

OPHELIA'S NEW HOME

As a high school math teacher who also hosts a weekly open mic at a hipster bar, I don't have much experience as an investigator. Trying to figure out if a student cheated on an algebra test or if a performer took more than his share from the tip jar is about the extent of it. Until last November, when a new performer died on stage. Not died as in performed poorly, but *literally* died. A couple days later, I stumbled upon an anguished email (well, maybe I eavesdropped) which caused me to ask a few questions (OK, snoop), leading me to conclude that the deceased had been the victim of foul play. Would I, Richard Meshkin, have played detective if a vintage guitar and a beautiful Australian shepherd weren't involved? Probably not. But everyone has their obsessions. And mine, it turned out, helped to uncover a killer.

It began as a typical Thursday night at the Last Place on Earth, a split-level bar in midtown Sacramento, popular with people under 40 who have figured out how to earn a living in front of a laptop in a coffee shop all day. I placed a sign-up sheet out at 5:45 p.m., and by 6 o'clock all 16 slots had been taken, meaning that each performer would get just two songs. I recognized most of the names on the list: several Baby Boomers who strum covers of hits from the 60s and 70s; a few younger guitarists performing originals, angling toward lining up gigs at places with less sticky floors; a handful of duos or trios, struggling to find their harmonies. Beside number 4 was new name, and it belonged to a lumberjack of a man who had been warming up in the corner, no one else nearby. "Next up is Tom," I announced, only a first name to go by, as usual. "It's his first appearance at The Last Place, so let's make him feel like we want to hear him." The prompt generated a smattering of listless clapping, as welcoming as being greeted at the door by, "Oh, it's you."

Tom appeared to be in his 50s, with a short pony tail protruding from a vent in his baseball cap and a considerable amount of grey in his thick beard. He looked to be about 6 feet 4 inches tall, but he approached the stage with small strides, as if he were wearing leg chains. Shunning a strap, he gripped the neck of the guitar with an oarsman's strength. After easing into a stool, he reached under his glasses with his right hand and vigorously rubbed his eyes, the plastic bridge bobbing against his nose. He blinked slowly a few times, and rubbed them some more. From somewhere, he produced three metal finger picks, and slid them into place before testing their fit by playing a few syncopated riffs. Immediately, I could tell that he had better guitar chops than most of the performers here, including those who are good enough to play instrumentals for their entire 10- or 15-minute slot. (Not that that's a good idea: most people expect open-mic performers to sing; so if you can't, take a cue from Steve Martin and make jokes a central part of your repertoire.) Despite his obviously superb guitar skills, Tom seemed quite nervous during the sound check, eying the microphone as if it were a drone.

I gave Tom a thumbs up and he scanned the crowd with the intensity of a deep-sea diver. "Good evening, folks," he finally said softly, leading me to slide up the vocals level. "My name is Tom and I'm going to play a couple of originals. The first one is called "Not on The Table." He leaned back and took a deep breath. Then his fingers got to work. Following an intro riff that sounded as smooth and clear as if coming from James Taylor, Tom's voice emerged as a full-throated, melancholy baritone, causing me to ease the vocals back down. The verses described a painful breakup, with poignant details rather than a pop song's cliches, building to the following chorus:

"Time travels in one direction

Cain can't undo killing Abel

*We had our moment, but she's not coming back
It's simply not on the table."*

By the third verse, the bar became unusually quiet: you would have thought it was a ticketed event, rather than background music for a post-happy hour crowd. When the song ended, even people clutching drinks found a way to applaud. Some whipped out their cell phones, anticipating posting at least a snippet from Tom's next song to social media. I too was eager to hear it, though I also detected envious throat clearing from some other performers. (They can be a competitive bunch: coughing fits, turning up the sound of the TV, and warming up while a performer is on stage are among the distractions employed by those who fear being upstaged.)

But instead of continuing, Tom laid his guitar on the floor, as gently as if placing a baby in a crib, leaned into the mic to announce he was feeling "poorly," and suddenly collapsed without even attempting to break his fall. Picture the operator of a marionette suddenly dropping his hand holding the control paddle. A separate guitar mic (which I had set up because Tom's guitar had no electronic pickup) amplified the thud of a body on the hard wood floor. Some patrons gasped. From a hallway leading to the bathrooms, a Janis Joplin-like scream emerged. A pint glass overflowed with IPA as the bartender froze in disbelief. Someone thrust open the front doors, apparently hoping that the cold November air would revive Tom.

