

SISTER MORPHINE

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SISTER MORPHINE

*Women's Narratives from the Case Notes
of a Community Psychiatric Nurse*

CATHERINE
EISNER



CAMBRIDGE

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'Tell me, Sister Morphine, how long have I been lying here?
What am I doing in this place?'

—M. JAGGER/K. RICHARDS/M. FAITHFULL, 1968

'Certain authors, speaking of their works, say: 'My book', 'my commentary', 'my history', etc . . . They would do better to say: 'Our book', 'our commentary', 'our history', etc., because there is usually more of other people's property in them than their own.'

—BLAISE PASCAL

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	1
SOFT SKIN	5
MR & MRS CAMILLA REVISITED	26
YOU BETTER GO NOW	34
ONE MINUTE APART	49
CONFESSIONS OF A KISSEE	61
THE CHEATED EYE	91
COUSIN LUDWIG'S SUBTRACTION GAME	118
HONEYMOON WITHOUT MAPS	138
ELEGY FROM A LOCKED DRAWER	189
RED COFFEE	215
DISPOSSESSION	261
A STRANGER IN BLOOD	351
THOUGHT POLICE	414
THE ELEVEN SURVIVING WORKS OF L V. K	417
THE THREE-TIERED GRAVE	435
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	481

INTRODUCTION

YOU MAY RECOGNISE the lyric, 'Tell me, Sister Morphine, how long have I been lying here, what am I doing in this place?'; it's composed, of course, by Marianne Faithfull (with Mick Jagger) whom I knew some years ago when we were both very young.

From her words I have derived my title for this collection of women's narratives which I have refashioned as fictions to delineate the effects of drug administrations on clients observed in psychiatric nursing.

To assist comprehension I have planted clues by prefacing each narrative with a summary of the common side effects of a generic prescription drug so, as you can probably guess, if there is a moral buried in these cautionary tales no diagnostician could ever have predicted it.

Such narratives reflect the growing popularity of self-narrative approaches towards a collaborative analysis of self-characterisation in counselling and psychotherapy. Diaries, letters, notebooks (including experiments in automatic writing), personal documents, news clippings, telephone conversations, and recordings in a variety of media are all identified as sources for experiential self-narrative assignments in psychotherapy, and this collection, I trust, explores similar sources to demonstrate how these theoretical exercises can enhance self-understanding in practice.

SISTER MORPHINE

The themes of these fictions encompass:

Guilt,	Post-Adoption Trauma,
Incest,	Jealousy,
Infidelity,	Revenge,
Sibling Murder,	Illegitimacy,
Suicidality,	Morbid Self-Harm,
Betrayal,	Drug Addiction and Substance Abuse,
Child Abuse,	OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder),
Bereavement,	Grand Larceny, etc.

All of these cases are based on the experiences of a CPN (Community Psychiatric Nurse) in an outreach team with whom I have established a close personal bond.

As a CPN, she aims to establish therapeutic relationships among the mentally ill by implementing programmes of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) intervention developed in consultation with the responsible medical officer. She also has autonomous responsibility for her caseloads which means she is in an unusually privileged position and, hence, sometimes uniquely placed to facilitate clinically significant symptomatic improvements in her patients.

As an experienced Registered Mental Nurse with a B.Sc. in Health Studies (augmented by a Supplementary Prescribing Course) her psychobiopharmacological knowledge permits her, under a Clinical Management Plan, to prescribe and administer mood-changing psychoactive drugs in pharmacologic interventions.

As the stories reveal, her individual interview-screenings of her women patients and monitoring of contextual stresses has, in particular, enabled her to conduct a special study of the side effects from such drugs—whether from antidepressants, tranquilisers or mood stabilisers—and the more bizarre asocial behaviour made manifest by these multifaceted side effects provides the substance of my fictions.

I cannot emphasise too strongly that these case histories are, indeed, fictions based on fact, their literary interest residing in their unconscious subversion of the classical rules of drama where—

unlike the dramatic unities—causality, conflict, transition and crisis cannot be neatly resolved.

Certainly, the CPNs regards her encouragement of her patients to record their experiences in ‘creative sessions’ (either as writings in the first person, or third person, or as audio-taped sessions when patients agreed to this) as a subtle psychotherapeutic interventionist technique; a technique which has been shown to often ameliorate prevailing levels of depression and self-harm, and to promote more effective stress and anxiety management, encouraging more adaptive responses to mental health.

By demonstrating a non-judgemental openness, and by communicating a willingness to listen (she is a Law Society Registered Expert Witness, incidentally), the CPN who recounts these stories is privy to remarkable confidences which often illuminate the psychopathography of a patient.

That said, the mental health problems of the psychiatric profession are also not neglected in her narratives. It should be remembered that—in a curious case of the biter bit—even doctors are not immune to ‘white coat syndrome’ and, on a graver note, it remains a sombre fact that, according to the latest available research*, one in fifteen UK doctors succumb like many of their patients to some form of dependence on drugs.

