

**IN MY OFFICE**

“Oh, for the love of...Cookie! Cookie! Come here and bring some paper towels with you. I just spilled coffee all over the Mason files.”

Cookie’s my secretary, receptionist and all around “gal Friday”. This office wouldn’t run without her. It’s my office. I mean, just me. Calling her Cookie isn’t one of those male chauvinistic things. Her real name is Jenny and her last name is, well, judging by the spelling, unpronounceable. I know this much; it’s Scandinavian with a dose of Danish ancestry thrown in for good measure. When she interviewed for the job, she introduced herself as Cookie. In childhood she was never without a cookie in her hand and so a nickname was born.

“Thanks, angel,” I added. *That’s* one of those male chauvinistic things. She doesn’t mind and thinks it’s kind of cute. If a feminist heard me say that, she’d pounce all over me and berate Cookie for tolerating it. But she marches to her own drummer and lives life without a care. She says life’s too short to worry about the small things. She’s right. So is the feminist.

“Don’t worry about these notes. I have all of them in the computer. I’ll just print out a new set for you, Mr. K.”

“You’re a doll, kid. After that run across the street and get us both a sandwich, would ya? I’m getting a bit hungry.” I ask, feeling a rumble in my stomach. “Take some money from the petty cash box.”

“Sure, Mr. K.”

She’s a cute kid. Well, hardly a kid. She’s in her mid-twenties. She wouldn’t tell me her exact age because she was “too old”. Her words, not mine. Ah, if I were only

twenty years younger. Oh, well, I'm not. And I won't ever be.

I was wrapping up some final notes on a case I did for Mortimer Mason. He hired me because he thought Mrs. Mason was cheating on him. I followed her all around Bay Town. Getting her hair done, getting her nails done, getting her pedicure. This kind of work is not exactly the reason I got into the private detective racket; I'll get to that later. Given the types of cases I get these days, I don't know why I stay in this racket at all. I like watching old detective movies. Back then, it seemed like the detective knew his place in the world. They lived by a code and made it all look easy. That's what I wanted. Some people around town say I remind them of a 1940s detective. As far as I'm concerned, some people expel too much carbon dioxide.

Mrs. Mason wasn't seeing another man at all. She was running a small-time betting ring for the ladies that frequented all those salons. She collected the bets and when the Knicks didn't beat the point spread like they were supposed to (do they ever beat the point spread like they're supposed to?), Mrs. Mason owed a lot of money she couldn't cover. That's when she went off the grid for a while. Mr. Mason leapt to the conclusion that she took up with their pool boy or gardener.

I found her in a motel, alone, with a dark wig and big sunglasses like the old time movie stars used to wear. The boyfriend of one of her customers had ties to a certain family of, well, let's just call it questionable legality. He was mad she didn't pay off like she was supposed to and madder that she was elbowing in on his turf.

I brought her back to her husband who covered all the bets under the condition that she give up the gaming business. Old Morty, bald as a cue ball, was one of Bay Town's more affluent residents and while this loss barely scratched the surface of his empire, he was still none too

happy with her. He ran two of the three local bus companies that ran north-south through the city. His buses were old and they shook like you were holding onto a jackhammer. They were just about as noisy, too. He was always looking for an opening into getting that third route through town but never did get it. He did pretty well for himself, though. The success of his bus routes was due to their connection to major train stations, as well as politicians. And politicians connected to federal and state transportation funds which allowed him to get into more than just buses. He ran a bakery, a candy/newspaper stand, a storage facility out on Highway 99, and one of the two remaining movie theaters. It seems like he has a finger in every pie around town.

Cookie came back with our lunch, out of breath from climbing the stairs to the office. “One of these days those stairs are gonna kill me,” she complained. “I tripped coming up and I think one of my nails chipped.” Cookie would look beautiful, chipped nail or not. She had a way of moving her blonde hair behind her left ear even when it wasn’t in her face.

My office was seventeen steps above a shoe store nestled in Bay Town’s main shopping district. There was a dentist’s office across the hall. We were the only two offices up here. When people reached the ground level, they were either in pain from Dr. Spee or me. It’s too close to call who delivered more pain.

“Charlie’s got a pair of pumps in the window I was thinking about getting,” she said. “Maybe after payday.”

“Whatever makes you happy, angel.” She gave me a look that could have said, “Don’t call me angel” or “Can’t payday come a little earlier this week.” I wasn’t sure which, so I ignored it.

## A CLIENT

I heard the distinct footsteps of someone coming up the stairs. I say it was distinct because of a loud thump on each of the seventeen stairs. It was the obvious sound of a cane slamming into the stair followed by the huffing and puffing of an elderly person.

