finding about the cause of death. No doubt, longevity played some factor in his assessment as he wrote "COD-- natural causes."

Crompton decided to return to the Club and told one of the uniforms to notify the membership that the next meeting would be a bit out of the ordinary and attendance was mandatory. As the coroner arrived, Crompton exited. On his way through the Club's portico, he passed the distinguished body of the distinguished V. Hadley Baxendale. Crompton expressed his regret for the recently departed saying *mors ultima linea rerum est. Death is everything's final limit* and *final limit* fit Baxendale's condition quite well.

V. Hadley Baxendale, Haddy to his chosen chums, rested his penultimate rest, not uncomfortably in the red faux Queen Ann wing. Next to the chair, Haddy had tipped the silver

bowl on to the table top with his left hand grotesquely curled and nestled among the kernels of caramel popcorn and peanuts right up to his Veritas signet ring.

V. Hadley Baxendale, from the soap company Baxendale's, was a Cincinnati native—to the corporation born. The Baxendale's, *mère et père*, sent young Haddy East to prep. It was at prep that he was graced with his monicker. Haddy could have been first man on the squash team, had he bothered to practice. Haddy could have been first debator, had he bothered to read the assigned problems. Haddy could have been class President, had he decided to run—had he, had he.

Still, prep was good to Haddy even if Haddy was, inconsequential, or, perhaps, ordinary, to prep. From prep to The College, then to The Law School. After all, privilege has its rank and legacies rank well indeed. Had he actually studied, Haddy would have made The Review with its clear path to Wall Street or to State (CIA, after all, was a Yale preserve). Then again, the gentleman's grades were more than sufficient to claim the family position at law in Cincinnati.

Coming home from back East, Haddy had celebrity status and he had his pick of jobs at the Firm. One bit of knowledge he did retain from The Law School was that litigation was the last bastion of the generalist. Translated, Haddy knew that specialists required expertise and expertise required effort. Generalists could, well, get along. So litigation it was.

In his first years at law, Haddy's verbal jousts at the trial bar and his bon mots at the appellate podium, served his reputation neatly and neatly served his casual work habits. Soon though, he learned that litigation was an ambitious, tough game. While it is easy enough to win a favorable verdict in the ordinary run of cases, real litigation required a street fighter's instinct for blood and a smidgen more work than Haddy ever intended to undertake. If his meager exertions could not assure him first man at squash, then why should he bother much at the bar?

Thusly, Haddy's legal pursuits moved him away from the courtroom. Haddy's new arena became the small conference room, large enough for two or three lawyers and their clients, not the large conference rooms of transactional lawyers doing deals at all hours of the day and night. Actually, Haddy was not quite sure what those transactional guys actually did other than accumulate reams of documents later tombstoned in acrylic. After litigation, his reply to the question, "What is your area of practice?" was "I am in estates—real and trust."

From litigation combatant to high-priced hand holder, Haddy fit his role like a bespoke

suit. He was accepted at the Firm for his hand holding and he was accepted in the social circles of those persons whose hands he held. He was also accepted at the Country Club as much for his social contacts as for his golf game.

Haddy's life from Firm to Country Club to home was seamless. He played golf with his clients and he made clients of his golf partners. At home, Haddy was devoted to Barbara, his first (and last) wife and to his soon to prep children. Haddy was comfortable with a life lived according to the rules; a life in which perspiration was frowned upon and in which sweating was *verboten*. Haddy loved the perks of class and hated thinking too much, if at all, outside the social register. Haddy loved the traditional values of patriarchy and hated any alternatives that might threaten them. Haddy loved the easy life at the Country Club and the social graces at the Firm and hated the haggling of the marketplace and the braying of politics. His "Philosophy of Life" was the Patrician belief that it was the examined life that was not worth living.

Had he just tried, Haddy could have been managing partner at The Firm, president of the Country Club, or top man at any number of other things but trying was suspect; it was a betrayal of class. Still, there was this lingering, unsettled sense in living the expected life as if there was another life passing by. None of these thoughts or doubts, of course, were ever expressible let alone expressed. Neither were they repressible, let alone well.

As it turned out, it was, at the Country Club that Haddy acted out the unexpressible and acted on the irrepressible. And, it was at the Country Club where, shall we say, his life sliced in another direction.

Haddy's initiation to the wild side came as unreflectively to Haddy as his admission to The College and his career at law. At The Country Club's Annual Summer Outing, after a +1 round of golf (and his second Club Championship), Haddy enjoyed the tournament Banquet and the orchestra.

