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An Amos Walker Mystery  
**LOREN D. ESTLEMAN**

# SUGAR TOWN



"A gem.  
I think Amos and McGee  
would understand each other."

John D. MacDonald

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LOREN D. ESTLEMAN

FAWCETT CREST • NEW YORK

*This one is for Carole.*

A Fawcett Crest Book  
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# 1

SHE WAS A VERY OLD WOMAN DRESSED ENTIRELY IN black, and when she fumbled open my inner office door the aluminum tubing of the walker she was leaning on gleamed like nickel steel against the black of her dress. I got up from behind the desk to hold the door open against the pressure of the pneumatic closer. She nodded her thanks with that jerky impatience that the very old share with the very young—the poised complacency of age is a myth—but she made no comment, concentrating on the involved business of setting the rubber feet down on the rug and toddling forward and then picking up the feet and setting them down again. Her breath came sibilantly through her nostrils, but apart from that and the way the cords on the side of her neck stood out like telephone cables under her skin, she showed nothing of the strain it took to cross that six feet to the chair on the client's side of the desk.

When she was sitting she closed her eyes and breathed. I walked around the desk and lowered myself into the swivel-squawker and waited while the quarter-size fever spots high on her cheeks faded into their ivory background and her narrow flat chest stopped galloping under the plain black material. I'm very good at wait-

ing, it's the first thing they ask you about when you put in for your investigator's ticket.

I had a nice day for it. It was May, I had the blinds up and the window raised, and three stories below, the cars gliding past on West Grand River caught the sun on their windshields and chrome and the sweetish smell of warm pavement took the bite out of the auto exhaust. Even the horns sounded content. The first decent day of spring will do that, even in a place like Detroit. Pigeons roosted on the window ledges of the apartment house across the way, looking like small animated gargoyles rehearsing for another remake of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Two hours earlier I had been fooling around with the thought of closing up and driving out into the country when the telephone rang and a Polish accent named Martha Evancek asked me if I was for hire. That's as close as I get, the thought.

"You didn't have to make the trip, Mrs. Evancek." I leaned on the second syllable and used a crisp *ch* on the last part, the way she had over the telephone. "I do house calls."

She shook her head. "Everyone tries to save me steps. I must have exercise."

Same voice, same accent. Her face was long and narrow under a black pillbox with a short black veil that hung like Spanish moss to the hump of her thick curved nose, but behind it you could see her heavy lids in the hollows of her eyesockets and below it the deep lines where her cheeks had fallen in. Her hair was very thick, very white, brushed back from her forehead and pinned at the nape of her neck. Fifty years ago it would have tumbled in rich dark waves to her shoulders and had the young Polish blades doing cartwheels to get their fingers in it. At first glance her face had a patrician look; at second glance it was just

old. The hands in her lap were blunt and red with skin flaking off the backs. The skin was well scrubbed but there was black dirt older than I was in the creases of her knuckles. There was a thick plain gold band on the third finger of her left hand and a startling red ruby in an antique setting on the corresponding finger of her right. It went with that hand like a silk dress in a steel washtub. There was much to learn about Martha Evancek.

"You are Mr. Amos Walker?" she asked.

I said I was. She said, "I picked your name out of the telephone directory. You are the only private investigator listed whose residence is in Hamtramck. That's why I chose you."

"Not precisely Hamtramck," I corrected. "But I'm so close it might as well be. The boundaries around Detroit are as vague as the mayor's morals."

She made a quick gesture with the hand wearing the ruby that made me feel stupid for even bringing up the subject. "I thought that since you live in a Polish community you might be sympathetic. Are you Polish, Mr. Walker?"

"I can be, if that's what you want."

That wasn't the answer she was looking for, but I watched her think it over and decide it didn't matter. Once someone has made an appointment to see an investigator and then kept it, he either goes ahead or gives up the idea entirely. He rarely shops around. It usually takes everything he has to make the trip the first time.

In her case it took more.

She watched me, the hollows in her cheeks working, sucking at her teeth. I'd glimpsed them when she spoke, white and even as aluminum siding and just as natural. She had sharp dark eyes under the heavy lids. Old

people almost always do. Anyone who equates great age with innocence has never looked into an old person's eyes.

"How old are you?" she asked finally.

"Coming up on thirty-four."