Abandoning my soundboard, I rushed to the stage with a few of the performers who realized that Tom needed more than a little cool air. But our amateur rescue attempts—rocking his shoulder, tapping his cheeks, and wiping his forehead with a damp bar towel, the odor of beer surviving a thorough rinsing—fared no better. "Does anyone know CPR?" shouted Paul, a regular and number 7 on the list that night, still struggling to unbutton

Tom's shirt. When no one came forward, he got sarcastic: "I guess this crowd only knows CCR." The reference to Credence Clearwater Revival prompted neither laughter nor a medic. But about 30 seconds later, a woman ran toward the stage from the rear hallway. "It's his heart," she cried. "He needs nitroglycerin. I've got some here." She dug into her handbag and removed a prescription bottle. She fished out a small white pill and slipped it between Tom's lips. But he remained as motionless as an unplugged turntable.

When the EMTs arrived—lugging their defibrillators, heart monitors, blood pressure cuffs, and oxygen masks—they worked on Tom for as long as a live version of a Grateful Dead song. Between her sobs, the woman who had fed Tom a nitro pill pleaded with him not to die. She later asked the EMTs to ride with him in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, identifying herself as Melanie Nicholson, Tom's fiancé. They agreed to the request. But by the time Tom was carried away, an oxygen mask squeezing his cheeks and an IV line at his wrist, inches from the still-attached fingerpicks, I feared that he was knock, knock, knocking on heaven's door.

Needless to say, at that point the open mic was over. While packing up my equipment, I asked the performers if any of them knew Tom well enough to hold onto his guitar which, from the looks of it, was a vintage Martin 000-18, probably worth a small fortune. None did, though some asked if they could "see it for a second," which I knew meant to play it until their fingers were sore. (Sorry, gents.) And so, I ended up taking custody of the Martin, as well as the tattered case that Tom had slid under an unoccupied table at the rear of the bar. I tucked the guitar into the red felt lining of the case, closed the five rusty latches, and rode home with it, strapped under a seat belt in the front passenger seat of my Hyundai hatchback.

With one hand gripping Tom's guitar and the other my soundboard, I opened my front door (the first of several trips from my car), and was nearly knocked over by Jude, my Australian shepherd-Siberian Husky mix, who shows his affection with body slams and wriggling between my legs when I try to walk away from him. Soldiering on, I made it to the living room couch and placed the guitar case behind it, hoping that putting it out of sight would help me to forget the traumatic event and rest well enough to muster some enthusiasm about quadratic equations the next day. After four hours of sleep, I was ready to concede that math was only for geeks.

On Saturday morning, I received a phone call from a reporter for The Sacramento Beacon, informing me that Tom had died, and asking me to describe how it all went down. I briefed the reporter on Tom's stellar performance, his stunning collapse, and our heroic efforts to revive him. A few hours later, an article appeared on The Beacon's website under the headline, "Midtown Musician, 53, Dies Onstage." The story began:

After wowing a midtown bar during an open mic performance, a late blooming singer-songwriter collapsed onstage and was pronounced dead a short time later. Thomas Templeton, a 53-year-old electrician who had hoped to launch a musical career, lived in an apartment a few blocks from The Last Place on Earth, the venue where he performed his last song on earth Thursday night.

The article went on to say that Tom appeared to have suffered a heart attack, but that an autopsy and toxicology report were pending. It said that, before the EMTs arrived, the open mic host had attempted CPR, to no avail. (Perhaps I exaggerated my role.) The article also said that a woman (described simply as "a friend") had placed a nitroglycerine pill in Tom's mouth, but he failed to respond. According to the article, Tom lived alone and had no children, but was "deeply devoted" to his Australian shepherd

named Ophelia. Indeed, the photo of Tom that ran in the paper showed him smiling while the dog licked his chin. A neighbor, Jessica Richards, told the newspaper that Tom mostly kept to himself, and that she often heard him playing his guitar into the early morning hours. “He was so good, I didn’t have to turn on my stereo,” she was quoted as saying.

The article raised more questions than a Bob Dylan song. If Melanie was Tom’s fiancé, why was she identified as a nameless “friend”? And why was she nowhere near Tom when he was warming up? Or closer to the stage when he was performing? And why didn’t she respond immediately to Paul’s plea for assistance?