There was no shortage of lovely partners to fill his dance card and after a few flutes of Champagne one of the lovelies touched Haddy's hand and led him onto the parquet. Her perfume, Parisian; her coiffure, of the moment; her warmth, inviting; and, her invitation warmly, if only half consciously, received.

Haddy mistook intoxication by champagne with being intoxicated by a more primal instinct. Straying never fully materialized in his mind largely because it would take as much

exertion as competing at school or in the courtroom. Lust was a word never uttered by V. Hadley Baxendale let alone a thought he entertained. Lust was Plebeian; it consumed other people or so Haddy read. Lust was *verboden* because it was sweaty not because it was morally improper. Lust was not a member of the Country Club and could never be part of a woman named Marissa.

Before the Banquet, Haddy charmed the ladies in the dining room and their husbands on the golf course. After the Banquet, Haddy confused his roles at The Country Club. His performance on the dance floor did not transfer smoothly to the tee box or to the workplace. Before the Banquet, Haddy enjoyed an easy familiarity with the Country Club and its members. After the Banquet, he acquired an easy familiarity with a female member or two including an easy familiarity with the wives of a member or two. Before the Banquet, Haddy's life was of a whole. After it, his life began to fracture ever so slightly.

Haddy's law practice loped along as estate practices do. Client interviews, drafting, yearly document reviews, more drafting, tax law updates, more drafting, and, oh, regular billing along the way. The months passed, the clients accumulated, and each morning in the armchair beside his Stickley desk Haddy enjoyed his morning French Creme latté as he read over the death notices with conflicting emotions. "Oh, poor Wendell," he would mutter. "How unfortunate for his family. How fortunate for the Firm."

Haddy's golf game also loped along until he sensed a recurring irritation in his left hand in the beginning of his downswing. As minor as the irritation was, it was worrisome enough that Haddy sought a hand specialist specializing in sports related injuries. The specialist Haddy sought was also a member of the Country Club that Haddy knew his way around so well and the doc was also a member of the Club at which Haddy rested his penultimate rest.

The sports doc had seen Haddy's symptoms before. A bit of nerve damage close to the skin corrected with minor surgery at best or a simple skin graft at worst. The surgeon recommended that Haddy allow him to perform a new procedure grafting a small portion of skin from Haddy's chest to the affected area of his palm. The doc told Haddy that chest epithalamia matches nicely with the palm and healing, when the graft took, was quick. As the doc told Haddy, the surgery will go smoothly or as Nietzsche says "whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger." To Haddy's mind "stronger" could only mean a stronger downswing and a stronger

downswing could only mean twenty yards or more.

Prepping for surgery went well, although as the anesthesia took hold of Haddy's hand he was indelicate enough to murmur the name Marissa which, coincidence of coincidences, happened to be the same name as his surgeon's wife. The graft procedure went smoothly. Chest skin to palm, bandages to both, then rest.

Two days later, Haddy was released from the hospital. Rather, and for the record, he was released by the insurance carrier. Two weeks later, the final bandages were removed and Haddy's physical therapy began with Haddy softly squeezing a soft rubber ball before moving on to a more resistant Dunlop GrandPrix. Two months later, Haddy's hand had yet to open to its full extension. Instead, his left hand would curl as if to grasp a tennis ball in its palm.

The surgical procedure did not improve Haddy's downswing—it eliminated it. Golf was now a game of the past. Equanimous as always, Haddy reluctantly stored away his Calloway irons and metal woods and rummaged through the basement for his old Prince oversized racquet. He could grip the racquet fully in his right hand and toss the ball sufficiently accurately with his left.

Haddy preferred grass to clay but was proficient on both. Soon Haddy's name was regularly listed at the top of the tennis ladders. He was a strong contender in the men's brackets at the Country Club. Yet, Haddy enjoyed the more refined, and less strenuous, game of doubles—both men's and mixed. Haddy mixed well with his men's partners. He mixed better with his favorite mixed partner—Marissa.

