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About five hours later, Kimmel was awakened in his house by Lieutenant Lawrence Corby, made to dress and come to the 7th Precinct Headquarters in Newark.

In his haste to dress, Kimmel had not put on any underwear. The wool of his suit scratched the delicate skin of his buttocks, and he felt half naked. The police station was an ugly, square building with two outside flights of steps going up to the main entrance, steps that made the word *perron* spring to Kimmel's mind, and Vienna's Belvedere Palace, which had such steps – though the nineteenth-century hideousness of the building's architecture made such an association ludicrous – and as he climbed the steps Kimmel was repeating the word in his mind, '*Perron, perron, perron,*' in a terrified way, like a kind of personal and protective incantation against what might befall him in the building. The basement room where Corby took him was lined with small hexagonal white tiles, like a huge bathroom. Kimmel stood under a light. The glare of the light on the tiles made his eyes sting. There was nothing in the room but a table.

'Do you think Stackhouse is guilty?' Corby asked.

Kimmel shrugged.

‘What do you *think*? Everybody’s got an opinion about Stackhouse.’

‘My dear Lieutenant Corby,’ Kimmel said grandly, ‘you’re so convinced that everybody’s fascinated by murder and can’t rest until the murderer is brought to justice – by *you*! Who cares whether Stackhouse is guilty or not?’

Corby sat down on the edge of the wooden table and swung his leg back and forth. ‘What else did Stackhouse say?’

‘That’s all.’

‘What else did he say?’ In the empty room Corby’s voice grated like a metal file.

‘That’s all,’ Kimmel repeated with dignity. His plump hands twisted and twitched, touching fingertips lightly together below the bulge of his belly.

‘It took Stackhouse nearly twenty minutes to apologize, then?’

‘We were interrupted several times. He just stood in the back of my shop by my desk and chatted with me.’

‘Chatted. He said, “I’m so sorry, Mr Kimmel, to have caused you all this trouble.” And what did you say? “Oh, that’s quite all right, Mr Stackhouse. No hard feelings.” Did you offer him a cigar?’

‘I told him,’ Kimmel said, ‘that I did not think either of us had anything to worry about, but that he had better not come to see me again, because you would attach a meaning to it.’

Corby laughed.

Kimmel held his head higher. He stared at the wall, unmoving except for his twisting, lightly playing hands. He was standing on one leg, the other was gracefully relaxed, and his body was somewhat turned from Corby. Kimmel realized it was the same statuesque position in which he sometimes surveyed himself, naked, in the long mirror on his bathroom door. He had assumed it without thinking, and though in a secret part of his brain it made him feel shame, he felt it gave him a certain indestructible poise. Kimmel held the pose as if he were paralysed.

‘Guilty or not, I suppose you know that Stackhouse pointed the finger at you, don’t you, Kimmel?’

‘That is so obvious, I don’t think it needs mentioning,’ Kimmel answered.

Corby kept swinging his leg over the edge of the table. The brown wooden table suggested a primitive, filthy operating table. Kimmel wondered if Corby was going to fling him on to it finally with a ju-jitsu hold on him.

‘Did Stackhouse explain why he had the newspaper clipping?’ Corby asked.

‘No.’

‘Didn’t make a complete confession, then, did he?’

‘He had nothing to confess. He said he was sorry he had brought the police down on my head.’

‘Stackhouse has a lot to confess,’ Corby retorted. ‘For an innocent man his actions are very peculiar. Didn’t he tell you why he followed his wife’s bus that night?’

‘No,’ Kimmel replied in the same indifferent tone.

‘Maybe you can tell me why.’

Kimmel pressed his lips together. His lips were trembling. He was simply bored with Corby’s questioning. Stackhouse was being hammered at, too, Kimmel supposed. For a moment, a defiant sympathy for Stackhouse rose in him, tangled with his loathing of Corby. He believed what Stackhouse had told him. He did not think Stackhouse was guilty. ‘If you so doubt my report of what Stackhouse said to me, you should have sent a spy into the shop to listen!’