Look, this isn't my fault. I didn't build the place. It's a small office on top of a shoe store on a merchant's mile of clothing stores, jewelry stores, pizzerias, sandwich shops and more shoe stores. This building doesn't have an elevator or even an escalator. It was built around the mid-to-late 1930s after Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration put people to work and helped get the country out of the Great Depression. That's not to say elevators and escalators weren't invented at that time. They simply weren't deemed necessary for a building this size. No doubt the power of the mighty dollar prevailed so the convenience was cut. I suppose it's a miracle I even have electricity here.

Thump!

Another step closer to a potential client. The footfalls were getting further apart. I could hear him catching a breath before taking on the next step. I cleared my desk of sandwich wrappers and napkins so the place would look a little more respectable. I was able to see Cookie in the outer office through the partly closed door. She looked like she had the same idea as me, scurrying around putting a paper plate laden with dripped mayonnaise and shredded lettuce into the trash. She kept her partly full bottle of water on her desk. I wouldn't complain. After all, I was

the one that spilled coffee all over. Come to think of it, I smell some of the remains of that coffee on something somewhere.

Thump!

I hope this guy isn't going to drop from a heart attack. I don't mind publicity but that's not the kind I'm after. It must have been the low moan of exhaustion that he let out that raised the hairs on the back of my neck. And then I realized, he wasn't a he. He's a she. An old woman was coming to see me. I was pretty sure she wasn't coming to see Dr. Spee across the hall. Someone who's having this much trouble climbing up this mini-Mount Everest would have quickly located another dentist in a ground floor accommodation. Oh yes, she was coming to see me.

I don't hold out much hope from old women for any interesting investigations. This may sound cliché but they usually hire me to find a pair of earrings they lost, or a necklace, or worse, a cat. Usually these items are right where they left them but they're just in places they don't normally leave them. It's not like they just get up and walk away, felines excluded.

I heard the woman enter the reception office as Cookie greeted her. "Hello, may I help you?" The woman is huffing and puffing and I'm ready to dial 911 but she rallies and asks if I'm in.

"Yes, he's available. May I ask your name?" Cookie is the consummate professional.

"My name is Hortense Oglethorpinger." Cookie looked down for just a moment and gave a little smile. That was one unique moniker. Cookie's smile, though, almost seemed triumphant considering her last name. You remember, the unpronounceable one that could beat this woman's name hands down.

Hortense Oglethorpinger was a heavyset woman of sixty years relying on a metal cane that looped around her forearm to get around. She had fiery red hair, maybe even

more orange than red. The dye job looked as if it went straight to the root. You couldn't be blamed if you suddenly doused Hortense with a bucket of water in the unnecessary hope of saving her from complete immolation. She walked in a stoop probably due to her reliance on the cane. A pair of reading glasses dangled from a strap she wore around her neck. Her legs were big, almost the size of small tree trunks. It was no wonder that the seventeen steps up to my office gave her great difficulty. She had a lot of woman to move.

"Come this way," Cookie said and gave a courteous knock on my office door, knowing full well I heard every word and that the only surprise here was that the woman made it up the stairs in the first place. I bade her to come in and Cookie introduced us. "This is Mr. Knight. Mr. Knight, Mrs. Hortense Oglethorpinger."

"Miss," Hortense Oglethorpinger corrected. "I never married although I came close a couple of times." I gestured to her to have a seat and, as she sat down leaning her cane against my desk, Cookie made a hasty exit for the reception office but not before discreetly rolling her eyes at me.

"How do you do, Miss Oglethorpinger? I'm Sonny Knight." And then she went into it. She's one of those people, who when asked how they are, proceed to tell you.

"The first man to whom I was engaged was an interesting fellow. His name was Hartley Bentley. He led a double life, Hartley did. Funny to think about it now but that double life then led to his third life." She began to stare off into space as she said this. I brought her back to earth.

"What do you mean by a third life, Miss Oglethorpinger?" I asked.

"Oh, he spends it in prison now. And will continue to do so until the day he dies. You must understand that to me, he was the doting gentleman, religious, attentive, and coached softball for twelve-year-old boys. I later learned

that Hartley's interest in me was secondary to his interest in the twelve-year-old boys. Hartley had a small Cape Cod and one day I arrived earlier than he expected me. I caught him in bed that afternoon with one of his boys. Hartley was lying on top of him and the boy was barely visible, but, oh, he was there all right. Hartley was asleep and the boy was, too. At least that's how it appeared to me. I nearly fell to the floor but I composed myself for that moment and stifled a cry so as not to wake them. I silently made my way to the kitchen and phoned police. They arrived in less than a minute because it happened that a patrol car was cruising just around the block from Hartley's place.