Act II

Marissa. Nee Vega. Of the Lima Vegas. The Lima, Peru Vegas. Not the Lima, Ohio Vegas. Now Marissa Schneebaum. Of the Western Hills Schneebaums. Now the Mt. Lookout Schneebaums. That would be the Dr. Mort Schneebaums of Mt. Lookout, as the rest of the Schneebaums had stayed in Western Hills where they were perfectly content. Maybe even more than perfectly content now that sports-and-hand doc Dr. Mort had taken his *auslander* wife and her taste for clothes that couldn't be found at Dillard's to the far side of the moon where, as far as the Schneebaums were concerned, it would be best that she stayed. Although, to be fair, Mort was as much to blame for the estrangement as the suspiciously beautiful Marissa. Of whom it had been suggested by Jean Schneebaum to her cousin

Margie Vogelsang over highballs at the Western Hills Country Club after having kicked Margie's ass on the links that she – Marissa – whose Peruvian high school might as well have been in Kentucky even if it was a Sacred Heart school but everything was in Spanish – even the Latin – had had that, you know, special operation where they take out a couple of ribs so that you looked like, in Jean's opinion, Cruella DeVille in 101 Dalmatians which Margie had no trouble believing, suggesting in turn that those puffy lips was for sure that collagen stuff. But Mort had left the parish long before meeting Marissa, abandoning his easygoing brothers and their obstetrics and ophthalmology practices and their boisterous wives forever, taking his breathtaking skill with the mid-irons to Wake Forest. Did Margie know that was a Baptist college? Margie hadn't known that it was Baptist, but she certainly knew it was non-Catholic.

And then U.C. medical school wasn't good enough for him. No, Mort had to go someplace fancy. Yale or Harvard (it was in fact Johns Hopkins) with a residency in New York City where he met someone who not only hadn't been to Mercy or Seton or even St. Ursula but was from a Foreign Country and kept a maid. A maid! Who even knew they made maids anymore?

Actually Marissa had a succession of maids, moody Incans who inevitably found life in Mt. Lookout unbearable, causing them to succumb to mysterious ailments that could not be cured by any of Dr. Mort's colleagues, requiring Dr. Mort to send them back to Lima for replacement, causing inevitable strain in the domestic fabric of the rambling childless Stanley Avenue Tudor. Marissa found it disagreeable to spend so much time breaking in the new girls who, in most cases, were baffled by North American appliances and terrified by Mrs. Silvers, the bad-tempered cook whose roasted chicken brought such joy into the life of Dr. Mort.

Who, sadly, needed any little scrap of joy he could find. For what, he asked himself on those late nights when he sat in his plaid-papered den in front of the muted gigantic plasma screen which never left ESPN, for what had he left Western Hills? What was he thinking?

But, two nights after Haddy's passing, Dr. Mort was not pining for Western Hills, he was waiting for Detective Arthur Crompton.

Not a name he knew. Not that he knew many names on the force anymore. His high school classmates had mostly retired, making it ever more difficult to take care of the speeding

tickets Marissa picked up weekly in the Porsche Carrera that was supposed to have been his and in which she also picked up Haddy Baxendale from whose pocket had fallen a tennis ball to which had adhered an unmistakable chest hair. The ball had lodged between the seat and the sill on the passenger side where Dr. Mort's hand had encountered it scrabbling for a grip as Marissa took the corner from Madison to Herschel at just under the speed of light, a maneuver that temporarily drained the blood from his head. When his vision returned he found himself with the tennis ball – an unfamiliar brand – in his lap. And his trained sports-surgeon eye had recognized the anomalous chest hair immediately. There was a moment of electricity in the Porsche as he looked from the tennis ball to his wife's spectacular profile and remembered Haddy Baxendale's mention of her name in pre-op, and as he recalled that mention he saw Marissa's long, elegant hand reach for the tennis ball and flip it up and out of the sunroof.

“So dirty,” she murmured in that smoky voice that had knocked the knees out from under him the first time he heard it in Studio 54. She had turned to him and smiled enigmatically, forcing Dr. Mort to scream at her to watch where she was going just in time to keep them from T-boning one of the last Buicks in the Republican zip code.

He had expected a call sooner or later. It was inevitable that the M.E. would get into Haddy's history and find record of the hand surgery. You didn't need to be a transplant specialist or even a semiologist to find a hairy palm noteworthy.

The sports-doc-hand-surgeon's eyes swept along the eighteen golf trophies that marched across the long limestone mantel. Not for the first time he wondered why he kept them. No one else ever came in here. Marissa found them mysterious. She earned her own trophies at a great rate on the Club's tennis courts, but she pitched them as soon as she got home. “What are they for?” she had asked her husband. “You can't put flowers in them. And the little people – they look like little Nazis.” Dr. Mort had, at one time, found such sweeping statements fascinating, part of the attraction she held for him. Now he just found them confusing.

