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## Anonymity

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WINNER  
JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR FICTION

**Anonymity**  
by Paul Michel

Why would one little man build such a big house? Everyone wonders: Emily the schoolteacher, who drives by each morning and watches the rising sun blink blood red in the wide bay windows. Her students, who can see the third-story turret from the knoll above the soccer field. Rick the grocer, who sells bait to the tourists fishing salmon in the steel-gray bay. (They ask, pointing, if somebody famous lives up there.) Ronny the mailman, who must putt-putt an extra half-mile in his tiny truck, on the smooth road that now winds up the hill to the shiny silver mailbox. Everyone wants to know.

At the end of the road stands a gate of twisted iron, from which a gravel driveway runs another half-mile to the mansion itself. Ronny sits at the gate, his motor running, thumbing through stacks of bills and catalogs, circulars addressed to "occupant," and a few small boxes at Christmastime: "To: M. Meyers, Esq." There is never a postcard to read on the sly. The man is simply a mystery.

He isn't mean, or at least he doesn't seem so. He'll say hi in the post office, nod affably in checkout lines. He'll toot and wave, one-fingered as Island custom dictates, from behind the wheel of his Mercedes. There is no telling his age. Reddish hair gone to gray, a wispy moustache set well above his mouth, heavy-lidded eyes. Soft clothes that fit well. He might be a weathered forty, a spry fifty, a well-pickled sixty. He speaks seldom. He licks his lips a lot.

Rumors abound.

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"He's a writer. A recluse. Like what's-his-name."

"A widower. There was an accident. He got money in a settlement."

"He's in mourning."

"He's crazy."

"He's a genius."

"He's dying."

"He's hiding."

"He's waiting for his bride."

This isn't the city, mind you. Not that the city is far; only ninety minutes by boat and car, minus the wait at the ferry line. You can see the skyscrapers from the dock on a day without fog. In the city a man can disappear; melt into the shadows, attract no attention, achieve a certain anonymity. This is the Island, where everybody's business is everybody's business. Ask the recent arrivals, with their SUVs and Eddie Bauer jackets, who want *acreage*, *acreage* and are able to pay for it. Everyone is so *nice*, they tell their mainland friends. Then ask them a few years later: Everyone is so *nosy*, they complain. It's like a goddamned soap opera. There's no *privacy*. They're right.

So what has he built here? And why?

"It has eight bedrooms."

"The bathtub is deep enough to swim in."

"There's an indoor gym."

"A tennis court."

"A banquet hall in the basement."

"A room just for watching the stars."

Not all of this is pure conjecture. The house took two years to complete. Workmen from the mainland drank at the Islander Cafe. They left, but their stories remained.

"He watched over them like a hawk."

"He never showed his face."

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"They were following a model—some other mansion someplace. Down to the last nail."

"They made it up as they went."

"Everything had to be perfect."

"He didn't seem to care."

Sometimes he takes the ferry off-Island. He tells Ronny the mailman how long he'll be away. He doesn't say where he's going. In his absence, reckless boys climb the iron fence, or scale the sheer rocks from the sheltered cove on the property's water side.

"All the blinds are drawn."

"We couldn't see a thing."



Milton Meyers grew up fast. He was speaking full sentences on his first birthday. Reading by three. Long division at five. He studied calculus on his own the August before eighth grade. The following summer he wrote a history of the world on seventeen yellow legal tablets. He entered high school as a junior. At sixteen, he had a full scholarship to an Ivy League college. He was brilliant and quick-tongued. He amazed his professors, aced his exams and dated the daughters of several senators who told him—the senators, that is—that he was bound to go far. The daughters grew to hate him, one by one. Oh yes, he was clever, and yes he was quirky and yes he could be funny, in a wicked sort of way. But he was a hard boy to trust. He told lies, broke hearts and started many a little war. At twenty-one he went to law school at the same college, successful and essentially friendless. For a while he tried to be nicer to people. It didn't feel genuine, and it seldom worked. So he decided just to be smarter, instead.

He returned to the Northwest with two diplomas in Latin

can bet on it.”