"The police saw exactly what I saw. One of the officers was a woman and she led me out of the room to a parlor where I sat down shaking like a leaf on a tree. The other officer shook Hartley who woke up with a start and a cry of disbelief that he'd been caught red handed.

"The boy, on the other hand, did not wake up. The officer recognized that the boy's lips were blue and immediately began CPR while his partner radioed for a bus. Now, I thought that was very strange. What on earth? Can any good come from a bus? Wouldn't an ambulance have been more appropriate?"

I wasn't sure why she was telling me this story because I had the sense that this wasn't the reason she came to see me. I explained to Miss Oglethorpinger that the bus the officers were calling for was an ambulance.

"Oh yes, I know that now," she said somewhat sheepishly. "Hartley went to trial for aggravated manslaughter, endangering the welfare of a child and a couple of other charges. The judge sentenced him to thirty years in prison. The judge said it was more than the guidelines but he was perfectly within the law to do so. Hartley's defense attorney argued to no avail. Every few years I come to Hartley's parole hearing. I want to be sure he stays right where he is so the devil can find him for his

fourth life — the eternal one in that special place in hell for people like him.”

I nodded approvingly. I was about to ask her why she came to see me but she went on with the story of her love life.

“The second man I nearly married was for sure a keeper,” Miss Oglethorpinger said. “We met on a tourist vacation that took us to the Middle East. His name was Michel and he was very gentlemanly and dressed impeccably. Even in the near unbearable heat of the desert protected by the Sphinx, he wore a light beige suit, buttoned up to the neck, a perfectly made silk necktie and spats. His shoes were shiny and repelled any grain of sand that dared to come in contact. For a Frenchman, his English was good and, I tell you Mr. Knight, it was simply a delight to be in his company. By the eleventh day I dare say we were falling in love and my head was in a spin. We spent every minute of the day and night together.”

She blushed a little at that. Even through all the rouge she wore I was able to see her cheeks grow a little redder.

“One day we were in a small town just outside of Tel Aviv,” she continued, “when our tour bus stopped at a market that would, I suppose, be comparable to a flea market here. I went to one shop to stop and look at some beautiful rugs. Michel doted at my side when he spied some very handsome walking sticks and fedoras on the other side of the narrow road. He begged my indulgence and I shooed him away to shop to his heart’s content. I was holding the rug up above my head examining and admiring the fine workmanship. That’s when I heard the thunderous boom. A man wearing a vest covered in dynamite and shrapnel detonated himself in the middle of the road less than fifteen yards away from where I was standing.

“All you could hear was crying and screaming. All you could see was blood and severed body parts within a twenty-five-yard radius. Bodies had dropped like bowling



pins and one of those pins was my Michel. I looked across the road and saw him lying face down, a large piece of metal that ripped into his body protruded from the middle of his back. His legs were a bloody mess. I was going to get up and run to his side but my right leg simply wouldn't move. I cried out his name but there was no response, not even a twitch of a muscle. I later learned he died in the explosion.

"I guess I was lucky. The rug I was holding up was made of very thick shag and it miraculously deflected some other pieces that could have done serious harm to me. I recovered in a Tel Aviv hospital and left for Bay Town on the earliest flight I could get. This cane has been a long-time companion."

I gently offered my condolences but she waved it away with a dismissive hand. "It's long in the past now, Mr. Knight. Your secretary just brought back a sudden flood of memories when she called me Mrs."

"I'm sure she meant no disrespect, Miss Oglethorpinger," I said apologetically.

"No disrespect taken," she replied.

"Now what brings you to me, Miss Oglethorpinger? How can I help you?" I wanted to get on to business so that I would be in time for my next client. In a sense that wasn't a lie, but the whole truth and nothing but the truth is that I had no next client.

"There are two things that trouble me, Mr. Knight. The first is that I'm no longer being paid to play the piano at Benjamin Franklin's restaurant and the other is that the inheritance I was to receive from a branch of the Oglethorpinger family name has yet to materialize."

She stared at me as if I should know what she was talking about. I can say one thing for sure, though. This had nothing to do with missing earrings or a lost cat.

"How did you get involved playing piano at Franklin's, Miss Oglethorpinger?"

“Why, from my son, of course.”

“Your son?” I started, “but I thought you said....”

“That I wasn’t married? I’m not Mr. Knight. I never said I was a virgin.”

**GO FLY A KITE**

I should probably explain about Ben Franklin's place. It's an upstairs-downstairs establishment that's owned and operated by Ben Franklin. That's really his name although his first name isn't Benjamin. It's really Bennett but ask any of his regulars and they'll swear on a stack of bibles that his name is Benjamin. He doesn't let on, neither confirms nor denies, and never bothers to correct any of his customers that his first name isn't Benjamin.