I know I shouldn’t have done it, but I opened Tom’s guitar case, lifted out the Martin, and noodled on it for a few minutes, as my Takamine looked on jealously from its stand in the corner. The curves of the Martin were like those of a swimsuit model; the action as light as the keys on a laptop; and the sound was both deep and bright, like a singer with a three-octave range. The serial number indicated a birthdate of 1954 (based on an online reference chart), which meant that the guitar had nearly seven decades of experience.

Before returning it to its case, I opened the interior compartment. It contained some typical items—picks, extra strings, a capo. There also was a bottle of Visine, which made me recall that Tom had rubbed his eyes rather vigorously when he took the stage the other night. And there was a wallet-sized photo of Ophelia, showing her running through a field. She was beautiful creature—mostly brown and black, with a bowling pin-shaped patch of white fur running down the front of her face; aquamarine eyes; and the tips of her ears flopped forward. The photo caught her with all four legs off the ground, wind pushing her fur upward. It was the kind of photo that could

sell dog food, promote animal rights, or cause even the sternest parent to relent to a child's pleas for a puppy.

Under the photo of Ophelia was a sheet of printer paper, folded into quarters so that it fit perfectly into the rectangular compartment. I unfolded the paper and saw that it contained a print-out of an email: sent from mnicholson43@gmail.com, to ttemplet99@yahoo.com, and dated November 3, 2022—exactly two weeks before Thursday night's the open mic. Sinking further into ethical quicksand, I began reading:

Don't be an asshole, Tom. When we got Ophelia, we agreed that she was going to be OUR DOG, even though she is registered under your name. Let me remind you that when we broke up last month, we said that you would have her four days a week and I'd have her for three. You even let me keep a key so that I could pick her up while you are at work, and bring her back when you aren't at home (which isn't very often). Now you have the nerve to say that being shuttled back and forth between us is not good for her 'mental health,' and she should live full time with you. Since when do have a degree in dog psychology? Ophelia is perfectly fine with shared custody. Have you ever thought that she gets "jumpy" and "antsy" around you because you leave her alone most of the day? Unlike you, I work remotely, so she isn't by herself when I have her. Not to mention at night, when you are out at one open mic or another. Really, Tom, think of what's best for Ophelia. And no, I'm not going to just 'go to the pound and get another dog.' Would you tell the mother of a kidnapped child to just go to an orphanage and pick out another kid? If you carry out your threat to change the locks, you will regret it.

One more thing, Tom. I never gave you permission to perform any of my songs, especially not, 'Not on The Table.' That song doesn't work from a man's

perspective. I know you have become an excellent guitar player. God knows—and so do your neighbors—that you practice enough. But you need to start writing your own lyrics. It's not so hard. Maybe if you paid more attention to the people in your life, you'd understand human nature. In the meantime, I'm not giving you back the key to your apartment. One way or another, I'm going to keep seeing Ophelia. Best, M.

Was this the same woman who, just two weeks later, screamed in horror over Tom's collapse, rode with him in the ambulance, and described herself as his fiancé? Had they reconciled? Just gotten engaged? If so, why was he still carrying around a printout of that hostile email? Maybe Melanie had recently given Tom permission to perform some of her songs (including Not on the Table). Whatever had transpired between them, I assumed that Melanie now had Ophelia. And if she was indeed Tom's fiancé, I figured she also should have his guitar. But when I Googled Melanie Nicholson in Sacramento, nothing popped up. Same with Tom. (It was one of the rare occasions I wished I had a social media account.) I did find an address for Tom's neighbor, Jessica Richards (listed as the sole proprietor of Clicks, a webpage design firm), so I decided to head over to her place and ask a few questions. And who knows? Maybe Melanie was at Tom's apartment and I could confront her as well.

The apartment building was one of the many stately Victorians in the vicinity of the state Capitol that, over the past century, have been turned into fourplexes—the architectural equivalent of breaking up The Beatles. The names on the mailboxes showed that T. Templeton and J. Richards had the upstairs apartments, units 3 and 4 respectively. I climbed the steep wooden steps and knocked at the door to Apartment 3, Tom's guitar case in hand. No

answer. So, I swiveled to the right and knocked at the door to Apartment 4, hoping Jessica might be home at 11 on a Saturday morning.