"That is very young."

"Not from this side, Mrs. Evancek."

"It is from this one." She might have smiled, tugging the pleating out of her lips briefly. "Your display advertisement in the telephone directory said you look for people who are lost."

I nodded. "I do other things, but most of my business comes from that." It being most of nothing for almost a month, which was why I was sitting there being watched by those sharp dark eyes instead of out picking marsh marigolds.

"I want to hire you to look for my grandson," she said.

I found a pencil and opened my notebook to a page without doodles. "How long has he been missing?"

"Nineteen years."

"I see. Would you mind if I smoked?"

"Cigarettes?"

"Yes."

"Could I have one?"

For no special reason, that rocked me harder than the part about the nineteen years. But I fished the pack out of my shirt pocket and shook out a couple and let her take one and slid the other into the permanent groove in the corner of my mouth and lit them both. She held hers between the second and third fingers of her left hand and filled her mouth with smoke and brought the cigarette away with her lips pressed tight and inhaled. Very little smoke curled back out.

"The doctor says I should not do this since the



stroke," she said. "I broke my ankle last year and he said I should not smoke then."

I smiled and slid the big glass ashtray between us and dropped some ash onto the picture of Grand Traverse Bay in the base. I had never been to Traverse City. The ashtray had come with the office and the rest of the furniture. She went on.

"I have been in this country only two years. My husband and I came over when the troubles started in Poland. That was his excuse, but I waited seventeen years to come over and learn what became of our little Michael."

"Your English is very good."

"Thank you. For six years I was maid to an American businessman and his family living in Cracaw. My husband was head chef in one of the largest restaurants there. But the dishes he made were not popular here and all he could get was a job waiting tables in St. Clair Shores, where we lived and where I am still living. It took something out of him. I scrubbed floors and dusted to help us live until this happened." She indicated the walker standing like a big chromium bug next to her chair. "Michael—my husband, our grandson was named for him—died last December. I had sold most of my grandmother's jewelry to pay our way to America, and I had to sell the rest to bury him. This is all that's left." The ruby caught the light as she waggled that finger.

"Your grandmother didn't get that scrubbing floors."

"She was related distantly to the old ruling family of Poland. When I was a little girl I would sneak into my mother's bedroom and put on the jewelry and pretend I was a princess. Funny little-girl dreams."

I gave up trying to picture her as a little girl and snicked some more ash into the tray. "Your grandson."



“Yes. The business of living, as you call it here, got in the way of our search, but we never forgot our reason for coming. The Hamtramck police were very polite and let us look at their records, but most of them were not there during the time we were interested in, and they could not afford to reopen a case so old.”

“Case?”

“I will come to that soon. Our son Joseph came here thirty-two years ago to go to work for the Chrysler Motors Corporation. His father and I stayed behind. No one from either side of our family had ever gone away from Poland. A year later Joseph married an American girl, Jeanine, and bought a house in Hamtramck. The house is still standing, though it is one of those to be torn down for the new plant General Motors wants to build there. They had two children, Michael and a daughter, Carla. I never saw them. Joseph was always going to visit us but he never found the time or the money and we could not afford the trip short of selling my grandmother’s jewelry, which at that time I did not want to do.”

I watched her take one last careful drag, her hand covering the lower half of her face, and squash the butt in the bay. The hand shook a little. I’d figured her for eighty when she came in but she could have been older. She kept on screwing the stub long after it was out.

“Nineteen years ago this month,” she said, “Joseph was let go from his job. He wrote that the Dodge plant was cutting back on personnel, but we found out later he was fired for coming to work drunk and sometimes not coming to work at all.

“For eight weeks he looked for another job, then gave up. On a hot day late in July he got into an argument with Jeanine over his refusal to look for work. He was drunk. The neighbors heard them shouting at each other. Then he went into another room and brought

back the shotgun he went deer hunting with in the winter. They heard that too.”

She abandoned the shredded butt finally and sat back, looking at me with her sharp dark eyes.

After a long moment I got rid of my own cigarette. It was starting to burn my fingers.

# 2

A YELLOW OBLONG OF SUNLIGHT DRAPED OVER ONE corner of the desk slid off and landed on the floor without a noise. The horns down in the street sounded less content now. I'd have bet the pigeons had flown off too. I turned to a fresh page in my notebook.