Perhaps little known is the predicament of psychiatric professionals when they are themselves prescribed a psychotropic medication (e.g. an antidepressant) for a mental health problem. Certainly, such a circumstance is not a bar to a psychiatrist practising. Indeed, it can be a valuable experience and mental health trusts routinely recruit employees with personal experience of mental illness. A former President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, for example, discusses quite openly his own experience of mental illness, and how this has informed his practice.

So these fictions should not be regarded as indiscretions; nor should they be seen as representing substantially more than illustrative examples from case studies for stimulating self-reflection and further debate on treatment strategies.

* The British Medical Association

SISTER MORPHINE

Rather, 'Sister Morphine', if it has any clinical use, could be considered as a therapeutic process towards a better understanding of dysfunctional personalities whose hopelessness or helplessness or hostility is so often a mirror of our own.

Yet, despite these resemblances, I reaffirm faithfully that in no particular in the text do these fictions breach the presumption of confidentiality or of legal privilege of information given to me.

CATHERINE EISNER

All the events in these stories are wholly imaginary, even the chance similarity of name; and no reference is made to any actual person.

SOFT SKIN

(*Felícia F.* — ALPRAZOLAM)

A CASE OF GRAND LARCENY IN THE SECOND DEGREE

Assessment Summary (extract): A 29-year-old, single woman requested admission to the emergency room. She claimed to ‘hear voices’ and reported seeing ‘strange objects’ (‘robed figures afloat in the sky’). The patient sensed that souls of the dead were present in her body; not only was a ‘good entity’ in her body but also ‘bad ghosts’ within her, and her self-harm was due to her attempts to cut out the bad spirits with a knife. She reported auditory and visual hallucinations (‘I saw my mother walk out of that mirror’), claiming to hear her mother’s voice and to have a dialogue with her. She often appeared to talk agreeably with her mother. The patient had not had a job for many months and lived, without any apparent source of income, in a religious charitable institution. She also reported changing her handwriting frequently, and attributed this to the presence in her body of two persons, her mother and her father. It was impossible to correct the patient’s false beliefs, many of which she committed to paper, writing in various hands. After 14 days, the patient was discharged into post-hospital care in a mental health community center. From her writings a composite account of her recent psychiatric history has been attempted but, although a psychopathological etiology was suspected, no definitive diagnosis was made.

Acknowledgements (written consent was obtained from the patient for publication of this Case Report): International exchange programs for cross-training of psychiatric/mental health professionals can yield profound insights into new psychotherapeutic interventions developed to

SISTER MORPHINE

enhance pharmacotherapy and improve outcomes in common psychiatric disorders. Abstracts prepared under these programs can be used for educative purposes, to teach an important clinical lesson, or to describe a diagnostic or therapeutic dilemma. Recent attendance, in Philadelphia, at a pharmaceutical corporation's sponsored symposium, for the reading of an abstract on specialty nursing, prompted an encounter with a South American *enfermeira psiquiátrica*. This psychiatric nurse's own paper on the clinical use of opioids had referred, in a brief digression at one of convention's sessions, to the following case. The respondent's American orthography in this account remains unchanged.

C.E.

SOFT SKIN

A CASE OF GRAND LARCENY IN THE SECOND DEGREE

Patient ID EPo841060170: Felícia F.

Occupation: Bank cashier.

Drug: Alprazolam.

Drug class: Benzodiazepine anxiolytic.

Common side effects: Release of hostility, decreased inhibition, light-headedness and other paradoxical behavioral effects such as irritability and hallucinations may occur with benzodiazepines.

IN THE INTERVIEW room she read her statement.

‘Right,’ she said coolly, ‘I guess this is all true.’

She signed her full name. Felícia Epifania Ferreira.

‘Thank you, Leisha,’ fawned Mac, the chief cashier (in the bank they called her Leisha), and he squeezed her forearm with silken fingertips.

She arranged her lips into a perfunctory corporate smile, while thinking: *You creep me out, you jerk!* By a supreme act of will she suppressed a shudder of revulsion.

The older police officer nodded, and his partner opened the door which led into the bank’s main lobby. Immediately after the robbery the two patrolmen had commandeered the bank’s meeting room as a temporary operations center while they pursued their lines

of inquiry. The younger uniformed officer, who was merely moderately cute, flexed his shoulders and winked at her with a preening self-regard she ignored.

As she crossed the threshold, Leisha was conscious of Mac's yearning gaze fixed on her figure in half profile—she knew perfectly well that most men surrendered to her dark good looks and she traded on this advantage.

She flicked a glossy strand of hair from her eyes in a practiced gesture contrived to be subtly flirtish.

Mac watched her return to her teller's station.