A dog yipped, and the door swung open to reveal a tall, slender woman in oversized sweats and holding a Starbucks cup. She appeared to be in her 40s, with large eyes behind very round glasses and a downturned mouth that seemed tired of smiling. Her dark hair was pulled back, with long earrings substituting for locks. A dachshund brushed past her ankles and headed toward the staircase. The woman issued a staccato warning—“eh, eh”—which caused the dog to stop in its tracks. It looked up at her, and she jerked her chin toward her doorway. The pooch scampered back inside.

“I wish my dog had that kind of recall,” I said by way of introduction. “But he’s part Husky and when I call for him at the dog park, he just looks at me as if to say, ‘Do I know you?’ (I opted not to tell her that I inevitably get a few chuckles when I call out, “Hey, Jude.”)

“I’ve heard that about Huskies,” she said with a smile that quickly faded like a breath cloud on a winter morning. “How can I help you?”

“Are you Jessica Richards?” I asked.

“And you are?”

“My name is Richard Meshkin. I was running the open mic at The Last Place on Earth when your neighbor Tom collapsed the other night.”

She closed her eyes, bowed her head and shook it slowly, paying her respects. “Yes, I’m Jessica,” she said. “I saw your name in the article about Tom. That must have been awful. But you were brave to try to revive him with CPR before the EMTs came. I can’t imagine being a guy and giving mouth-to-mouth to another guy, especially one with a full beard. I mean I’m

assuming you're not . . ." She caught herself and steered back to safer ground. "Well, I'm sure it was very upsetting."

"Yeah, it was pretty traumatic," I said, wondering when someone would be calling the newspaper, seeking a correction. "I gather from the story that you knew Tom pretty well."

"Hardly," Jessica said. "Like I told that reporter, he lived next door for maybe six months, but it's not like we were friends or anything. I mean we were friendly, we just never hung out together. I used to hear him playing his guitar and sing, and he was good, *really good*. But sometimes he played well into the night, and with these thin walls, he was keeping me up, so I had to ask him to please find something else to do after midnight. Anyway, what is it you are looking for?"

What I was looking for was an invitation to step inside. The more Jessica spoke, the more I found her attractive. Those large brown eyes and her smooth, angular chin. I didn't see a ring on either hand, and I had a hunch that being clean-shaven might be a point in my favor. Plus, since I'm in good shape (owing far more to genes than exercise) and don't have any wrinkles or much grey, she might not detect what I estimated to be a 10-year age gap. But I put those thoughts aside and remembered why I was there.

"I'm trying to find Tom's fiancé, Melanie Nicholson. I brought Tom's guitar home with me that night and I wanted to give it to her." I lifted the case along the side of my body, in case she hadn't already seen it. "Do you know if Melanie lived with Tom, or where else she might be?"

Jessica snorted. "I'd be surprised if Melanie is or ever was Tom's fiancé. She used to come around here all the time—always making a huge fuss over Tom's dog—but a few weeks ago, I overheard them having a big

fight, and after that, she would come around to pick up the dog for a few days and then return it, usually when Tom was at work. She obviously kept a key to his apartment. Crazy as it sounds, I think they had shared custody of the dog. She was last here yesterday, the day after Tom died, and I saw her leave with the dog. A few hours later, a locksmith came and changed the locks. Weird, huh?”

Based on what Jessica said, it didn’t sound like Melanie and Tom had reconciled. So why was she at the Last Place on Earth on Thursday night? And why did she claim to be his fiancé? I was starting to think that maybe Melanie shouldn’t inherit Tom’s Martin.

Just then, I spotted, through a crack in Jessica’s door, a Taylor 314 on a wooden stand in the living room. Which I couldn’t let pass.

“Do you also play the guitar?” I asked.

“Just started to, about a year ago,” Jessica said, a half-smile raising the corners of her mouth, which was looking more enticing by the minute. “I’m not that good, certainly not as good as Tom is, I mean was. Still, I managed to write a few songs, trying to emulate Lucinda Williams or Emmylou Harris. But I never had an ear for poetry, so . . .”

“I’m sure you’re being too hard on yourself,” I said. I was tempted to ask her to play something for me and let a professional be the judge. But I realized that would come across as condescending or downright creepy. So I stuck to the matter at hand. “Do you have any idea where Melanie lives?”

“Sorry, Mr. Meshkin, I don’t.”

