

MOM MEETS HER MAKER



A MYSTERY

by JAMES YAFFE



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James Yaffe



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Mom Meets Her Maker

To Elaine, again.
And why not? You're still the one who makes it all work.



PROLOGUE

Mom Praying





Dear God,

All right, You're probably surprised to see me here. I know I'm not the type that spends a lot of time in this place. The High Holidays, and occasionally on a Friday night, and that's about all You ever get from me. I realize there are women that come here whenever there's a minyan, and wail at You and sing-song at You, and I'm sure You appreciate them very much, but there's no possibility I'm ever going to be one of them. After seventy-five years, You don't teach a dog new tricks. Especially such foolish tricks.

Besides, I also know You don't hold it against me because I'm not one of those regular clients. Does God take attendance? Does God peek through the curtain and count how many seats are empty? If ticket sales were what You cared about, You'd go over to the Catholics, wouldn't You?

So if You're listening to me now—and why wouldn't You be? what else are You if not all ears?—You're understanding already that I wouldn't be here, sneaking into this place in the middle of a weekday when there's nobody else around, if it wasn't a matter of importance.

It's about this murder, naturally. All right, the murder is ancient history, it was all solved and wrapped up and put away in the closet a couple months ago, on Christmas day. And since

then everybody is telling my son Davie what a fine job he did and how smart he is, which I'm certainly not unhappy to hear. But what You know is that the whole truth and nothing but didn't come out yet. And You know that I know it too.

Which is why I'm here, talking to You now. Dear God, am I wrong to keep my mouth shut about this? Am I doing a terrible thing which forever into eternity You'll be angry at me for doing? I did it only because I thought it was for the best, I didn't mean to do something wrong. How could I lie to You about that? All these years You've been acquainted with me, how could I expect to fool You about my feelings and my motives and so on? But even so, maybe I was wrong and I should open my mouth and come out with the truth.

In other words, dear God, I'm full of doubts. I'll tell You the whole story—which naturally You know already, but I have to tell it anyway—and then I'm hoping You'll give me Your honest opinion . . .



Dave's Narrative





Wednesday, December 21

In a town like the one I live in, there's one thing you can always be sure about—when it's Christmas.

The reminders begin weeks, in fact months, ahead of time, and they quickly grow fruitful and multiply. Christmas music fills the airwaves just as the Halloween pumpkins are starting to turn rotten. Announcements for Christmas sales pop up in the stores before the last crumpled leaflets of Fall Clearance Sales have been swept away. The day after Thanksgiving, every cloth turkey, chocolate turkey, Kodachrome turkey, or any other form of turkey effigy has disappeared from every shop window, and been replaced by Santa Claus.

As I got back to my office after lunch that Wednesday afternoon, Christmas was still officially five days away, but there could hardly have been a local throat down which it hadn't already been thoroughly stuffed. I've made it clear by now, I hope, that it was putting me in a lousy mood.

My office is part of a suite that belongs to the public defender. Excuse me, "suite" is a euphemism. In fact, it's an outright lie. Ann Swenson, my boss, and her staff—her secretary-receptionist and her chief and only investigator, myself—are squeezed into three tiny rooms on the top floor of the courthouse, in the back. The district attorney and his

staff occupy most of the second floor, with air conditioning, desks you could stretch out and take a nap on, and magnificent views of our local mountains, including the world-famous peak that sticks its fist up above the rest, like some militant at a rally.

Our respective budgets are pretty much proportional to our office space. The public defender has one aging investigator, plodding along on his tired feet at all hours of the day and night; the district attorney has so many investigators that they're constantly tripping over one another. The district attorney's annual expenditure for coffee and doughnuts comes to pretty much the size of my whole salary.

I never got to my little cubicle to check my mail that morning. Ann's secretary, Mabel Gibson—a sweet little whitehaired lady who just became a grandmother, a role she had been rehearsing for all her life—leaned across her desk and gave me one of her loud whispers: “She’s in there with some people. She wants you.”

Mabel's eyes were gleaming. After all these years, she still finds excitement and romance in what we do. It's kind of touching, actually.

I knocked on Ann's door, and found her office full of people. That is, three people in addition to herself, but that's enough to make Ann's office look like a subway car in rush hour. There were no empty chairs, so I gently braced myself against a wall while Ann performed the introductions.

Closest to her desk were a couple who looked to be in their middle sixties—a tall broad-shouldered, heavy-featured man, with thick gray hair and immense bags under his eyes; a little woman, also gray-haired, who seemed to be half his height. Her eyes had no bags under them, but

somebody had smudged dark charcoal rings around them. Neither of these people, or so it seemed to me, had been doing much sleeping for awhile.

"Mr. and Mrs. Meyer," Ann said. "Abe and Sarah."

Abe nodded at me with a grunt.

Sarah gave a little sigh. "I know your mother," she said. "We met once or twice at Friday night services at the synagogue. She isn't there too often. She has such an active social life, doesn't she?"

I couldn't disagree with that. When Mom finally moved to Mesa Grande last spring—after I'd been trying for over a year to persuade her that it was no life for her alone in a New York apartment—I was a little worried she might find time hanging heavy on her hands. But just the opposite was turning out to be true. Within a month, she seemed to have half a dozen circles of friends, none of them overlapping with any of the others. To me, twenty years her junior, her social life would have been exhausting.