Before the door closed she heard him say in a hollow, defeated voice:

'Jeez. It's a disaster, all the way around.'

Sickened, Leisha sat at her position and folded her hands tightly on the desktop to control their shaking.

Across the polished marble floor of the lobby, behind the brass teller cages, she saw the bank's auditor was glaring at her. He weighed two hundred and eighty pounds and he now presented the appearance of a man who had been recently boiled in a bag. After all, the bank's hard currency reserves had just been depleted by more than a quarter-million dollars.

Leisha shrugged inwardly and told herself firmly she had nothing to fear. To calm her mind she once more reviewed the circumstances of her case.

The starting point had been when?

In her innermost ear a warm consoling voice answered: *It wasn't your fault. A culpa não foi tua.* Since the beginning of the fall, the words of her mother had been echoing inside her head like a long-distance trunk call.

Yet, despite her mother's comforting presence in her thoughts, Leisha knew that what she had done, in the opinion of all who would afterwards judge her, was wrong . . . irretrievably wrong . . . *except*, perhaps, in the opinion of her neurotologist, who alone among her few confidants would guess the truth of her motives.

She pressed her fingers to her temples as a jagged blade of raw light, zigzagging across her field of vision, stabbed with precision and temporarily blinded her left eye. Her hands and feet had

SISTER MORPHINE

somewhat cooled, she noticed, signaling an onset of nausea. She prayed desperately, indiscriminately, for the pain to recede and shaded her eyes under her palm.

With further gentle pressure on her eyeballs, she was rewarded by the pain fading in a multicolored phosphene, on whose after-image the pinched white face of little Sonny Kaminski now dimly emerged.

At the memory of Sonny, the corners of Leisha's mouth trembled on the brink of a secret smile.

Yes, she thought, she must not forget little Sonny Kaminski because, after all was said and done and denounced, Sonny, too, had shared her confidences, though unlike the good doctor he no doubt could not be trusted to keep them.

Leisha caught her breath, dizzy at recalling the mainspring of her audacious enterprise.

Yes. Before the arrival of Sonny into her life she had only dreamed and schemed, but after their chance encounter she'd seen at once that he had presented her effectively with the equivalent of a *fully collateralized surety* (to borrow a term of fiscal usage from her own bank) which could mitigate her operational risks. All Leisha needed to do was seize the opportunity.

That, at least, was true. *Opportunity makes the thief. A ocasião faz o ladrão.*

She remembered all too clearly the circumstances of their first unexpected meeting . . . it was not an occasion she was likely to forget.

A SMALL MAN IS SLY

Felícia Epifania Ferreira lived on the fifth floor of Mrs Kaminski's apartment building.

Three weeks earlier, on a Sunday morning she had cause to recall, Leisha had been kneeling on her prie-dieu outside her bathroom, poised to hang an advent calendar. The date was November 30th.

A votive candle was burning in the little shrine she had erected to Saint Nicholas. In Portugal, she thought, her young cousins

would be counting the days to the Night of the Magi and the gifts they exchanged at Epiphany. (Her birthday was celebrated on January 6th.)

Each year, as the season of the Nativity approached, she struggled with a strange complication of emotions. Strong feelings of loneliness and homesickness threatened to overwhelm her. Hence, that morning, little by little, her prayers had turned to the Holy Mother, the refuge of sinners, for a blessing that would release her from the nine-to-five tyranny of a bank whose male-supremacist managerial ranks (she was convinced) conspired to grind her down.

Were her morning devotions answered? Certainly she felt her heart stumble as across the bathroom window fell a shadow. Behind the dimpled glass a hooded Blessed Virgin, immaculately white, seemed suspended, bowed in prayer, against the brightening sky.

She could scarcely summon the resolve to open the window . . . yet she did.

Framed by the open casement, Mrs Kaminski's only son bared his teeth and grinned at Leisha from beneath the cowl of a hooded ski jacket. Gripping a guardrail, he knelt precariously on the platform of a window-cleaning gantry he'd winched from the roof.

'You gotta be kinda crazy to ride this cage,' Sonny said flatly, in a poor attempt at nonchalance.

Yeah, kiddo, Leisha thought. *And let me tell you, you've got to be crazy to work in a teller's cage.*

She noticed there was no window-cleaning kit to explain his presence on the gantry. She could only assume his true intention had been to rob her. At her own eye-level, on the gantry platform, Sonny shuffled his stained high-top sneakers but he could not conceal a switchblade, and the shaft of a screwdriver sharpened to a spike.

'Come in, why don't you?' she said matter-of-factly. 'I can show you a way to make more cash than you have ever imagined.'

'This sure beats me all to hell. I thought you were in church today,' he muttered incautiously, not realizing that by these words he incriminated himself. He unclipped his safety harness and

clambered through the window. A strong easterly breeze brought a chill into the room and she noticed her wind-chimes had been silenced by icicles from the eaves.