“Richard, please,” I said, disappointed that she was addressing me like one of my students.

“No, Richard,” she said, starting over. “But if it helps, I think she is also a musician. Before they broke up, I overheard her telling Tom that she was planning to perform at a new wine bar downtown. What’s that place called, Grape Friends?”

“Friends of the Grape,” I corrected her. I like to keep tabs on all the open mics around town, and I heard that they might be starting one at F.O.G. on Wednesday nights, but I hadn’t yet had a chance to check it out. Now I had a reason to get my ass over there.

I thanked Jessica and told her that if she ever felt confident enough to perform, she should come to The Last Place on a Thursday night. She said she would think about it, giving me hope that I might have a chance to see her again, possibly in tighter clothing.

The following Wednesday night, after grading algebra exams and inhaling some take-out, I stopped by F.O.G. on the chance I might catch Melanie Nicholson performing. This time, I left Tom’s guitar at home. I ordered a glass of house Cab (twice the price of a beer at The Last Place) and stood at the far end of the bar, away from the gathering crowd, until just before 7 p.m. when the open mic was about to begin. I walked toward the stage and peeked at the sign-up sheet. I was somewhat surprised to see Melanie’s name on the list, in the final slot, number 11. Returning to my seat, I glanced around the room and spotted her at a table in a far corner, sitting by herself, scrolling through her phone, and sipping a glass of red.

She looked quite different from the hysterical woman I had seen a week earlier. The blonde hair that she had worn in a bun was now set free and floated down to her waist under a Joni Mitchell-style beret. Instead of the sweater, jeans, and sneakers she had worn at The Last Place, she sported a

long tie-die skirt, combat boots, and an assortment of bracelets and bangles, bringing the full Berkeley look to Sacramento. (Not a stitch of mourner's black.) While she had previously seemed to be in her 40s, she now looked a decade younger. Indeed, she could have passed for a Cal grad student.

At about 9:30, the host of the open mic, a muscular and heavily tatted guy named Phil, called out, "And last, but certainly not least, we will hear Melanie." Ms. Telegraph Avenue approached the stage, her clacking bracelets as melodic as a toddler on a tambourine. As she scooted onto a tall stool, Phil—who had opened the show with a cover of Dylan's "Tangled Up in Blue"—handed her his guitar, a Gibson J-45 Sunburst, which she nestled over her right knee. Phil patted her shoulder and she in turn squeezed his hand. If I had to bet, I'd say that wasn't the only part of Phil's body she'd ever squeezed.

Melanie pulled a capo from her front pocket, wiggled it over the second fret, and strummed a D chord to test the fit. Rather than the typical "test-one-twos" during the sound check, she warmed up her vocal cords with a series of rising and descending "la, la" notes. Phil, clearly smitten with Lady La La, flashed a thumbs up. Melanie looked out at the dozen or so people in the audience and pushed her bangles above her elbow until they clamped her bicep like another capo. She gathered up a river of hair flowing across the guitar strings and tossed it over her shoulder.

"Hey, everyone," she chirped. "My name's Melanie and tonight I'm going to play a cover and an original. This first song was written by my namesake, and it came out about 10 years before I was born."

I couldn't get over it. There was no sign of sadness, sorrow, or pathos. I've heard that everyone grieves in their own way. But I never imagined setting up an open mic in a funeral parlor.

As I correctly guessed, Melanie's first song was "Look What They've Done to My Song, Ma," a mellow but haunting hit by Melanie Safka, a Woodstock generation singer-songwriter widely known by her first name. Melanie N. did a passable cover, even singing one verse in French, as in the original. But her vocal range was limited, and she lacked any of the emotional plaint of the original Melanie. The sound system didn't help: low-end mics, tiny speakers, a mixing board with fewer knobs than a car radio. Phil obviously was a Little Leaguer.

Melanie then introduced her second song: "I wrote this one about my dog, Willie Mae, who passed away about a year ago. I still miss her every day, but now I have another dog, so it's not so hard to sing it anymore. It's called 'Willie Mae's New Home.'"