‘Oh, we know you’re an expert at spotting police detectives. You’d have warned Stackhouse and he would have stopped talking. We’ll get it out of both of you finally.’ Corby smiled and came towards Kimmel. He looked fresh and fit. He was working on a nightshift now, he had told Kimmel. ‘You’re protecting Stackhouse, aren’t you, Kimmel? You like murderers, don’t you?’

‘I didn’t think you thought he was a murderer.’

‘Since finding the clipping, I do. I told you that as soon as I’d found it!’

‘I think you think there is still ample room for doubt about Stackhouse, but that you will not *let* yourself be fair with Stackhouse because you have decided to break a spectacular case!’ Kimmel shouted, louder than Corby. ‘Even if you invent the crimes yourself!’

‘Oh-h, Kimmel,’ Corby drawled. ‘I didn’t invent the corpse of your wife, did I?’

‘You invent my participation in it!’

‘Did you ever see Stackhouse before I brought him to your shop?’ Corby asked. ‘Did you?’

‘No.’

‘I thought he might even have come to see you,’ Corby said speculatively. ‘He’s that type.’

Kimmel wondered if Stackhouse had been stupid enough to tell Corby that he had come. ‘No,’ Kimmel said, a little less positively. Kimmel took off his glasses, blew on them, reached for his handkerchief and not finding it, scoured the lenses on his cuff.

‘I can imagine Stackhouse coming to see you, looking you over – maybe even expressing his sympathy for you. He might have looked you over to see if you really looked like a killer – which you do, of course.’

Kimmel put his glasses back on and recomposed his face. But fear had begun to grow in him like a tiny fire. It made him shift on his feet, made him want to run. Kimmel had felt until Corby came that he had enjoyed a supernatural immunity, and now Corby himself seemed possessed of supernatural powers, like a Nemesis. Corby was not fair. His methods were not those commonly associated with justice, and yet he enjoyed the immunity that official, uniformed justice gave him.

‘Had your glasses repaired?’ Corby asked. Corby walked

towards him like a little strutting rooster, his fists on his hips holding back his open overcoat. He stopped close in front of Kimmel. 'Kimmel, I'm going to break you. Tony already thinks you killed Helen. Do you know that?'

Kimmel did not move. He felt physically afraid of Corby and it angered him, because physically Corby was a wraith. Kimmel was afraid in the closed room with him, with no help within call, afraid of being hurled to the hard tile floor that looked like the floor of an abattoir. He could imagine the vilest tortures in this room. He imagined that the police hosed the blood down from the walls after they worked a man over here. Kimmel suddenly had to go to the toilet.

'Tony's working on our side now,' Corby said close in his face. 'He's remembering things, like your saying to him just a few days before you killed Helen that there were ways of getting rid of the wrong wife.'

Kimmel did remember that – sitting with Tony in a booth at the Oyster House, drinking beer. Tony had been there with some of his adolescent friends and had sat himself down in the booth uninvited. Kimmel had actually talked so boldly because he had been annoyed at Tony's sprawling himself down before he had been asked to sit down. 'What else does Tony remember?' Kimmel asked.

'He remembers that he tried to come by your house after the movie that evening and you weren't home. You didn't get home until long after midnight that night, Kimmel. What if you had to say where you were?'

Kimmel gave a laugh. 'It's absurd! I *know* that Tony did not try to come to see me. It's absurd to try to reconstruct the dullest, quietest evening in the world more than three months later when everybody's forgotten it!'

'The dullest, quietest evening in the world.' Corby lighted a cigarette. Then his hand flashed out suddenly, and Kimmel felt a sharp sting on his left cheek.

Kimmel wanted to take off his glasses before it was too late, but he did not move. The sting in his cheek continued, burning, humiliating.

‘Getting hit is the only thing you understand, isn’t it, Kimmel? Words and facts never bother you, because you’re insane. You refuse to attach a meaning to them. You live in your own private world, and the only way to break into it is by hitting you!’ Corby’s hands came up again.

Kimmel dodged, but Corby had not struck him, was only removing the glasses that Kimmel felt suddenly yanked from his ears. The room jumped and became blurred, and Kimmel tried to focus the black smudge of Corby’s figure moving towards the horizontal blur of the table. Quickly Kimmel put his spread hand before his face, saw it, and whipped it behind him, clasped with the other.

Corby came back.