Up to that moment no man had entered Leisha's studio apartment. Sonny saw her bedroom was very simple and neat, with a Colonial rocking-chair in one corner beside a small wooden bedstead. Above the bed a hologram of the Holy Family was adorned with a sprig of palm.

At close quarters eighteen-year-old Sonny Kaminski could be seen to exhibit all the telltale signs of his narcotic dependence . . . the hopped-up rapid speech, the unhealthy pallor of a flesh clammy with sweat, and the drooped eyelids half-shielding narrow pupils unresponsive to light. As he had reached through the window, Leisha had noted hardened needle tracks on Sonny's momentarily exposed inner left forearm, along veins infected with weeping rashes.

'How much do you need for your next hit?' Leisha asked briskly.

Sonny produced from the patch pocket of his cargo pants his last five-dollar bill.

'More than this green stuff.' He sniffed. 'Yes ma'am, that's for sure.'

'Well, stealing from me won't support your habit.' Her manner was not so forbidding as to deny him altogether the glimmer of a ray of hope.

'So okay, I boost and shoot,' he countered defiantly, 'but truth is I guess I never got busted till now.' He began to shiver and shut the window.

(The kid's gone cold turkey, thought Leisha heartlessly. She had never dabbled in street drugs herself but she recognized his panic. In the bank, not a few young clerks with the shakes claimed they suffered from yuppie flu.)

She laughed out loud.

'You're not busted, Sonny. I'm not the fuzz. This an easy score.'

She handed him a ten-dollar bill.

'See. More than a dime's-worth of dreams for start-offs.'

Sonny extended his other hand and she added a five.

'You gotta be kiddin' me,' he whined. 'This'll buy nothin' 'cept flea powder.'

From her bureau drawer Leisha withdrew a bankroll of crisp new notes. Sonny's hooded eyes widened. The scared look was no longer there; but those eyes were full of greed.

'Wow! What's the deal?'

'It's very simple. You're going to be my gopher, Sonny.'

She then told him the precise details of his participation in her scheme. Sonny whistled. 'Hey, that sounds neat!' The sum of cash she mentioned amounted to the street value of four thousand quarter-ounce bags of dope.

'Is it for real?' He inclined his head and riffled the stack of banknotes against his ear. That's when Leisha knew he was hooked on the bait. As she expected, he could not resist a proposition so 'way cool', 'totally wild', and 'off the wall' . . . to quote his own impetuous words.

For more than an hour Leisha coached him in his shopping errands, then Sonny departed the way he had entered. His small compact form was ideally suited to breaking and entering.

A small man is sly. Far off, in her deepermost memories, she heard a familiar voice counsel her as if she were a small child again. *Um homem pequeno é velhaco.*

Since Sonny's last scam, during Mrs Kaminski's vacation overseas, when he had collected the rents for all fifteen apartments in cash and failed to deposit them, his mother had warned her tenants to be leery of her son.

Leisha watched Sonny ascend in his cradle like a clumsy *deus ex machina*.

Follow that cloud, kid, she thought. *This is no joyride.* But she ruefully admitted she could have been referring to herself.

As she closed the window the candle blew out.

She returned and relit the flame at the shrine of Saint Nicholas, the patron saint of thieves.



Now, as she sat at her desk, an hour after the holdup, she marveled at the nerve with which she had outfaced her co-workers who had scrutinized her every move.

She busied herself by filing an interoffice memo entitled, *Armed Robbery Prevention Strategies*. She glanced at a sub-section which stated:

Unarmed 'soft-skin' operators, proportionate to armed security guards under special category instructions, should listen attentively to robbers, be calm, courteous, and patient, and treat the robber as you would a customer. *Do not resist*, but cooperate unhesitatingly with the robber, as this is the most reliable way to avoid injury. *Don't try to be a hero*. Take no action that would jeopardize your safety or the safety of others. Activate alarms *only* if you can safely do so without detection.

Well. As a vulnerable 'soft-skin target' she had acted accordingly. She hadn't resisted. On the contrary! Despite Sonny's tendency towards torpor when rehearsing the stick-up, he had come through on his promises to simulate a menacing rage. However, his true enthusiasm had been reserved for fashioning a 'funky' disguise.

When Sonny had entered the bank lobby precisely at 4 p.m., closing time, he was carrying a gray, nylon, carry-on flight bag from which he pulled a silver semi-automatic handgun. He was wearing black motorcycle-type gloves with red stripes running down the fingers. (They reminded Leisha of the burned out veins along Sonny's pitted forearm.)

He was also wearing a beige hooded sweatshirt, a black baseball cap, camouflaged battle-dress-uniform pants, aviator sunglasses, and a black and yellow bandanna over his lower face.

('I wanna bandanna,' Sonny had entreated her, when he had received his last briefing for the heist. He had acted like a sulky spoilt child who feared he might be denied a treat.)