“Haddy,” he thought to himself. “Why him?” Baxendale was such a dud. Slightly thick of both body and mind, years removed from the promising Harvard student, his trust fund widely known to be a shadow of its former self. What was the attraction? How far had

it gone? Had the obvious convexity of Hadley Baxendale's slackening midriff slipped into the taut concavity of Marissa's bowstring tight thorax? For that had she had those ribs removed?

Dr. Mort's agony was interrupted by the deep gong of the door chime. He pulled himself from the massive leather armchair that had been his fiftieth birthday present to himself – Marissa hadn't even mentioned the occasion – tucked his shirt into his trousers and answered the door himself. The Incan maid and Marissa had long since withdrawn to Marissa's rooms.

He peered through little diamond pane of pebbled amber glass to be sure he was not answering the ring of a home invader and mentally reviewed the location of the household Glock. Just in case. He could make nothing of the tall shape on the other side of the door, but there was the reassuring taillight of a Ford Crown Victoria, not, he thought, the automotive choice of home invaders. He pulled the door open.

"Dr. Schneebaum?" The voice was deep and dark, and the name was pronounced correctly.

"Are you...?"

"Arthur Crompton, Cincinnati Homicide.

Arthur Crompton had been on the job long enough to know the effect of his 270 pound weight, six feet five inch height, and Ghanaian heritage on the average middle class person of interest, and he was more than clever enough to use it to his advantage. He also knew the advantage of an evening visit. Even physicians, accustomed as they were to the lordship of their medical realms, felt a little less sure of themselves coming face to face with what was usually the first detective to cross their threshold. He allowed a moment for Dr. Schneebaum to take in his size and ancestry. The physician didn't exactly quiver, but Crompton saw that his composition had taken a hit. "May I come in?"

"Sure," the physician said, and he pushed the storm door open. Crompton grabbed the handle and pulled the door all the way back. He didn't like to have to sidle.

"This is about...?"

"Hadley Baxendale."

"Oh. Yes. Of course."

"Nice place," Crompton smiled at the doctor as he moved just over the line into the

man's personal space. Was the man sweating? The top of his head gleamed under the light hanging in the vestibule.

"What ...?" Dr. Mort didn't know whether he should try to take charge of the situation. It was, after all, his house. But he was no idiot. He recognized that Detective Crompton had the advantage. "Would you..."

"Why don't we sit down?" the detective led the way into the vast dark reach of the Schneebaum's un-lived-in living room. "You operated on Mr. Baxendale," he said, settling himself into the huge moss colored club chair that always made Dr. Mort feel like a ten year old. It fit the detective correctly.

"Yes. A minor procedure."

"I hear it messed up his downswing." When the detective laughed, the little prisms on the table lamp to his left started to vibrate.

"You did?" Who the hell had this guy been talking to?

"So, just what do you do in that club?" the detective asked.

"Which?.. Oh!... Where he..."

"That one. I always wondered."

"We... We read papers."

Detective Crompton stared at Dr. Mort and waited.

"To each other. We read papers."

"Newspapers?"

"News...? Oh! No. They're ... they're original papers. We write them."

"So it's not one of those places you hang out in."

Arthur Crompton knew perfectly well what went on there. His brother in law was a member. But you had to have a little fun.

"No... It's ... it's"

"Mortie?" Marissa's voice came floating down the stairs. "Mortie, is someone here?"

Arthur Crompton thought it might have been the second or third sexiest voice he had ever heard. He was extremely loyal to his wife Maxine, but he had keen and discriminating hearing. Thanks to Maxine, he also had a discriminating eye for women's clothing, so he knew that the ten yards of silk on the slim owner of the rich alto voice would properly be

called a peignoir – not something you saw a lot of outside of the movies – and that it had probably set Dr.Schneebaum or somebody a week or so of detective rank salary. He stood.

“He’s a policeman, honey,”

“My husband is so rude,” Mrs. Schneebaum said with a little pout. And then she took the two steps down into the living room in such a way that the peignoir billowed out like spindrift. Arthur Crompton felt a little light headed. “I am Marissa Schneebaum” she said, sliding a slim hand into the detective’s warm grip.

Act III

As a child, Crompton had sat beside the cooking fires on the beach at night, listening to his grandparents’ tales of witches and enchantresses. Unless he turned away and stopped his ears, she would possess him, and all his education, training, and experience would sink like the shrouded sun on a far away cloudy sea. The devil’s dogs were barking as they bounded across the sand to snatch him away forever. Then his hand went cold as she turned away and said something in Spanish.

An overweight pug dog pranced into the room, followed by a shapeless woman with long black hair tied in a huge pigtail. Crompton looked at the doctor, who had positioned himself in front of the table beside his chair.