Meyers always returns on the last ferry, just after midnight. The tourists are long gone by then, back to the mainland or snug in the B&B's that have sprung up on the Island's west side, facing the straits and the white-capped mountains beyond. The Mercedes' high beams split the darkness as he winds up the new road, trailing a lurid glow of tail lights that flash, low to the ground, then fade and shrink to vanishing pinpoints, and finally blink out of view.



He fell in love. He was a senior associate when it happened, with seven years of briefs behind him but no hint of true advancement, no talk of truly joining the firm. They gave him raises, and a bigger office, and a desk of polished black mahogany that stretched out before him like a moat. But they did not ask him to join them.

Her name was Martha. She was a new associate; not a raw neophyte but a “lateral hire” with three years' experience, lured away from a small, cross-town firm that couldn't afford to keep her. She too had attended law school back east; not Milton's alma mater, but a rival cluster of ivy-covered monoliths. This association gave them something in common from the start. He remembered the old slogans and fight songs; she had some new ones that made him laugh and lick his lips more quickly. He invited her to his office, and joked with her across the shiny black expanse. Then he took her to lunch, and lectured her across white linen tablecloths. There was much speculation in the office about whether, when and how he would seek to shrink this distance even further.

“You ever seen him like this?”

“Never.”

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"Turns out he's human after all."

"The jury's still out on that."

"Give the guy a break. He's head over heels."

"But what on earth does she *see* in him?"

"Love works in mysterious ways."

She was indeed brilliant. Her diplomas said *summa*, she had published in the journals, she had taken to the law like a fish to the sea. The partners gave Milton her drafts to review. He sometimes sent them back without a mark, so flawless were her arguments and their presentations. Her stint with the firm was a mere three months, after which she would return to school. Milton courted her feverishly. By the second month, there was no longer speculation about their intimacy. They arrived at the office together. They left it late at night. The partners smiled indulgently. Milton licked his lips more and more often.

The partners had assigned to Milton the W\_\_\_\_\_ case. It was certainly the biggest, not to mention the most difficult, matter that the firm had ever undertaken—a dispute over the estate of the legendary Max W\_\_\_\_\_ himself, builder of ships and the rail lines that served them from B.C. to Baja, father of a fortune so vast that his sons could not stand to share it. Each man, made in his father's image, demanded complete control. Each claimed ascendancy according to some doctrine or document or twist of law or language they held as dear as life itself, and their case had lurched and lingered in the courts since Milton's law school days. The firm represented the youngest son. He harbored what appeared to be both the weakest claim and the most ambition. Trial, at last, was approaching. A miracle was in order.

Milton worked around the clock. Martha worked with him. Case books piled up on the floor of his office, splayed open to this point or that precedent, each a potential new thread in a

web that the two of them wove while the city slept outside their high-rise windows. After the janitors had come and gone, after the clubs had closed and the streets had emptied, after the opposition in their neighboring high-rise offices had run out of energy and ideas and any sense of their ultimate vulnerability, Milton and Martha worked on. They created and disregarded theory after theory, papers flying, arms flailing, keyboards clacking as new arguments were crafted, dissected and demolished by their tireless, surgical intellects.

Often, when they were caught up in the throes of some new, delicious argument, persuasion would turn to passion in an eye-wink. Milton would mount Martha atop the desk, her gray skirt around her waist, her buttocks screeching against the slick mahogany, the tails of his monogrammed shirt flapping loose behind him as he drove home his point with grunts and shouts that echoed through the empty paneled halls. Afterwards, while he paced and pulled on his moustache, and she wiped the stains from the shiny black wood with her rumpled white underwear, they would discover that they had made progress. A new brick could be added to the impenetrable, cock-eyed wall of logic they were building between their client and the facts. Milton would lick his lips with vigor, and they would get back to work.



He has been gone four days, over a weekend in late October. He left early Thursday morning. Rick the grocer was at the ferry, meeting the delivery trucks for fresh bread and produce. Later he will remember that the little man sat in his Mercedes alone, drinking coffee from a porcelain mug; that he had his window open and the radio on, to a classical music station from the mainland. Rachmaninoff. When Island people spy on

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Milton, they notice everything.