The senior police officer had demanded a description of the robber but all Leisha could say she remembered of the incident were 'three eyes'.

SISTER MORPHINE

She had rehearsed her statement and knew exactly what she intended to say. *Three eyes. I swear. That's all I saw. Two eyes leveled at me and the eye of the gun!*

She swallowed hard at the thought of the supreme trust she had invested in Sonny . . . those two eyes and that unwinking eye of the gun.

The descriptions of the unknown masked man given by the clerks at the neighboring desks had not been any more conclusive: 'a hideous little guy with creepy eyes' and 'a spaced out drug-nut waving a pistol looking like a mad scientist.'

Leisha recalled Sonny's sallow face, slick with sweat, and rapid tongue darting to wet his cracked lips. His repetitive demoniacal screaming of 'Gimme all your money! *Right now!*' had achieved its desired effect. Leisha had promptly obeyed.

The subsequent bank audit showed that, during the two minutes in which the bank's lobby had been threatened at gunpoint, Leisha had handed over to Sonny one hundred and forty packs of twenty-dollar bills wrapped in violet color straps. Sonny had then swung his fully laden travel bag over his shoulder and escaped into the anonymous afternoon.

And to what destination was this 'hideous', 'spaced out' traveler bound?

Unless she was much mistaken, at this very same moment a stolen four-door white Dodge Neon, license plates unknown, was speeding some fifty miles south on the state highway in the general direction of their would-be rendezvous . . . with Sonny at the wheel, floating weightless, eyelids propped open with amphetamine uppers.

Out of sight, out of mind, she thought. *Longe da vista, longe do coração.*

But my own lonely masquerade is little more than half over and the last act has yet to play.



She must strive to appear composed and *occupied*, she commanded herself, until the bank's closure and her release at 5.15 p.m.

Already the two uniformed cops were removing the yellow police tape which cordoned off the crime scene.

She glanced at her watch. 5.05 p.m.

Leisha straightened a sign above her desk: *Fight Fraud.*

She could not refrain from smiling. There was little she did not know about the varieties of defalcation possible in the practice of personal banking, since she had considered and rejected most of them over her long and systematic search for a deception that would confound her masters.

Leisha was well versed in the most frequent bank swindles and other so-called improprieties; from *salami-ing* (by shaving off fractional cents from thousands of periodic interest payments and crediting them to a single untraceable account), to fraudulent check *kiting* by drawing against insufficient funds.

Nope. She wanted no part in these activities since they were subject to the most vigilant monitoring. For her, a successful fraud to remove a generous portion of her bank's assets, she decided, would be best executed when obeying to the letter the conditions of her fiduciary duty . . . *do not resist, but cooperate unhesitatingly with the robber.*

She thumbed through the PVISP application form that Mac had insisted she complete, and she reread the passage which referred to the underlying purpose of the bank's Post-Violent Incident Support Program:

Perceived criticism from an employer, a supervisor, or a co-worker can be a major factor in causing on-going emotional problems and loss of self-esteem after the psychological trauma of a violent incident.

She sensed the sinister, soft, gliding footfall which announced Mac's approach.

The contents of the PVISP, she realized, listed any number of anxieties dismissed by men as 'women's weaknesses' which could elicit Mac's sympathy or pander to his patronizing conceit. In such crises his determination to over-compensate by being 'nice' (in

his own skewed estimation) was an observable characteristic she intended to exploit.

Mac placed a pitcher of water and a glass on her desk. Somehow he seemed to have guessed the nausea which at that moment had overcome her.

His hand squeezed her shoulder, then he cleared his throat. His breath smelled always of camembert and highland malt whisky.

She wanted desperately to draw back as from some unclean animal but she lifted her bowed head meekly, and met his moist gaze.

His face was rawboned, with deepset eyes, and his tall, gaunt frame brooded over her. Both his hair and his eyelashes were sandy colored and sparse, of a type she had heard some natives of Scotland describe as 'wanthriven'. His nose was pinched and pink, and his prominent adam's apple bobbed nervously above his tight collar.

(Leisha's father, a roadmender by trade, had nurtured a life-long aversion towards Scotsmen. 'There is no part of the world where a Scotsman cannot be found,' he had repeated with resentment whenever the topic arose. 'Nor any place that would not be the happier without them.')

'Leisha, listen,' breathed Mac confidentially close to her ear. 'You shouldn't reproach yourself. You handled that little psycho real well. I can't see how any one of us could've acted any different. The low-life punk threatened to shoot your pretty little nose off, for gosh sake!'

In fact, Sonny's threatening note, which Leisha had drafted herself, was scrawled with these words in a disguised hand, unrecognizable as her own: *This is a holdup. This gun is NOT a toy. DON'T press the alarm. Give me ALL your money FAST.*

Mac's long spatulate fingers hesitantly circled her wrist. 'Right now, what you need is a diversion. How about a date to shake yourself out of this shocking business? Just you and me, huh?'