"And this is Roger," Ann said, "Mr. and Mrs. Meyer's son."

He was tall and dark-haired, with a thin earnest face, black horn-rimmed glasses, and slightly unruly hair, which seems to be a requirement of his generation. He couldn't have been more than twenty-one or twenty-two. Abe and Sarah might have been his grandparents; he must be the child of their old age. Given what their own names were, how had they resisted the temptation to call him Isaac?

He stood up and shook my hand, and then he asked me if I'd like to take his chair. "I don't feel much like sitting anyway," he said. "I'm sort of fidgety."

My God, a kid with manners! I thought they'd all been rounded up years ago and sent off to rudeness camps, behind barbed wire, to be trained for modern society.

I thanked him and took the chair.

"The Meyers are here," Ann said, "because this office will be handling Roger's case."

"We were going to get a lawyer," Abe Meyer said, in his deep, guttural voice. "We couldn't afford it, it could use up all our savings, but we were going to get one. Then we went to the rabbi at the synagogue—Rabbi Loewenstein, you know him?—and he told us we should go to the public defender. It's free. I said to him, if it's so cheap, there must be something wrong with it—"

"Abe, Abe!" said his wife, rolling up her eyes a little.

"That's all right, Mr. Meyer," Ann said. "It's a natural reaction. Everybody has it."

"Exactly," Meyer said, giving his wife a look. "So the rabbi answered me, this is one case where free means the highest quality, where you'll be getting something for nothing. He said you've got a good record, he could give me the names of plenty of satisfied customers."

"He also told us you've got a genuine New York policeman working for you." Meyer turned his gaze on me. "And this, I admit, made me feel better about the whole proposition. I'm from New York myself. Born in Brooklyn—Bensonhurst—and didn't leave till I was twenty, when my uncle gave me a job in Detroit, which is where I met Sarah and where Roger was born and also our older child Jennifer, and it's less than four years since we left there and moved here."

Obviously he could have gone on forever telling us his autobiography, with details, but Ann interrupted him. "Roger is facing a serious situation," she said to me. "You probably read about it in the paper this morning."

"I didn't get a chance to look at the paper this morning," I said, not explaining that it's because I'm always in bed half

an hour after my alarm goes off, so I'm always gulping my breakfast and rushing downtown to get to work on time. It's one of the penalties of having had a wife for twenty years and then being forced to live alone: you got used to an active personalized alarm clock who wouldn't take no for an answer, and now you have to adjust to the passive mechanical kind.

As this thought passed through my mind, I could almost hear Mom's voice in my ear. "So you know how to cure that problem, no? Do you think this town is populated only by people of the male sex?"

But maybe, before I go any further, I'd better explain about Mom and me, and what we're doing in this unlikely town, in the shadow of these improbable mountains.

* *

I was born and brought up in New York City—God's country, or anyway the place He had the most fun creating—and for thirty years, until I moved out here, I worked for the New York City Police Department, in the Homicide Squad. I even made inspector before I was forty, which as far as I know is still a record.

Then my wife died, and New York lost its charm for me; waking up to its dreariness every morning, I could hardly believe that it ever had any charm in the first place. So I came out here to Mesa Grande, this middle-sized paradise in the foothills of the Rockies, to become the chief investigator for the public defender's office.

My only real regret about making this move was my mother. I didn't like the idea of leaving her back in New York. I urged her to come with me, but she was absolutely firm about refusing the offer. She liked her little apartment, she had her friends, the supermarkets would be terrible where I was going, and anyway she couldn't really believe

that human beings actually lived and thrived west of the Hudson River.

It was a year or so before Mom changed her mind. I should have known all along, of course, that she'd change it. In the old days, back in New York, when Shirley and I came up to the Bronx for Friday night dinner, I always told Mom about my latest unsolved murder case, and between the chopped liver and the strudel she always managed to solve it for me. These exercises were among the greatest pleasures of her life, and she looked forward to them all week.

With my exodus from the city, her homicidal connection was cut. She became restless, dissatisfied, at loose ends. "It turns out I'm just like your Papa," she told me. "I took him once to the Catskills, for a vacation at this big resort. The food was delicious, the fresh air couldn't be healthier, but after the first day Papa spent all his time sitting on the porch, moving his fingers up and down, cutting imaginary pieces of cloth."

Then, last March, Mom came out to visit me, and experienced an amazing revelation. Out here in Mesa Grande, there were plenty of murders for me to investigate. "Isn't it wonderful!" Mom said. "People kill each other just as easy in the Southwest as they do in the Northeast! It gives you a nice feeling that human nature will never change!"

And so, she decided to settle here for good. Not such an easy decision for a woman in her seventies to make. After all, to put it in Mom's own words, "I've been a born New Yorker since I stepped off the boat at the age of seven."

For this reason, I always welcome interesting new cases that have unusual features in them. How else am I going to keep Mom from being bored?

And this brings me back to Roger Meyer's problem, which Ann was now describing to me.