Emily sees Milton in the ferry line too, when he returns on Sunday night. She has been visiting her mother in Tacoma, and has barely made the last boat home. Only a dozen cars sit in line at the slip. The outside air is damp and cold. Emily waits in her car, grading papers under the dim dome light. She recognizes the Mercedes, three cars ahead. Milton is in the driver's seat. She knows his small, oval head, the motion of his hand reaching for his moustache. There is another shape beside him, in the passenger seat. Their profiles, in silhouette, turn toward each other, then away. The head on the right leans back, as if in laughter. Emily smiles—it is a woman.



*"Did you see them upstairs on the crossing?"*

*"They must have stayed in the car. I went up for coffee. I always do. I get claustrophobic down on the deck, with all the fumes and..."*

*"You're sure you never saw them?"*

*"Not until I drove off behind them at the dock."*

*"Okay, Emily. Let's take a break."*



They won the W\_\_\_\_\_ case. Not at trial. There was never a need for a trial. Milton and Martha wrote a brief for a motion to dismiss all of their opponents' claims, and the novelty of their argument sliced through the other sons' positions like a scythe through straw. A settlement quickly followed. Young W\_\_\_\_\_ got his inheritance, and the firm got a contingency fee that dwarfed their last three years' revenue combined. Milton received a bonus check large enough to keep him in monogrammed shirts for life. He hardly gave it a thought. For

along with the check came an invitation to a dinner at the managing partner's mansion, on a hill overlooking the bay and the mountains out beyond the islands. Though the invitation didn't say so, word spread quickly through the office that this was to be more than a victory celebration. There was an announcement to be made. Milton licked his lips.



Emily keeps her distance, a half-dozen car lengths behind. What's gotten into her? Her way home lies south along the shore, not this way, the way she drives to school, past the road leading up to big house and its blood red windows. She thinks up excuses—she's going into class, to finish grading papers. She left something—didn't she?—in the teacher's lounge. Ridiculous. It's almost one o'clock in the morning. She was nearly too tired to drive to the ferry. But her eyes are open now, and her pulse is pounding, as she follows Meyers home.



The dinner party was small. Just the five partners. No wives. Milton. Martha. There had been a couple of cancellations: two other associates and a clerk who'd worked on the case but had not, at the last minute, been able to make it. Milton thought that a poor choice, on their parts. Who could say what other opportunities for advancement might be found at such an intimate gathering? Besides the obvious, of course. He bought a new suit for the occasion. He wondered if there would be pictures. He didn't want to forget a single detail.

The meal was catered. Superbly. The wines were provided by the host, whose cellar was legendary. Crystal glittered. Champagne bubbled. The room smelled of rich sauces, of ripe cheeses, of vintage Bordeaux, and, mostly, of victory. It wafted

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and swirled like incense, thickening the air. Milton could taste it. He licked his lips, sipped his wine and stroked the fine hairs of his moustache. Martha sat beside him. When he reached her hand under the table their eyes met, and he smiled. How wonderful, on top of everything, that she should be present to share the evening with him. Later, they would celebrate again. Alone.

They ate at a round table, beneath an enormous chandelier of real wax candles, their flames winking through cut glass orbs. There were candles on the table, too, and settings of delicate china. The cutlery was solid silver; the napkins silk. Around them in the shadows sat similar tables, their white cloths bare and ghostly in the darkness—a full banquet hall, right in the man's house, with a corner stage and room for dancing. This was the world that Milton had awaited; the life for which he had prepared himself. He had come far, indeed. He wished that all the chandeliers might glow, and all the tables be filled with well wishers. Ah well. This would come in time.