It was not the first time he had made advances to her as the solitude of another soulless weekend beckoned.

His smooth fingertips, slithering down her upper arms, gave her goosebumps. Mac never made mistakes when handling paper currency; the pads of his fingers were polished to a shine like a cardsharp's from constant batch counting.

'What do you suggest?' Leisha's cool gray eyes considered the chief cashier steadily. She noticed that he had recently powdered over his freckles with talcum powder.

'Well . . . uh . . . you know, it's Friday night . . .' Mac gulped, squirming with the effort to convey unaccustomed suavity. 'I'm planning on throwing some heavy cannon down the Lanes.' He was team captain in the inter-banks bowling tournaments. 'The beer's cheap and there're no leagues until nine. Whaddyasay?'

Although Leisha had predicted Mac's invitation, just as she had also anticipated her own answer since it was the very essence of her plan, she pretended to demur.

She waited for Mac to repeat his plea then she relented.

'Okay, big guy,' she said, 'lead on.'



In the locker room, at the rear of the bank, Mac and Leisha prepared to leave the building.

Promptly at 5.15 p.m., the staff departed in a concerted rush leaving the chief cashier and an appointed deputy to set the alarms and lock up.

All that week Mac and Leisha had retained dual custody of the back-office keys. Mac's fellow keyholder was appointed on a rota basis, according to the bank's supervisory regulations, to discourage hostage-taking or kidnap for ransom singling out designated personnel. Accordingly, for no more than a month, Leisha had known with certainty that she and Mac would be the last staff members to leave the building on the Friday night she'd chosen for springing her long-overdue surprise.

Mac opened his locker and, with a grunt of exertion, lifted his bowling bag to the floor . . . it was a two-ball locker-trolley weighing twenty-eight pounds.

SISTER MORPHINE

Leisha looked away, suddenly sickened, and closed her own locker, her mind teeming with unwelcome thoughts. Earlier that year, she remembered reading in the local press, a woman's head had been found in a bowling bag in the next suburb.

Pain again struck her between the eyes like a lightning shock, and bright scintillations behind the eyelids dizzied her to a degree of intensity that found her, slowly, almost unconsciously, clinging to the edge of the locker room door for support, willing Mac to depart.

There was a sense of impending danger in the very air, in the loneliness of her position, yet she turned to Mac with resolution and pretended to be brightly attentive to his every word.

The color had drained from her lips, but her mouth was steady and firm.

Mac slapped the contents of his bag, beaming with self-importance. 'My favorite strike balls!' he bragged. 'Last week I nailed six straight strikes with these little fellas. C'mon, let's get outta here!'



When they double-locked the outer door they found the dusk was deepening into night, with the moon riding clear of the clouds. Seeds of snow stung her eyelids and sheshivered.

A silver hip-flask glinted in Mac's hand. He took a swig and smacked his lips.

'Weel, here's to gude company!' The toast was accompanied with a leer. Mac believed he acquired charm by affecting certain Scotticisms in his locutions.

One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five seconds, Leisha counted under her breath.

Thirty seconds was the time she'd calculated they would need to cross the asphalt backlot to where Mac routinely parked his car.

Six . . . seven . . . and there it was! The corny, two-door, scarlet convertible droptop was clearly chosen by Mac to fulfill a dream

he'd harbored since his youth, in envy no doubt of some adolescent dude.

Leisha thought: *Yuk! Mac's idea of getting in touch with his inner child is a hot date for his Friday night passion-wagon at a drive-in movie with the top down.*

However, on this occasion—a clear but blustery evening—the car's retractable soft-top roof was latched shut against the cold. Placing his locker-trolley on the sidewalk, Mac unlocked the nearside door and jack-knifed his long spindly legs over the passenger footwell to reach his driver's seat.

Eight . . . nine . . . ten . . . eleven . . . Leisha congratulated herself on the accuracy of her month's-long surveillance when observing Mac's daily schedule.

Mac, a creature of unswerving habit, would unfailingly arrive each morning at the bank half an hour earlier than his bosses. Punctually he would reverse with a sidling motion into the most inaccessible parking space on the lot, a snug enclosure where two sheer blank walls met. This bay was so confined he could open neither his own driver's door nor the trunk. Such selflessness, Mac believed, would win favor with the senior bankers, little guessing that this obsequious act would provide Leisha with the most favorable conditions for bringing about his downfall.

Eighteen . . . nineteen . . . twenty . . . Leisha withdrew from her purse a neat stack of banknotes . . . or, to all appearances, a wad of bills no different from those she had thrust into Sonny's eager outthrust hands.

Twenty-seven . . . twenty-eight . . . no time to wait! Leisha hurled the packet into the interior of the car and slammed the door.