‘Why don’t you admit that you know Stackhouse is guilty? Why don’t you admit that he told you enough to make sure of it? You can’t make me believe that you love Stackhouse so much that you’re going to protect him, Kimmel.’

‘We are both innocent men in very much the same position,’ Kimmel said in a monotonous voice, ‘as Stackhouse pointed out. That’s why he came to see me.’

Corby hit him in the stomach. It doubled Kimmel over, like the blow in his house. Kimmel waited for the hurling into the air, the crash to the floor. It didn’t come. Kimmel stayed bent over, recovering his breath little by little. He saw black spots on the floor, more came as he watched, and then he realized that his nose was dripping blood. He had to open his mouth to breathe, and then he tasted it, a terrifying salty orange taste. Corby was walking around him and Kimmel turned with him, keeping his black figure always in front of him. Kimmel suddenly grabbed his nose and blew it violently, flinging his wet

hand out to one side of him. 'You should have blood on this floor!' Kimmel shouted. 'You should make the walls run with it! Men you have tortured!'

Corby seized Kimmel by the shoulders and pushed his knee into his belly.

Kimmel was down on hands and knees, gasping for breath again, with a deeper pain than before.

'Admit that you know Stackhouse is guilty!'

Kimmel simply ignored it. His mind was entirely occupied with feeling sorry for himself. Even the recovery of his breath was an involuntary process, a series of painful, soblike gasps. Then Corby kicked him or pushed him in the hip, and Kimmel fell suddenly to the floor. He lay on one hip, his head raised.

'Get up, you old bitch,' Corby said.

Kimmel didn't want to get up, but Corby kicked him in the buttocks. Kimmel got on to his knees and slowly hauled himself erect, his head up, though he had never felt weaker or more passive. The closer Corby strutted around him, the flabbier he felt himself, as if Corby hypnotized him. He ached, he stung in a dozen places. Kimmel was aware that he felt intensely feminine, more intensely than when he spied upon his own sensuous curves in the bathroom mirror, or when he read books sometimes and for his own diversion, imagined, and he was aware that it gave him pleasure of a kind he had not felt in years. He waited for the next blow, which he anticipated would strike his ear.

As if Corby understood him, he struck the side of Kimmel's head.

Kimmel screamed suddenly, releasing in one shrill blast a frantic shame that had been warring with his pleasure. He heard Corby's laugh.

'Kimmel, you're blushing!' Corby said. 'Shall we change the subject? Shall we talk about Helen? About the time she threw out your *Encyclopaedia Britannica* out of sheer malice? I heard you paid

fifty-five dollars for that set secondhand, and at a time when you really couldn't afford it.'

Kimmel heard Corby bouncing on his heels, triumphantly, though Kimmel was still too ashamed to look at him. He made a tremendous effort to think who could have told Corby about the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, because it had happened way back in Philadelphia.

'I've also heard about the time Helen was manicuring her friends' fingernails for pin money. You must have loved that – women coming in and out of the house all day, sitting around gabbing. That's when you decided you could never educate Helen up to your level.'

But the manicuring had lasted only a month, Kimmel thought. He had stopped it. Kimmel looked off to one side, though he was still wary of a darting attack from Corby. Kimmel felt goose-pimples under his trousers, as if he was naked and a cool wind was blowing on him.

'But even before that,' Corby went on, 'you'd reached the point where you couldn't touch her. She was loathsome to you, and gradually the loathing transferred itself to other women, too. You told yourself you hated women because they were stupid, and the stupidest of all was Helen. That was strange for you, Kimmel, who'd been so passionate in your youth! Did you begin to get it all out of pornographic books?'

'You disgust me!' Kimmel said.

'What could disgust you?' Corby came closer. 'You married Helen when you were twenty, too young really to know anything about women, but you were very religious in those days, and you thought you ought to be married before you enjoyed their— You must have a name for it, Kimmel!'

'It fits you!' Kimmel spluttered. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

'Do you want your glasses?'

Kimmel took them and put them on. The room and Corby's thin face came into focus again. Corby's lips were sneering under the little moustache.

'Anyway, it was a sad day for Helen when she married you. Little could she know – a simple girl out of the Philadelphia slums. She made you impotent, you thought. That wasn't so bad, because you could blame it on Helen and enjoy hating her.'