*"It was silly of me. I was nothing but a voyeur. He had a woman with him, and I guess I just wanted to get a better glimpse of her."*

*"Did you?"*

*"No. I never had the nerve to get close enough."*

*"What happened then?"*

*"Nothing, really. They just drove inland until they got to the new road, then they turned up to his place."*

*"Did you follow them?"*

*"Of course not."*

*"But you returned on Tuesday?"*

*"That was different. I often drive a little ways up the new road*

*on my way to school. Especially this time of year."*

*"Why is that?"*

*"It's October. That's the best time to hunt for mushrooms."*

*"You went back alone?"*

*"No. Rick and Ronny came too. We hunt together, every fall."*

*"Do you always go to the Meyers' property?"*

*"Not always. We have lots of places that we go. They change from year to year."*

*"You pick these mushrooms to eat?"*

*"Sometimes. Chanterelles, especially. But we gather all different kinds—agaricus, lactarius, boletus. Inky caps and fairy rings. I take them into class and try to teach the kids which ones they can eat, which ones to avoid..."*

*"You're something of an expert?"*

*"No. You can look them up in field guides. It usually isn't hard..."*

*"Yes. Well. Let's move on, then."*



A spoon rings on crystal. Talk falters, throats are cleared, hands are folded. A waiter moves quietly from guest to guest, for the glasses must be full.

"Ladies—I should say 'lady,' and gentlemen. Thank you for joining me tonight in my humble home for our little celebration. Of course we regret that Mr. W\_\_\_\_\_ himself could not be with us..."

"The founder of our feast!"

There is laughter and scattered applause.

"Well put. But Max had an urgent matter to attend to elsewhere, and..."

"In the Grand Caymans!"

More laughter. Another spoon striking glass.

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"In any event, we toast him in his absence. To his success, his good health, his victory and..."

"Our fees!"

Raucous laughter. The waiter makes his rounds.



The gate was open. They had not talked about driving so far, but the picking was good. Their muslin sacks bulged. In a separate bag, Emily had a special find: a dozen pure, smooth, white buttons all ready for a team of perched, grinning leprechauns. *Amanita Virosa*. The Destroying Angel. She would take special care with these when she addressed the class; allowing them to look but not to touch, imprinting the innocent, snowy shapes in their minds: Never, never, never...

They drove, they parked, they gathered, they drove again, up the two miles to the gravel drive. They were hoping, quite simply, to see the woman. Emily had told them about the car on the ferry. The men were desperate for details: Was she old? Was she pretty? Did they touch? Sit close? Emily laughed and shook her head. She'd barely had a glimpse, she insisted. Long hair, narrow shoulders, a female face in profile. Maybe he reached for her, once, as they bounced off the ramp onto the Island. Emily hadn't been close enough to be sure.

The iron gate stood open. They had never seen it open before. The gravel drive ahead of them. One after another, without a word, shushing and shaking like ten-year-olds, they slipped inside.



"But we are not here simply to celebrate. As most of you know, I had an ulterior motive in bringing this little group together. Tonight we salute something more than our luck, our

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skill or even our accomplishment. Tonight we toast our future.”

A smattering of applause. A pause for effect. The speech continues, long winded, pompous, self-important. Only Milton pays close attention.

“The firm needs new blood...change is what keeps us vital...our careers winding down, even as we reap the rewards of our decades of hard work...torches to pass...build on our good name...dedication...brilliance...perseverance...courage...the future...It gives me great pleasure...”

At last, Milton begins to rise, hunched forward, pushing off the linen with his fingertips. Tears blur his vision. There is a hollow pounding in his chest. He has prepared some words. He licks his lips as the speaker concludes:

“...a place in the firm...a warm and heart-felt welcome...one of us...hope she’ll accept...”

“Martha...”

“Martha...”

“Martha...”



Gravel crunches underfoot. Emily and the men whisper and giggle. They feel stupid, but they can’t help themselves. Mushrooms are forgotten; they pass splendid specimens under the trees without notice. The house draws nearer. Victorian, gabled, turreted, adorned. Out of place, on this island of stark, cedar simplicity. Grass grows tall on the sloping yard. There are no flowers, no hedges, no notion of lawn or garden. The structure sprouts from the rock like a toadstool. Were it picked up and moved, the landscape would barely blink goodbye. The sky is empty. The only sound is the whispering of the surf, far below.

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Milton left the firm. The parting was amicable. How could he stay? How could he ever again face the partners, or they face him, and not see a man half-risen at a round table, vainly awaiting the accolades of his peers, and a lovely woman beside him torn between joy and shame and pity? Pity. Yes, that was the crux of it. How could they not pity him, recalling how he'd sat and wept silently, tasting his own salt tears with every flip of his lizardly tongue? How could he face them and not recall how they'd faltered in the candlelight, downing glasses, checking watches, hurrying the unfortunate evening to a merciful close?