Thirty seconds! Her last clear view of Mac was of his craggy face turned to her in total bewilderment as the package detonated with a thunderflash and a vivid red dye sprayed the inside of the windshield.

From within the vehicle could be heard deep gasps and hoarse, frenzied chokings. The air quickly became tainted with an odor as acrid as a spent firework.

'Welcome to splitsville,' Leisha hissed.

She seized the handle of Mac's locker-trolley and sped away into the main street to flag down a cab. In less than a minute she was riding in a taxi to the airport, with the bowling bag safe in her arms, as though this one embrace warmed her heart as no other had in all her adult years.

She thought that she would never be happier than at that moment.

She turned briefly and looked back to see the canopy of Mac's convertible automatically lowering, and Mac—his long upper body stained the brightest red—leaping out, scorched arms flapping, like a demented jack-in-the-box.



'CONFIDENTIAL DISPOSALS'

When they reached the turnoff to the airport, Leisha sat back in the cab and relaxed, dimly aware of the brightly lit buildings flickering past . . . fast-food restaurants, thrift shops, 99 cent stores, druggists, 7-Eleven outlets . . . very soon all these would be emptied of all meaning for her.

Never forget, a warm voice in her head affirmed, you're a survivor. The greatest risk is not taking one.

On the distant darkening skyline the colored neon of a casino spelled out: *Break the Bank for a Million Bucks!*

Well. What the heck, her haul had been only one quarter of that sum but Leisha was not dissatisfied with her afternoon's work.

She half closed her eyes and like a five-star general she retraced step by step the private campaign she had waged, and exulted in its successful outcome.

The idea for her deception first came to her when the bank introduced a cost-saving machine for the degradation of used notes in circulation.

The bank tellers were advised to cancel used banknotes of unacceptable quality by feeding them into the automatic cash-canceling machine after sorting.

Thus, in the past week, Leisha had been able to amass, in the 'Canceled for Collection' hutch of her cashier's desk, one hundred and forty packs of twenty-dollar bills, wrapped in florescent yellow color straps. Each stack, processed by the canceling machine, had been punched through in a domino pattern with six standard 12 mm holes.

Throughout the late afternoon she had substituted clean negotiable twenty-dollar bills in her till for the degraded punched banknotes, which, in turn, she rewrapped in violet color straps to falsely denote legitimacy.

Up until then her preparations had been mercifully uneventful.

And the transit to the back office of one hundred and forty packs of seemingly canceled twenty-dollar bills, now wrapped in yellow color straps, had attracted no remark.

Yet, there was no reason for her actions to excite interest; after all, 'Confidential Disposals' were part of her routine.

There had been a moment of alarm when she had transferred Mac's two favorite strike balls from his trolley-bag to her locker, and one had caromed off the rear panel with a metallic clash.

She had experienced an all-consuming rush of adrenaline. Fortunately, no one entered to see her load Mac's bag with the one hundred and forty bundles of oh-so-used-and-untraceable currency.

She had not miscalculated: a locker-bag containing two balls each weighing fourteen pounds is no different in weight to 280,000 dollars, all in twenties.

Certainly Mac had not noticed the difference.

Nor, for that matter, had Sonny in his frantic, drug-fuelled haste noticed the substitution of the punched bills. And to the gawking bank staff, observing the unfolding drama in appalled fascination, the regulation-issue violet color straps were signal enough of the notes' authenticity.

No doubt, at this very minute, Sonny was holed up beside a creek, on some dusty back road, sprawled in his getaway car, and opening his first pack of twenties to discover the notes were so

much sausage-stuffing and punched right through with six fat zeros.

Nothing! *Nada!* Zilch!

She imagined his look of utter desolation as he toked up on his last joint of laughing grass. *Poor Sonny, definitely a classic weirdo! No more candy!*

Of course, Sonny and the bank security guard had never been in any real danger of shooting each other. She had assured Sonny that the guard visited the john like clockwork . . . on the hour. She had even taken a secret polaroid to demonstrate the fact.

Now, thinking of that final week—the anxiety and jittery suspense of it all—she shivered.

The worst moments for arousing suspicion, she had known from the very beginning of her stratagem, would be the vital seconds between Mac entering his car and her wresting the stolen dollars from his unwitting possession.

The solution had presented itself in the guise of the explosive dummy dye-pack, a cash degradation system designed to stain stolen cash indelibly. This special pack of real bills, in twenty-dollar denominations, was virtually indistinguishable from a regular stack of money except the dye device was concealed in its center. As Mac would learn to his cost, the stains from the red aerosol smoke and dye, when they came into contact with skin or clothing, would be embarrassingly difficult to remove.

He would have a hell of a lot of explaining to do; both his clothes and reputation were now in tatters.