'I didn't hate her,' Kimmel protested. 'She was actually feeble-minded. I had nothing to do with her.'

'She wasn't feeble-minded,' Corby said. 'Well, to continue this, a woman you had a big fiasco with came and told Helen about it and Helen began to taunt you.'

'She did not! There was no woman!'

'Yes, there was. Her name was Laura. I've talked to Laura. She told me all about it. She doesn't like you. She says you gave her the creeps.'

Kimmel stiffened with shame, seeing it again as Corby told it, the furtive afternoon in Laura's apartment when her husband was at work – he'd always told himself it was the furtiveness that had caused everything that day, but, whatever had caused it, he had never had the courage to try again after that – seeing Laura climbing the stairs of his own house the next day to tell Helen. Kimmel had not seen her climbing the stairs, but he always imagined it very clearly, because Laura limped in one foot and had to pull herself up by banisters. Kimmel could see the two women laughing at him, then covering their mouths like idiot children, ashamed of what they had said. Helen had told him about Laura's visit that very night, and Helen had still then been giggling about it, peering at him. Helen had murdered herself that very night with her insane jeering!

'You thought after that that everybody knew about you,' Corby said, 'so you moved to Newark. The last straw was here in Newark – that insurance salesman Ed Kinnaird.'

Kimmel twitched. 'Who told you that?'

'That's a secret,' Corby said. 'It's too bad you didn't kill him instead of Helen, Kimmel, you might have got off. That lout! And Helen picked him up on the sidewalk like a prostitute – at the age of thirty-nine, a sagging old woman having a last fling. To you it was repellent! And she was proud of him, boasting all over the neighbourhood about what he could do. You couldn't stand that, not when you were carrying on scholarly correspondence with college professors all over the country. By that time you'd built up quite a reputation in Newark as a book dealer who knew his business.'

'Who told you about Kinnaird?' Kimmel asked. 'Nathan?'

'I don't reveal my sources,' Corby said smiling.

Nathan had been at the house the night before, Kimmel thought, the night Helen and Kinnaird had come in, yet he didn't believe Nathan would tell, not about that night, anyway. Lena could have told him about Kinnaird, or Greta Kane – any of the lowest people in the neighbourhood Helen had used to babble to! But what bothered Kimmel most was that with all Corby's investigations in the neighbourhood, no one had come and informed him.

'It wasn't Nathan,' Corby said, shaking his head, 'but Nathan did tell me about the night you and he were playing pinochle and Helen came in with Ed Kinnaird to change her clothes before she went out somewhere dancing. Kinnaird walked in as unconcerned as you please. Nathan knew what was going on. And you might as well have been a fat eunuch sitting there!'

Kimmel staggered forward, grappling for Corby with both arms. Kimmel's stomach heaved, his feet left the floor, and something smashed against his shoulder blades. For an instant his face was pressed against his belly. His legs were propped against the wall. *Every bone in my body is broken!* Kimmel thought. He did not even try to move, though the pain in his spine was excruciating.

'You told her to get out of the house – right in front of Nathan. It wasn't the first time, but you meant it this time. Ed got out and she stayed, wailing it all to Lena over the phone.'

Kimmel felt a kick in his legs. His feet hit the floor and began to sting. Nathan who never talked, Kimmel thought. That was why Nathan had not come to see him for so long. Kimmel knew from the Newark police that Nathan had never even said: 'He *might* have done it' when he was questioned. But maybe the Newark police had never gone into that story of the night before. Nathan had betrayed him – the high-school history teacher whom Kimmel had considered a gentleman and a scholar! A bitter disappointment in Nathan, like a private inner hell, filled Kimmel's mind, balancing the outer hell of the room. He had lost his glasses again.

'Lena told Helen to go to her sister's in Albany for a while. A very unlucky move. Really, Kimmel, with all the people who knew about your fracas that night, you've got off amazingly well till now, haven't you?'

Kimmel was beyond speaking. He lay in a heap. The black spot not far from his eyes was his shoe, he thought. He reached for it and his hand pressed against something cool, but whether it was floor or wall, he didn't know.