"Joseph killed his wife?"

"He didn't stop with her. The police said he used the shotgun on little Carla when she ran in after the first explosion. Then he turned it on himself."

The words came neatly, one on top of another like bills counted out by a banker who no longer thought of them as money. The whole story had the sound of something she'd told plenty of times.

"Michael?"

"He was attending summer school to make up for a failure in arithmetic. If he hadn't come home late he might have been killed too, the police said."

"He discovered the bodies?"

She closed her eyes and nodded. "It was not five minutes after the shooting. The neighbors were afraid to investigate after all the noise. When the police came they found him standing in the middle of all the blood and bodies. He was eleven years old."

"When were you notified?"

“Ten days later. The telephone service in Poland in those days was what you might expect it to be and the cable the authorities sent was delayed somewhere. In the meantime the police had pieced together the entire incident, and Joseph, Jeanine, and Carla were buried and the boy had gone to live with Jeanine’s sister and her husband in St. Clair Shores. Jeanine’s parents were dead. There was never any question afterwards about our living anywhere else when we came to this country. But at the time there seemed little that we could do. Michael and I argued about it bitterly. He wouldn’t let me part with Grandmother’s jewels. He said they were the things that kept us from being common peasants. You would have to know the class system in my country to understand such pride.”

“We have the same system,” I said. “We just call it by different names.”

“It wasn’t until the troubles came and there was not enough food available to keep the restaurant open that he gave in.” She talked right through me. “By that time Jeanine’s sister and her husband had moved away and taken little Michael with them. The police had given us their original address but they never answered our letters.”

“No forwarding?”

“It was too long ago. The post office stops forwarding mail after a year and destroys its records after two. We talked to the people who were living in their old house but they knew nothing of them. The house had had at least two owners since and we couldn’t find the people who sold it to those who are there now.”

“If a real estate firm handled the sale you could have traced them through the firm.”

“It was sold privately.” Her head started to shake. “I don’t think these people want to be found.”

“Could be. Time has a way of drifting in over your

tracks whether you ask it to or not." I tapped the pencil on the edge of the book. "What name did Jeanine's sister and her husband go by?"

"Norton. The Robert Nortons. Her name was Barbara."

I wrote it down. "Occupations?"

She shook her head, deliberately this time.

"Who investigated the shooting?"

"Sergeant William Mischewicz and Detective Howard Mayk of the Hamtramck police. Mischewicz was shot to death in a holdup a few months later. Mayk retired four years ago. He still lives in Hamtramck." She gave me the address and telephone number. "We talked to him. He remembered almost everything about the shooting but had no idea where the Nortons moved to."

"Were you satisfied with the official account of the shooting?"

She looked down at her hands in her lap, then nailed me again. Her whole head was trembling now. "I lived through the Nazi invasion. I know that people are capable of anything under certain circumstances. I did not see Joseph the last thirteen years of his life. I can't tell you what kind of man he was in those years."

Outside, the horns were getting nasty. I got up, closed the window, and sat back down. "Do you have a picture of your grandson?"

She had a black crushed-leather purse about the size of an after-dinner mint in her lap. From it she drew a two-by-three snapshot and held it out fluttering in her hand. I accepted it the way I had accepted hundreds of others: too-dark Polaroids with green skies and red spots in the eyes, studio shots with fake landscapes in the background and more touchup than photo, black-and-white poses against cars with big headlights and round fenders long since gone to the crushers, beach

pictures with big grins and funny hats and rolls of pale flesh around the middle, school shots with starched white blouses against blue canvas, grainy exposures taken through keyholes of naked white bodies, service photos with neck-high uniforms and visors square over the eyes, vacation shots with tanned faces squinting into the sun and fluted canyons behind, theatrical poses dramatically lit, motel room pictures burned out from the flash, telephotos snapped from across the street, blurred freeze-frames in sixteen millimeter, lightning-clear blowups in bureau-top size, First Communion pictures, bar mitzvah pictures, wedding pictures, clowning-around pictures, candid pictures—you don't really have film in that camera, do you?—pictures you dress up for and pictures you take your clothes off for. Pictures handed over eagerly, reluctantly, in hope and in terror, the act symbolic of breaking open the family circle to admit a stranger. I had handled enough pictures to fill a gallery of the lost. This one, dog-eared and finger-marked, showed a boy with his dark hair wet down and parted on one side, the way no boy anywhere combs it without adult help, with shiny dark eyes tilted slightly toward a large nose and that smile kids have before they learn to show their teeth. Clean plaid cotton shirt buttoned at the throat. The name of a school photo agency was stamped on the back. I memorized those features that counted and gave the picture back to her.