He set up his practice alone. The partners sent him business, for a while—hopeless cases and twisted dilemmas, matters more of craft and cunning than of presence or charm. He did well on his own. His fees were high, his hours long, his vices few. His reputation grew, not hugely, but enough to keep him in steady work. Years passed. Gradually, he severed ties with the firm. He wrote Martha only once, after a few weeks, only to say that he wouldn't be writing again. She didn't reply.



The Mercedes is parked outside the house. The door to the house is ajar. The curtains are drawn. A lone crow passes overhead, wheels in the wind and returns to settle in a hemlock high above them. Emily calls out—*hello*—in the chill air. There is no reply.



*"What did you see?"*

*"Not much at first. The rooms were very dark, with the blinds drawn and no lights."*

*"But you saw something?"*

*"Our eyes adjusted. It was just—you know, a house. Chairs. Coffee tables. A couch of some kind. Rooms off a hallway—we didn't go that way. A kitchen off the other direction. And a door open with stairs going down."*

*"Did anything seem unusual?"*

*"The place was huge. And nothing seemed very, you know, lived in. Like nobody ever sat in the chairs or walked on the rugs or put anything on the tables. I don't know what it reminded me of."*

*"Of a museum?"*

*"Yeah. That's it. A museum."*

*"Anything else?"*

*"There was an awful smell."*



More years passed. Two decades during which Milton prospered, and Martha advanced in the firm and made a name for herself as a bankruptcy lawyer. Milton read her name sometimes in the Bar News. He clipped the articles and pasted them in a scrapbook he kept in his office safe. He clipped and pasted too the notices he read, months and years apart, of the retirement of the partners, one through five, the oldest through the youngest, each described in the news with the left-handed praise lawyers use when discussing their own. The firm had prospered in their wake. There were fifteen partners now, including Martha. But the original five eventually passed the torch and retired to their beach houses, golf courses and mountain cabins to reap the rewards of their life-long practices. Milton read the stories carefully, smoothing the hairs of his graying moustache,

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snipping and gluing, locking the scrapbook away each night with his ledgers and coupons and petty cash and a Rand McNally atlas, its pages dog-eared, with marks in red.



A single bulb burns above the staircase. Ronny calls again, his voice ringing off the polished floors and furniture. Emily tries to joke; something about a bachelor pad. The men don't laugh. She swallows, and her throat seems full of sand. They push the door open wide and descend the stairs in single follow, Rick in the lead.



*"And then what did you see?"*

*Silence.*

*"Take your time."*



How many of the partners remembered the victory of the W\_\_\_\_\_ case? The turn of fortune it had represented? It's hard to say. So much had happened since, and old memories sometimes will fail. Certainly they did not dwell on it; did not allow it to stand between them and the world that remained within their shrinking grasps. A simpler world, day by day. If the phone rang, they hastened to pick it up. If the doorbell rang, they answered it.



*"Try to tell us, Emily."*

*"I don't want to."*

*"I understand. But remembering will help you to forget."*



A round table. Seven places set, in the middle of a large, shadowy room. Overhead a chandelier. (Electric bulbs. Nothing is perfect.) Five men sit strapped into chairs. Two are bloated, two are green; one is but bones in a Brooks Brothers' suit. A woman, slumped forward, her head oddly angled, her face frozen in protest. Milton sprawled on the floor, his chair pulled back. Flat champagne in the glasses. Food congealing on the plates. A centerpiece of smooth, snow-white mushrooms; plump, perfect buttons in a blue-green bowl.



What is that house up there? Why is it all boarded and overgrown? Its windows are broken; its paint peels in patches. It looks out of place.

"We really don't know." Rick shrugs from behind his smooth oak counter top.

Once out of earshot, the tourists shake their heads.

"He knows damn well," they agree.

A single crow passes overhead, wheels on the wind and circles back above the hill and its smooth, winding road. It flaps once, and flies like an arrow out over the steel-gray bay.

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