Removing the capo, she began strumming in four-four time with her fingernail. Then the opening verse:

*She was wandering through an alley,
her Oreo coat all matted.
I was feeling beaten down that day,
Nothing really mattered.
Then I gazed into her clear blue eyes,
which said "I'm all alone."
I felt her pain and when I saw no tags
I had to take her home.*

The rest of the lyrics were similarly sappy and as predictable as a Disney movie: Willie Mae affection wipes away her new owner's blues, and through regular visits to a dog park, the owner falls in love with the owner of another rescue. I wondered if this is how Melanie and Tom met.

After savoring the tepid applause, Melanie handed the Gibson back to Phil, who wrapped his arm around her and pecked her on the cheek before thanking the crowd for coming out to hear "Sacramento's rising stars at its most professional open mic." I fantasized adding some more color to Phil's Sunburst with the remainder of my Cab.

As Phil began to pack up his gear, I followed Melanie to her table, where a fresh glass of wine had already been placed. Before she could sit down, I complimented her on her performance, both her choice of a cover and the genuine sentiment behind "Willie Mae." Her face, already glowing from the adrenaline of performing, brightened even more. (Although open mic performers often praise one another as professional courtesy, they don't often receive kudos from other bar patrons.) Somehow, Melanie didn't seem to recognize me, and I held off telling her that I had seen her in a completely different state just six days ago. Instead, I told her that my own dog Jude was a rescue, who brought me as much joy as music. I tapped my cell phone to show her a picture.

"He looks like a wolf!" she said with as much glee as if I had shown her a photo of an alligator.

"I like to think coyote. People either want to caress him or report him to Animal Control. Do you have any pictures of Willie Mae?"

On her cell phone, Melanie flipped through several pictures of a beautiful Husky with cream-colored fur, widespread eyes and ears, and the tip of its tongue jutting out in mild disapproval.

“What happened to her?” I asked, not yet ready to breach the real object of my curiosity. By now we were sitting across from one another at her table, our wine glasses a few inches apart. Melanie occasionally glanced at the stage where Phil was breaking down stands for the mics and speakers.

“Cancer. I had to put her down about a year ago. She was only nine. It was the hardest day of my life.” She began to well up, so I changed the subject, continuing to play dumb.

“But now you have another dog? Tell me about her . . . or him.”

“*Her* name is Ophelia, and she is as beautiful and cuddly as Willie Mae. Until a few weeks ago, she belonged to a musician friend of mine. But he realized he didn’t have enough time to raise a dog, and so he gave her to me. He had a bad heart and died suddenly while performing. His name was Tom. You might have heard about him. It was in the news. So unfortunate.”

It was time to come clean. “Actually, I host the open mic at The Last Place on Earth, and so I was there when he collapsed,” I said. “Aren’t you the woman who gave him a pill and who rode with him to the hospital?”

Melanie stiffened her back and lost her smile. She took a gulp of wine and glanced again at the stage, where Phil was rolling up a cord, looping it between his palm and elbow. “Tom and I dated for about a year and we raised Ophelia together,” she finally said, as if I had not heard her first version. “I even suggested the dog’s name based on the character in Hamlet. Tom never read Shakespeare but he liked the song by The Band with that

name. Before he performed at your club last week, he wasn't feeling well and I pleaded with him not to go out. But he was determined to get more experience. So I went with him and made sure to bring his nitro tablets. They usually revive him, but on Thursday night . . . well, you were there."

Yes, I was. And so I finally asked her why she did not come forward right away when Paul called out for help, but rather waited for a while before approaching the stage.

"I was in the bathroom," she, defiantly. "I heard a scream, then came out and saw there was a commotion on the stage. I figured something must have happened to Tom and when I got closer and saw him on the ground, I knew it was his heart. So I ran toward the stage and gave him one of his nitro tablets. But by then it was too late."

My mind was flooded with new questions. Why did she choose to go to the bathroom in the middle of Tom's set? Why didn't Tom carry his own nitro tablets? Did she ever consider naming their dog Lady MacBeth?

But before any of them made it to my lips, Melanie glanced at Phil, then set her eyes on me and said, "I see that my friend is about to join me. So if you wouldn't mind, Mr. Munchkin, I would appreciate . . ."

"Meshkin," I corrected her. "It's Russian for 'little mouse.' I should have changed it years ago. Anyway, just one more thing. I took Tom's guitar home with me because no one else at the club seemed to know him. As I'm sure you know, it's probably worth a lot of money. A vintage Martin in excellent condition. I'm thinking maybe he would have liked you to have it. "

"I'd feel kind of weird about that," she said. "I already have Ophelia, and that's all I need to remember Tom by. Besides, you saw me play. I'm no

Bonnie Raitt or Eva Cassidy. So Tom's guitar would be wasted on me. It probably should go to someone in his family. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to use the ladies' room. When I return, I expect that you will be gone."