“Don’t be so rude, Mortie,” Marissa said. “Lonnie wants his treat.”

The pug yapped, the trembling maid held her breath, and the surgeon stood as rigid as if Circe had turned him into stone. A man who moved effortlessly across nitrogen green links and whose fingers forged skin grafts securer than love was as helpless as the detective.

Another incomprehensible burst of Spanish, and the Incan woman stepped around the detective and the doctor and picked up a silver bowl of caramel corn from the doctor’s table. She tossed a piece to the dog. Its stomach was so big that when it tried to jump, only its front paws left the floor. Lonnie stopped barking and licked the caramel corn. The Incan placed the dish in Dr. Schneebaum’s frozen fingers.

“He can drop one into Lonnie’s mouth from across the room,” Marissa said. “Sometimes he just sits in his chair and practices for hours. Now why have you come to see us?”

Arthur Crompton was staring at the mantel, where a row of gleaming golf trophies attested to the physician’s skill with club and scalpel.

“I’m talking with everyone who was at the Club Monday evening,” he said. “It’s standard procedure for every unusual death.”

“Haddy’s death was unusual?” she said, turning to her husband. “I thought he had a heart attack.”

“I just said that’s the most common cause of a sudden death,” Mort said. The Incan woman scooped up the dog and left the room.

“How did he die?” Marissa said to the detective.

“I thought you were supposed to be questioning me,” Dr. Schneebaum said.

“I was going to ask you about Mr. Baxendale’s surgery. I understand that it’s unusual for the scars to still be so prominent more than a year post op.”

“I don’t know who’s been telling you that,” the surgeon said.

“Just tell me how he died,” Marissa said.

Now Arthur Crompton was not Dirty Harry; he did not act as prosecutor, judge, jury, and executioner. He meticulously collected evidence, reported his findings to his superiors, then presented the case to the prosecutor and the grand jury. His career, his very life, was dedicated to finding and speaking the truth. But if he answered her question truthfully, he would condemn a man who might be innocent.

“Tell me!” she cried.

“He was asphyxiated by a piece of caramel corn,” Crompton replied.

“Aspirated a piece of caramel corn?” the doctor laughed. “You’ll never get any DNA from that.”

“I don’t need DNA,” Arthur Crompton said.

Neither did Marissa Schneebaum.

“Will I see you Monday at the Club?” Crompton asked.

For the detective, proof to a moral certainty was more important than proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

“I hope so,” said the physician.

When Arthur Crompton entered the Club Monday evening, the reception room was packed. Members not seen in months or years were present, many with their personal attorneys as guests. For all of them but one, it was the ultimate literary experience to be present in the last act of an Agatha Christie play, when the master detective gathers all the country house guests in the library to provoke a startled confession from the murderer. Like spectators at a crime scene, the membership parted before him as the people parted before gods and kings in the old stories.

Although Crompton had interviewed most of the members, only the President, a tall, well-meaning man with a Club bowtie and nervous smile, spoke to him.

“Well?” he said.

“The bartender wouldn’t let me pay for my drink,” Crompton said, gesturing with his Perrier to the Steward.

“On the house,” the President explained.

“The department makes us pay,” Crompton said.

“It’s a tradition,” the President said.

For Arthur Crompton, “tradition” was a word with many meanings.

“Ask them to sit where they sat last week,” he said, still looking for the guest of honor.

“And the ones who weren’t here last week?” the President asked.

“In the extra chairs at the back, just as they always do when the reading room is full.”

“And then?”

“The paper,” said Arthur Crompton, still scanning the crowd.

Several of the lawyers huddled when the President announced Crompton's request, but the members complied, separating into familiar groups or taking their remembered places. Only the large Chippendale at the top of the stairs, called "the Secretary's chair" after Roland Workman's long tenure, was vacant. Crompton heard several men murmur "Poor Haddy," as they passed his next to last resting place. Then the detective joined the President on the stage.

"There's something wrong, gentlemen," he said.

The lawyers broke their huddle and advanced in a middle-aged phalanx to the top of the stairs.

"One member is missing, but all the seats in the reading room are taken," the detective continued. "Please be sure you are in your correct place."

"Was I here last week?" one ancient asked.

Answering his own question, he rose and pulled himself up the stairs by the rail and through the lawyers just as Morton Schneebaum, M.D. entered.

"We've been expecting you," Arthur Crompton said, watching the physician take the one empty chair behind the round table nearest the steps.

"And now?" the President said, far enough away from the microphone to avoid provoking an outrage among the attorneys.