"He'll have changed too much," I explained. "If I showed that around, it would just throw people off. You'd have to be a pro and know what to look for. He'd be about thirty now?"

She looked at the picture for a moment before putting it away. "His birthday's in June. He turns thirty on the fifteenth." She sucked at her teeth a little. "Can you find him, Mr. Walker?"

"I have some tricks," I said, by way of evasion. "If

I do, my job stops after I've told you where he is. If he doesn't want to see you I can't make him."

"Why would he not want to see me?"

"I'm just mentioning it as a possibility. Half the time in these things they don't."

She thought about that. Then:

"I want to see him. But if I cannot I will be satisfied to know where he is and that he is all right."

"I charge two hundred fifty dollars per day, expenses extra. First three days in advance. I report daily and put it all in writing at the end." I considered. "One day in advance will be fine."

She was back inside her purse already. She hoisted out a flat packet and laid it on the desk between us. The bill on top was a crisp new hundred. "Here is a thousand dollars. That is four days."

I left it where it was. When you do see money in my business you usually see it in cash, but there had never been that much of it on that desk all at once. She must have read me, because she said, "I sold my husband's things. Also your public benefit programs here are very generous. I do not require much to live. If you have learned little in four days I can sell the ring."

I split the stack and held out the top five bills. "Two days will tell us whether you're wasting your money."

She hesitated, then took back the bills. There was something behind her face that had not come in with her.

I gave her a receipt and got her address and telephone number in St. Clair Shores and then helped her down three flights to the street. It only took a half hour. She was tougher than she looked. "We'll make it your place next time," I told her, when I had a cab coming our way. She'd taken the bus in. "You must have been all afternoon wrestling that contraption upstairs."

"When you have helped stack sandbags all around



your city with shells shrieking overhead, nothing you try to do later is too much." She gave the walker to the driver to fold and put in the front seat while I helped her into the rear. She was as light as pie crust. As I was getting set to close the door she looked up at me. "I feel I have made the right choice," she said.

I swung the door shut and stood back while the cab pulled out from the curb and burbled away. I hoped she was right. I had never stacked sandbags in my life.

Back in the office I dialed the number she had given me for Howard Mayk in Hamtramck. A man's voice, very deep, answered after two rings. Listening to it I saw a big man in a blue uniform with a double row of brass buttons down the front, swinging a stick in one hand and folding deep vertical lines in his cheeks when he smiled.

"Officer Mayk?"

A pause, then:

"That's Sergeant. My last ten years with the department, anyway. Now it's Mr. Mayk. Who's asking?"

"Amos Walker. I'm a Detroit P.I. working for Mrs. Martha Evancek, looking for her grandson Michael. I'd like to come over and talk for a few minutes if you're not too busy."

"I haven't been busy in four years. But I can't tell you anything about what happened to the boy because I don't know. I told her that enough times."

"I realize that. I thought if I knew something about the shoot I might get a better handle on the case."

"Yeah."

"Does that mean I can come over?"

"Yeah."

"I'll be there in forty minutes, then."

He said yeah again and I thanked him and he hung

up. This was going to be like pulling nails with my teeth.

Before leaving I broke out some duplicate driver's license application forms issued by the Michigan Secretary of State's office and filled out two of them, one asking for a copy of a driver's license for Michael Evancek, the other asking for one for Michael Norton, including lost Michael's date of birth on both. I stuck them in separate envelopes and addressed them to the Lansing headquarters of the SOS and stamped them and dropped them into a mailbox on my way to Hamtramck. If the stars were all in their places, one of the applications might jar loose a photocopy of the missing party's license containing his present address for a small fee, if he hadn't left the state or taken another name or if he had a license at all. It's a service provided for people who drop their wallets into the sewer while leaning down to pick up a quarter. It can save you steps, but only when you've got a month to spare for the turnaround. I had two days.