Melanie grabbed her Kate Spade bag from an adjacent seat (the same bag from which she had removed the nitro pill bottle), stood up, and walked toward the back of the bar. By now, I was convinced that Melanie had given a better performance at The Last Place than here. I was even beginning to suspect that she had something to do with Tom's death. But what? Her email offered a motive (two of them, actually) but there were still too many variables. I may have solved for why, but how had she made him an ex?

I decided that if I didn't have it in me to play Detective Colombo, I could still act like James Bond. While Phil loaded up his last few pieces of equipment, I took a miniature, voice-activated digital recorder from my jacket pocket and tucked it behind a closed blind on a window sill at the end of the table. (I've always been intrigued by recording devices, and I got this one from Amazon for about \$50.) Then I went for a walk, hoping that the mp3 recording would fill in some of the blanks. When I returned to the bar about an hour later, the table where Melanie had been sitting was vacant (except for our wine glasses), and all of Phil's sound equipment had been removed as well. Heart pounding, I opened the window blind. The device, about the size of a Post-it note, was right where I had placed it. I exhaled and placed it back in my jacket pocket. Clutching it like a stolen diamond, I headed home.

Jude greeted me with body slam worthy of an NHL enforcer. After limping to the dining room table, I connected the device to my laptop and hit "download." The sound quality was worse than a bootleg album made from a 1970s-era cassette tape recorder. Still, I was able to make out most of the

conversation between Melanie and Phil. Melanie kept referring to “the eye drops” and said that when she returned to Tom’s apartment after he died she couldn’t find “the bottle.” She said she had dumped out all the water glasses and coffee mugs in the kitchen and living room, but she forgot to look in the bedroom and bathroom. Other doubts began to pour out. Maybe she had legal rights to Ophelia and could have talked to a lawyer. Maybe she could have moved to another town with Ophelia. Maybe she could have gone from a romantic relationship with Tom, to just being his lyricist. Phil told her to calm down, saying their “plan” had worked, and he could provide her with an alibi, if necessary. He promised to arrange for her to cut a few songs in a recording studio. “Before long, they will forget the other Melanie,” he said.

But Melanie was not assuaged. “That guy from The Last Place, Mushkin or Mishkin or whatever his name is, I believe he’s onto me. What if he goes to the cops? I’m really scared, Phil.”

Holy shit, I thought. She’s in this up to her eyeballs.

A quick Google search revealed that Visine, when ingested orally and in large quantities, can have toxic effects. In fact, I found a couple of newspaper articles describing separate domestic murder cases in which eye drops had been used to poison a spouse. The fatal ingredient is tetrahydrozoline, and it can cause a variety of serious symptoms, including cardiac arrest. If Melanie’s fingerprints were on the Visine bottle in Tom’s guitar case, that could help prove that she put eye drops in his beverages surreptitiously. There was no time to waste.

I picked up the phone and called a high school friend, Dave Sheldon, who works as a robbery detective for the Sacramento Police Department. It was late, but I had Sheldon’s personal cell number and I thought he would

understand. “What the fuck is wrong with you, Mouseman?” he said when I identified myself. “It’s past midnight.”

I apologized for waking him up but explained why I thought I had uncovered evidence of a murder. When I laid out my case, I realized that I must have sounded delusional. But my old friend took me seriously. He instructed me to head to the Police Department right away with the guitar case and the recording device, and said he would meet me there. When I arrived, he escorted me to a drab interview room where I met a homicide investigator, Sgt. Peter Davey. I went over Melanie’s suspicious behavior, what I learned from Tom’s neighbor Jessica, and what I had heard on the recording. I knew it had nothing to do with the case, but I felt compelled to tell the sergeant that Phil’s sound system was for shit.

“Well, you’ve been doing more than grading algebra exams this week,” Sgt. Davey said. “It turns out that the toxicology report came back showing levels of tetrahydrozoline in Tom’s blood 30 to 40 times more than what you would expect from Visine in your eyes. So the case has been classified as a homicide. And thanks to you, we now have a suspect and a motive. We’ll listen to that recording and dust the guitar case and everything inside for prints. By the way, the pill that Melanie stuck in Tom’s mouth before the EMTs arrived was a tic tac. I guess she wanted him to die with dignity.”