I know for sure it isn't Benjamin because a few years back I got involved in straightening out a shakedown scheme where Ben was the victim. Part of my investigation led me to the bank accounts he held at the Bay Town City Bank and Loan, one of those classic massive buildings with the Roman style pillars, marble floors and chains on the pens. Security, indeed! Having obtained Ben Franklin's authorization, I asked the bank manager to see Benjamin Franklin's accounts. I was promptly informed he had no such customer and that my wisecracks weren't appreciated. The bank manager suddenly had a change of attitude when he asked if I was referring to Bennett Franklin. I told him the restaurateur Benjamin Franklin. I was curtly corrected.

I learned in that investigation that Ben Franklin had a silent partner, none other than Mortimer Mason. I was surprised by this and yet, after putting it in perspective, I wasn't. It was hard to conceive that Ben Franklin had

enough dough to scratch up to complete his vision of epicurean delights. The bank was only going so far. Mortimer Mason saw an opening and filled in the rest of the “Benjamins” Ben needed for his restaurant with the promise of being a silent partner.

The similarity in name, though, didn’t slow Bennett Franklin from capitalizing on the confusion. He named his establishment Go Fly A Kite. Upstairs was a classy restaurant with tuxedoed waiters, linen tablecloths, linen napkins and prices on the menu that showed you exactly who paid for all the elegance. To be sure, the food was the best in town and rarely receives less than a five-star rating on all the popular websites. Some people just can’t bring themselves to rate the place with five stars. There’s always someone who just can’t be satisfied no how no way.

Go Fly A Kite’s downstairs establishment was much more informal. There was a long L-shaped bar at one end of the room. There were plenty of tables and booths around and some of the booths provided a certain level of privacy not commonly found in your garden-variety pub. I’ve been known to use those booths myself when meeting with clients who needed a drink after the news I would have to share. Sometimes I thought they just didn’t want to climb seventeen steps up to my office. I couldn’t blame them for that.

There was no shortage of portraits of our founding fathers all around the establishment, both upstairs and down. I can see how this could get a little overdone but it was displayed quite tastefully.

Bennett Franklin was a stout gentleman of some forty years, certainly not less. He’s been in this business for twelve years now and Go Fly A Kite has had some well-known business leaders and state and local politicians as steady customers. I’ve even seen some members of that family with the questionable businesses eating there. And a lot of the time they ate with the state and local politicians. I

always thought of Bennett as the type of guy constantly looking over his shoulder. I never could shake that feeling because there was just something about the way he made eye contact...he didn't. When speaking to him, he looked up, down and sideways, rarely looking you in the eyes.

Ben's master bartender was "Big" Frankie Pierce. Just a coincidence I suppose that the bartender's name was real close to Franklin Pierce, president of the United States in the mid-1850s. You half expected the valet parking attendant to be named Paul Revere...he wasn't. He was just a tall, skinny kid named Jimmy. His valet uniform hung on him like a suit hanging in a closet on a wire hanger.

Big Frankie earned his nickname easily. The guy tipped the scales at nearly three hundred pounds. He worked on his feet most of the evening making drinks. That weight, though, can wear a guy like that down. By the nine o'clock hour, drinks came out of the bar a bit more slowly. Always prepared properly, just slowly. He was bald on top with a ring of black hair that stretched across the back of his head from ear to ear. He continuously mopped the sweat from his brow with a discreetly hidden dish towel he kept within reach under the counter. I always wondered if he mixed up that towel with another he used to dry wine glasses and beer mugs. Best not to think about it.

Bennett and Big Frankie seemed to have a mental connection to each other. Just a look from one or the other can mean to cut off drinks to a guy at the end of the bar who looked unsteady or a glance at the basement door to get more liquor from storage. They had some kind of telepathy going on between them.

Entertainment in the upstairs room was perfect for that romantic dinner. A jazz trio could knock out American songbook tunes or Beatles classics in just the right tempo. Sometimes there was a solo pianist. Downstairs had a more folk and light blues atmosphere. Tuesday nights were

reserved as an open mic offering. Amateur musicians were given up to thirty minutes to entertain the customers. The musicians were young and old alike and sometimes played original material. They weren't paid for their efforts. Just the chance to be heard was payment enough. I was there the Tuesday night before Thanksgiving when I heard a familiar voice on the small stage. Seated at the piano was none other than Cookie. She sang the Billy Joel tune "New York State of Mind", a sultry version of "It Had to Be You" and a third song I was unfamiliar with. Ah, if I were twenty years younger. Wait, I think I said that once before.