'You didn't kill Helen because she was going with Kinnaird so much as because she was stupid. Kinnaird was only the match that touched it all off. So you followed your wife in the bus that night and killed her. Admit it, Kimmel!'

Kimmel's tongue was limp in his mouth. In a sense, he had even closed his ears to Corby's voice. He cringed on the floor like a dog, painfully aware that he was like a dog, yet enduring it because he knew there was no alternative. No alternative to Corby's rasping, screaming voice. Corby's hands yanking him up by the shoulders with their terrifying strength and propping him against the wall, cracking his head against the wall. Kimmel couldn't see anything. It was dimmer than before.

‘Look at yourself! Pig!’ Corby shouted. ‘Admit that you know Stackhouse is guilty! Admit that you know you are here because of Stackhouse and that he’s as guilty as you are!’

Kimmel felt his first passionate thrust of resentment against Stackhouse, but he would not have betrayed it to Corby for anything because Corby wanted him to. ‘My glasses,’ Kimmel said in a squeaky voice that didn’t sound like his own. He felt them pushed into his hand, felt the nosepiece crack even as he took them. Half of one lens was gone. He put them on. They fell to one side, below his eye level, and he had to hold them up to see anything.

‘That’s all for today,’ Corby said.

Kimmel did not move, and Corby repeated it. Kimmel did not know which way the door was, and he was afraid to look, afraid even to turn his head. Then he felt Corby yank him by one arm and shove him in the back. Kimmel nearly tripped over his big dragging feet. Something bounced on the floor. It was his shoe that Corby had thrown after him. Kimmel started to put it on, had to sit down on the floor to get it on. The floor felt icy beneath him. Kimmel got himself up the stairs to the ground level of the building. Corby had disappeared. He was alone. There was a policeman reading a newspaper at a desk in the hall, who did not even look at him as he passed. Kimmel had a ghostly feeling, as if he might be dead and invisible.

Kimmel went down the steps clinging to the banister and thinking of Laura doing it. He held to the end of the banister, trying to think where he was. He started off, then turned again and went in the other direction, still holding up his glasses so he could see. It was morning now, though the sun had not risen. When he felt the cold wind on him, he realized that he had wet his trousers. Then his teeth began to chatter, and he did not know if it was cold or fear.

As soon as he reached home, Kimmel dialled Tony’s home

number. It was Tony's father who answered, and Kimmel had to pass the time of day with him before he put the telephone down to call Tony. Tony senior sounded just as usual, Kimmel thought.

'Hello, Mr Kimmel,' Tony's voice said.

'Hello, Tony. Can you come over to my house please? Now?'

There was a startled silence. 'Sure, Mr Kimmel. Your *house*?'

'Yes.'

'Sure, Mr Kimmel. Uh – I didn't have breakfast yet.'

'Have your breakfast.' Kimmel put the telephone down, and went with as much dignity as he could in his damp trousers upstairs to his bedroom, removed the trousers and hung them to dry before taking them to the cleaners.

He washed his shoes carefully in the bathroom, put his socks to soak in the basin, and drew himself a hot bath. He bathed slowly and exactly in the manner in which he always bathed. Yet he felt he was being watched, and he did no more than glance at himself in the long mirror when he stepped out of the tub, and it was a furtive, disapproving glance. In his bedroom, he took a clean white shirt from the stack in his drawer, put it on and put his robe on over it. His fingers caressed the starched white collar absently and appreciatively. He loved white shirts more than almost any tangible object in the world.

What proof could Tony give them? he asked himself suddenly. What if Tony did turn against him? That would prove nothing.

The doorbell rang as he went downstairs to put on coffee. Kimmel let him in. Tony came softly, a little reluctantly. Kimmel could see the apprehension in his black eyes. Like a small dog afraid of a whipping, Kimmel thought.

'I stepped on them,' Kimmel said in anticipation of Tony's question about his glasses. 'Will you come into the kitchen?'

They went into the kitchen. Kimmel motioned Tony to a straight chair and set about making coffee, which was difficult because he had to hold his glasses.

'I hear you talked to Corby again,' Kimmel said. 'Now what did you tell him?'

'The same old thing.'

'What else?' Kimmel asked, looking at him.