Like the other tellers, Leisha had at all times, near to hand on her desk, a dye pack set in 'safe' mode attached to a special magnetic plate. Within the dye package was a small radio receiver that would be triggered when the pack was discreetly palmed by the clerk to be yielded up, among other wads of cash, to the robber. *But . . .* and this was the extra-cunning part of Leisha's plan . . . while the thief (in this case, *herself*) was still inside the bank, the pack would remain *dormant*.

Leisha knew that a small radio transmitter was mounted near the bank's entrance. Once the dye pack passed outside the building, and received the radio signal, it activated. She also knew her

SISTER MORPHINE

dye pack was set on a timer of thirty seconds to ensure any criminal was in his getaway car before the package exploded.

Mac had proposed a *diversion*; she had not disappointed him.

Did Mac deserve this act of retribution? Not for one instant did Leisha question the justice of smiting her foe.

A month earlier, when silently entering the locker room, Leisha had heard a gust of malicious laughter. A bull session with some of the guys from 'Confidential Disposals' had been in progress over which Mac had evidently presided. Unseen, she'd heard Mac confide lazily to a junior intern: 'Sure as hell that bean-eating euro-spic knows I have a crush on her, but what I want to know is has she one on me?'

Leisha thought: He's not worth my prayers. *When your boss is no good, you shouldn't waste good candles on him.*



UNA STRADA AOS ESSES

She arrived at the airport with ten minutes to spare to board her flight. She was traveling business class and the maximum weight allowance of her carry-on luggage was thirty pounds so, before she checked in, the absconding bank clerk stole a little time to buy mineral water and bitter black grapes.

Leisha thought: *These grapes are like eating the autumn.*

Who can explain the pangs of memory, and when they strike?

She remembered wandering as an infant with her father in his small vineyard and how his little sickle-bladed knife had separated the bunches . . . the succulence of those Portuguese grapes from his *vinhinha* of vines and flower gardens on the foothills of her village could never be recaptured.

The neighboring grower whose land surrounded her father's plot was a well-known port wine producer, a notorious drunkard of Scottish ancestry. His family had been established in the region since the early eighteenth century.

The face of the Scot had resembled a side of British beef and, following local custom, he was generally known by the name of Bife among the villagers.

According to family legend, Leisha's father, so she believed as a child, had been contracted by Bife to build a road through the landowner's estate. As the work advanced, the whisky-swilling *bêbado* had become progressively more drunk and uncommunicative. With each appearance of the drunkard the roadworks were halted while Leisha's father attempted to clarify instructions for directing the route. To her father's questions the Scot slurred an affirmative: 'Es, 'es.' So her father, a simple man, had put another 's' in the road until it snaked in and out of the terraced vines to double its intended length . . . *una strada aos esses*.

The cost of litigation against Bife to seek settlement for unpaid bills, and a frivolous countersuit claim, had been the source of her father's financial ruin, and his undying hatred of all Scotsmen.

Diabo daqueles estrangeiros! The voice of Leisha's father still raged in her head. *To hell with these foreigners!*

This bitter grudge had been compounded when her father was forced to sell the family *vinhinha* and Bife had outbid the other creditors.

Perhaps, Leisha reflected, as the aircraft leveled off over the ocean, she had been unduly harsh on Mac by making him the scapegoat for the hateful Scotsman who had so dishonored her family.

And Sonny, too, would never forgive or comprehend her betrayal.

The pity of it was that neither man would ever know her true motives for the crime. In recent months, the pulsating phantom voices of her dead parents resounding in her head had grown distressingly louder and more insistent until a visit to her doctor had confirmed her worst fears.

Her doctor had first diagnosed *tinnitus aurium* but a further audiometric examination by a neurotologist had identified complications: an acoustic neuroma, a tumor dangerously near the brain requiring surgical removal.

Her terror of the possibility of a botched operation had ignited in her the profoundest reaction: to seek out the world's most celebrated neurosurgeon, whatever the costs.

She had located her miracle-working surgeon in a gun-toting South American city, which ironically boasted the world's highest death toll from head wounds. However, against this inconvenience was weighed the advantage of an ineffective extradition treaty which failed to remove overseas criminals who sought refuge in the capital. Besides, her body craved comfort. In this new city she would again speak her native language freely, and enjoy a mild climate where windchimes sounded gently all the year round.

So when Leisha had added the surgeon's fees for microsurgery to the costs of her hospitalization and convalescence, and checked and rechecked the daunting sums required for her recovery, she knew she had but one path to take.

Once her course had been set there was no going back.

And yet, when all was said and done and ordained, had she been found so wanting in virtue, and so unworthy?

Sinking back into the softness of her fully reclining seat, lulled by the steady throb of the engines, Leisha heard again her mother's voice, sent like a tongue of flame to illuminate her inner darkness. *Ladrão que rouba ladrão tem cem anos de perdão*, her mother whispered reassuringly in her ear. *The thief who steals from a thief has one hundred years of pardon.*