"First, I believe a moment of silence for Mr. Baxendale would be appropriate."

The detective held Morton Schneebaum's eye through the longest minute of the physician's life. The President turned to the detective again.

"Now, I believe, you ask members to introduce their guests, state the title of next week's paper, and introduce the speaker."

"Yes, of course, that would be the thing to do," the President agreed, and the Club reverted to normal.

Arthur Crompton sat in the front row, listening closely to a dissertation on a rare aphid that was destroying strawberries in Ceylon but whose secretions held great promise as an antipsychotic. When the speaker had

finished and the polite applause had worn itself out, he leaned over to the President.

“Now ask them to pretend that it is last week again and leave in exactly the same order as they did then.”

“But what about supper?” the President asked.

“We’ll get to that in a minute.”

The President went to the podium and repeated the detective’s request. Surprised by the inconvenience, the members arose, grumbled, and started back up the stairs into the reception room. Mort Schneebaum was in the center of the pack, when another member took his arm.

“We stayed late for the medicinal bourbon, Mort. Don’t you remember?”

Mort remembered all too well and kept moving.

“Then you got that bottle of Laphroaig from the bar, and we closed the place down. Just like the old days.”

Dr. Schneebaum turned and looked at the detective.

“Yes. I remember. And Haddy was still just sitting there, snoring.”

“Thank you,” Arthur Crompton said to the President. Like a sorcerer in the old stories, he saw the doctor, several drinks too many after a brutal day at the hospital, recoil as he climbed the stairs. Oblivious to the torment he had inflicted on the doctor, Haddy was snoring happily, head back in his chair, mouth wide-open. Just one piece of caramel corn from the silver bowl, a look around to be sure the Steward was in the kitchen and the reception room was clear, and he snapped the golden morsel into his rival’s open mouth.

“You may call them back,” the detective said to the President.

The President returned to the microphone, and the members, like a slowly revolving herd of cats, reversed direction and took their places again. Arthur Crompton stepped onto the stage.

“Gentlemen, I am satisfied,” the detective said.

“Just what the hell do you mean ‘satisfied?’” called one of the lawyers from the back. An estate planner, he was anxious to demonstrate his

aggressiveness and acuity before so many of poor Haddy's former clients.

"I know the cause of death to a legal certainty, and the motive, the means and the perpetrator to a moral certainty."

"Stop playing word games," the lawyer cried, emboldened by two of the best drinks he had consumed in years. "What's the difference between a legal and a moral certainty?"

"The difference between conviction and damnation, between a criminal prosecution and the despair of unrequited guilt."

"That could be the subject for a paper," the President said.

"I would like to put in an application," Crompton said. "I never knew a place like this existed."

The entire Club including the lawyers was silent.

"What are you reading now?" the President said, going on automatic pilot.

"Strassler's edition of *Thucydides* and Amy Hempel's *Collected Stories*," the detective replied.

"Do you have a writing sample?"

"Most of my written work is confidential, but I am working on a compilation of Ghanaian folklore that I could share."

"Well, gentlemen, there you have it," the President said.

So for the first time in its history, the Club elected a member by acclamation, and the homicide detective joined the long list of bishops, rabbis, ministers, lawyers, doctors, entrepreneurs and occasional murderers on the roster. Dr. Schneebaum, however, left without supper and did not return the next week. No one except Arthur Crompton noticed; surgeons often missed meetings.

Morton Schneebaum, however, ran into an unexpected complication. Cutting across the Interstate for the Kenwood exit with her terrified husband beside her, Marissa misjudged the distance of a tractor-trailer ahead. A deft turn of the wheel saved her from going under the truck, but poor Mortie was

lost, along with a difficult to replace windshield.

Once again the members rose in pious silence to mark a fellow's passing. Aside from a citation for following too close, Mrs. Schneebaum did not attract any legal notice for the accident, except for being a silent witness to Arthur Crompton's theory of moral retribution. Other members, however, may have drawn similar conclusions. One man shut himself up in his condo, only opening the door to Meals on Wheels; another was institutionalized after he started weeping uncontrollably, unable to say anything except, "Poor Dorothy;" a third moved to Sedona, Arizona, searching for some ancient rite to purify the soul. Arthur Crompton commiserated with his new friends about their lost brothers, but never shared his conclusion: the perfect murder consumes the perpetrator as well as the victim.

Curtain

All of the roles were played by the actual persons except for the three uniformed police officers who were played by Joseph Tomain, Albert Pyle, and Frederick McGavran.