“So everything she did at The Last Place was a charade,” I said, feeling partly vindicated and partly duped. “Which is why she laid low afterwards, and didn’t talk to the press. But I guess her own desire to achieve fame as a performer caused her to let down her guard and start talking to me.”

“Either that or your mutual love of dogs,” Sgt. Davey offered.

I had to agree. At the same time, I realized that my fingerprints might be all over Tom's guitar, the case, and maybe even the Visine bottle. Would that make me a suspect?

"Don't worry about it," Sgt. Davey said, sensing my fear. "You said the guitar was a '54 Martin? Can't say I blame you for taking it out for a spin. I've got an old model Guild. Don't play it much anymore, and I think it needs to have the neck reset. Anyway, we'll get a set of your prints before you leave, just to make sure no one else touched the bottle. We already have Tom's prints, and we can probably get Melanie's from her wine glass."

The following week, I got a call from my friend at the PD. "Good news, Mouseman," said Detective Sheldon. "Melanie's fingerprints were all over the Visine bottle. That and her admissions on your little spying machine were enough to charge her with murder. Seems that she was adding teaspoons of Visine to Tom's water and coffee whenever she was at his place to pick up or return the dog. Also, we got a warrant for her friend Phil Simpson's laptop and found that he spent hours searching the dark web for information about tetrahydrozoline. Add in his incriminating statements to Melanie, and he's an aider and abettor. They are being booked at the county jail right now. Have you ever thought about becoming a junior cadet?"

"Very funny, Sheldon. I was actually thinking about something else. What about Ophelia? Does Melanie get to keep her, even though she's in jail? Inmates aren't allowed service dogs, are they?"

"I'll have to check with legal," Sheldon said. "But I think that unless Melanie's name is on the ownership papers, or unless Tom had a will that specified that she should get his dog, then Ophelia will go to Tom's heirs—just like his guitar eventually will."

“Do you have any information about his kin?” I asked. “The Beacon said he didn’t have any children.”

“You’re pretty hung up on that dog, aren’t you? Maybe you’d like be an investigator for Animal Control instead.”

“You saw the photo in the paper,” I explained. “That dog is Lassie of the twenty-first century. And Aussies are smart and friendly. Not that I personally would kill for one, but for a long time Jude has been asking me for a playmate.”

“Tell you what,” Sheldon said. “Tom has a brother in Phoenix who we have been in contact with. I’ll give him your number and ask him to give you a call. How’s that?”

A few days later, I got a call from James Templeton of Phoenix. He said that he was still in shock from his brother’s death, but that Detective Sheldon had told him about my role in the case and he was extremely grateful. Regarding Ophelia, James said that because Tom didn’t have a will and because James was his only living relative, he would be inheriting all of Tom’s property, including the dog. He said that he and his family had two cats and he didn’t think adding a dog to the mix would go over well.

“So, I was going to have the city put the dog up for adoption, unless maybe you would be willing to take her in,” James said, a lilt in his voice suggesting he knew the answer.

Not long afterwards, I presented the Sacramento Animal Control Department with a notarized letter from James Templeton regarding Tom’s family’s wishes for his orphaned Australian shepherd. I brought Ophelia

home and she and Jude are becoming fast friends, wrestling and chasing each other through the house, and quickly devaluing my furniture.

As for the Martin, James wanted me to have that as well, a further showing of the family's appreciation for my detective work. When I pointed out that the guitar was probably worth at least ten grand, James didn't balk. He said that Tom was the only one in the family who played an instrument, and that he wouldn't know a Martin from a Lewis. I thanked him profusely, and said I would do my best to honor Tom's memory by taking good care of his instrument, once it was no longer needed as evidence in the case.

After Melanie and Phil pleaded guilty and the case was closed, I went to the police station and picked up the guitar. But in the ensuing weeks, I found that I had little time to play it; after all, I now had two energetic dogs to exercise, on top of my teaching job and my open mic responsibilities. So I went back to Tom's apartment building. I walked up the steps and knocked at the door of Apartment 4. I handed the case to Jessica and told her that I looked forward to hearing her perform with it some Thursday night. I petted her dachshund before descending the staircase.