Tony cracked his knuckles. 'He asked me if I'd seen you after the show. I said no – at first. I really didn't see you, you know, Mr Kimmel.'

'What if you didn't? You weren't looking for me, were you, Tony?'

Tony hesitated.

Kimmel waited. A stupid witness! Why had he chosen a stupid witness? If he had only kept looking that night, looked around in the theatre, he might even have found Nathan! 'Don't you remember? You never said you were looking for me. We spoke to each other the next day.' Kimmel felt repelled by the shiny black hairs that grew over Tony's thick nose, connecting his eyebrows. He was hardly a cut above a juvenile delinquent in appearance, Kimmel thought.

'Yes, I remember,' Tony said. 'But I might have forgotten.'

'And who told you *that*? Corby?'

'No. Well, yes, he did.' Tony put on his earnest, frowning expression that was no more intelligent than his normal one.

'Told you you might have forgotten. Said I could have been miles away killing Helen by nine-thirty or ten, didn't he? Who is *he* to tell you what to think?' Kimmel roared with indignation.

Tony looked startled. 'He only said it was possible, Mr Kimmel.'

'Possible be damned! Anything is possible! Isn't it?'

'Yes,' Tony agreed.

Kimmel could see that Tony was staring at the pink blotch on his right jaw, where Corby had hit him. 'Who is this man to come here and make trouble for you and me and the whole community?'

Tony hitched himself to the edge of his chair. He looked as if he were really trying to think just who Corby was. 'He talked to the doctor, too. He said—'

'What doctor?'

'Mrs Kimmel's doctor.'

Kimmel gasped. He knew: Dr Phelan. He might have known Helen would have gone to have a talk with Dr Phelan. He had cured her of arthritic pains in her back. Helen thought he was a miracle man. Kimmel even thought he could remember the time when Helen must have been going to him, about a month before she died, when she was wrestling with herself as to whether to give up Ed Kinnaird or defy her husband and indulge herself in that last fling. Dr Phelan would have told her to indulge herself, of course. But Helen would have told Dr Phelan about his own efforts to stop her. 'What did the doctor say?' Kimmel asked.

'Corby didn't tell me that,' Tony said.

Kimmel frowned at Tony. All he saw in Tony's face was fear and doubt now. And when a primitive mind like Tony's began to doubt – Tony *couldn't* doubt, Kimmel thought. Doubt demanded a mind capable of entertaining two possibilities at once.

'Corby did say – the doctor told him about Ed Kinnaird. Something like that. A fellow—'

Everybody knew, Kimmel thought. Corby had circulated like a newspaper.

Tony stood up, sidling from his chair. He looked afraid of Kimmel. 'Mr Kimmel, I don't think – I don't think I should be seeing you so much any more. You can understand, Mr Kimmel,' he went on faster, 'I don't want to get myself in no more trouble over this. You understand, don't you? No hard feelin's, Mr Kimmel.' Tony wavered, as if he were about to extend a hand, but was far too frightened to extend a hand. He sidled a few steps towards the door. 'It's okay with me, Mr Kimmel, whatever you say. Do, I mean.'

Kimmel roused himself from his trance of astonishment. 'Tony—' He stepped towards him, but he saw Tony retreat and he stopped. 'Tony, you are in this – to the extent that you are a witness. You saw me *in* the theatre. That's all I've ever asked you to say, isn't it?'

'Yes,' Tony said.

'That's the truth, too, isn't it?'

'Yes. But don't be angry, Mr Kimmel, if I don't – don't have so many beers with you any more. I'm scared.' He nodded. He looked scared. 'I'm scared, Mr Kimmel.' Then he turned and trotted down the hall and out the front door.

Kimmel stood still for a minute, feeling weak, physically weak and lightheaded. He began to walk up and down his kitchen. A concentration of curses rattled steadily through his mind, curses mild and foul in Polish and in German but mostly in English, curses directed at no one and nothing, then at Corby, then at Stackhouse, then at Dr Phelan and Tony, but he checked the curses at Tony. He lumbered round and round his kitchen, chin sunk in the fat collar of flesh that flowed into his rounded chest.

'Stackhouse!' Kimmel shouted. It echoed in the room like pieces of glass falling around him.