

ZAMBONI
IS NOT A
PASTA



A Blue Bridge Mystery
by Michael K. Zimmerli

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This is a work of fiction. This stuff all came out of the author's head. Names, characters, places, and incidents are used fictitiously or are the product of the author's imagination. While some places are real, all events and characters are fictional unless otherwise noted in the Acknowledgments.

Cover photo: the Blue Bridge by Michael K. Zimmerli

Zamboni Is Not A Pasta

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PREFACE

IT MADE ALL THE LOCAL papers in Winnipeg, Manitoba. In early 2002, Martin Favreaux, a Zamboni driver at the local civic center/high school hockey arena, was thrown from the Zamboni he was driving and nearly run over by the 4-ton machine. The ice-smoothing vehicle made big loops around the rink, smashing into the boards repeatedly, until – like a bull finally worn down by the matador – the Zamboni ceased its wild ballet and rolled to a standstill. The multiple collisions with the sides of the rink had unstuck whatever had become stuck, and the machine had returned to its usual docile self.

Mechanics and maintenance technicians at the arena examined the ice-conditioning machine after the incident but could find nothing wrong with it. Their best guess was that a small chunk of ice had stuck to the driver's foot and come off while Favreaux was driving. The ice chunk then became lodged in the accelerator's linkage, causing the machine to accelerate rapidly and become non-responsive to repeated attempts to reduce its speed.

One spectator at the arena, Bob Luschawitz, said he'd never seen anything like it but thought it was

exciting, so much so that he suggested the arena rig the Zamboni to stick wide open each week. Luschawitz said they could offer a prize to anyone able to stay on the Zamboni for more than eight seconds, like bull riding. Luschawitz added, “There’s a million-dollar idea I gave you fer nothin’, eh?”

Martin Favreaux, the ill-fated Zamboni driver, suffered minor injuries to his lower back from being tossed off the ice-resurfacing machine onto the ice. The doctor who examined Favreaux explained that injuries to the back can be challenging to diagnose and tricky to prevent from recurring in the future. Rather than risk a big lawsuit and an even bigger payout, the city offered the driver a lump sum settlement. In return, he promised to move away from the Winnipeg area and never seek further compensation for his troubles.

“HOW MUCH FURTHER SOUTH AND where is ‘here,’ Doug?”

Jimmy had never talked with Doug before and was surprised that a man who made his living describing fast-moving events unfolding in front of him could be so tongue-tied when asked to answer basic questions. Jimmy pulled up a map on his computer and had it zero in on his own location. Then he pulled it back to display the surrounding fifty miles around his house. His computer was linked to his phone. It would be easy to bring up the same map on his phone if he needed to leave and meet up with Doug.

“We were down at Daytona Beach, and we had driven back to Jacksonville because we were going to fly back in a couple of days. We had a reservation at a hotel near the airport, the Doubletree by Hilton. It’s right on the airport property. It was a little pricey, but I figured it was worth it for two nights.”

“Okay, so you were in Daytona Beach. Then what?”

“There’s a lot of stuff out near the Jacksonville airport, and I figured we could have a couple of nice

dinners, shop a little, get some good sleep, and be rested before we headed back.”

“So ... ?”

“So we stopped in St. Augustine on the way up from Daytona Beach. It’s the oldest city in the United States, you know. They’ve got this big outlet mall place that’s on both sides of the interstate, can you believe it? It made me think of the Twin Cities. Of course, it wasn’t as big as the Mall of America, but it was still pretty big. Anyway, we got up to the hotel at the airport at about 4 o’clock. I didn’t want to get there too early because you can’t always check in if you’re early, you know? But 4 o’clock is fine, so we went inside to check in, and while I was signing us in, Ruthie suddenly said she needed to run out to the car to get something, and she never came back.”

“This happened around four p.m.?” Jimmy had still been enjoying the view and the quiet at the Riverside Café at 4 o’clock. He looked at his watch; 5:14 p.m.

“Yeah. It’s only a couple of hours on I95 if you don’t stop at the outlet stores, but Ruthie wanted to stop. With lunch and shopping, it took us about five hours to get here.”

“So she’s been gone about an hour; a little over, and you haven’t heard from her or anyone else with info about her?”

“Nothing.”

Jimmy sat for a moment trying, trying to understand why Doug wasn’t out looking for Ruth or, at the very least, telling this story to the cops. There was something Doug wasn’t telling Jimmy about the situation.

“I don’t really know what to say, Doug. I don’t know what I can do for you that the police can’t do. You *have* called the police, right?”

“Not exactly.”

Jimmy groaned inwardly. “What does ‘not exactly’ mean, Doug?”

“While I was checking in with one desk clerk, there was another clerk behind the desk working on some stuff. When Ruthie didn’t come back in right away, I just made small talk with the clerk who was helping me. You know how women are, and if Ruthie was trying to find something in the car and couldn’t find it right away, she was not coming back in until she found it. That’s what I thought, anyway. But after about

fifteen minutes, I was really starting to wonder where she had gone; what could possibly be taking her so long, you know? I thought maybe she was looking at some flowers and talking to a landscaper. Ruthie's done that before. Sometimes she has a thing for flowers."

"Where are you right now, Doug?"

"At the hotel. Out by the airport. I was already checked in, and I used the computer they have in the business room, and that's when I looked you up... I was looking up *any* investigator, actually ... but then I saw your name in the search page results. I know I never knew you back in Rapids, but I knew *of* you, and I knew that you and Ruthie had a connection, a kind of history, sort of ..." he trailed off. Jimmy took advantage of the silence to give Doug the real story.

"Ruth and I don't have a history, Doug. She was sleeping with that moronic bully Jack Powers. He saw me leave the skating rink near her house in the middle of the night and decided I wrecked the warming house with a Zamboni. Powers tried to force me to confess, but he couldn't say how he knew I had been there or where he had been because he was married. Powers wasn't with his wife that night; he was with Ruth. And that's the only connection Ruth and I have."

There was silence on the phone for a minute. Jimmy wondered if they had been cut off. Then he heard Doug clear his throat, take a breath, and in a raspy voice, he said, "You're the only one who can help me right now, Jimmy. I'm a long way from home, and I don't know anybody down here. I mean *anybody*. I don't even know you, but at least we know people and places together, so it's almost like I know you."

Jimmy rolled his eyes back into his head, then gave a tiny sigh and said, "Tell me more about when Ruth went outside at the hotel, Doug."

"Well, I said to the clerk, 'I wonder what's taking her so long?' and the other clerk interrupted us and said, 'I was looking at the monitor for the courtesy drive-through outside, and I saw her get into another car and leave.' And I was like, 'What?' And he repeated what he said: 'I saw her get into another car and leave.' I asked if he could show me on the monitor, you know; like they do on cop shows. And he said he could. I didn't expect that, but he did it. But they can't zoom in like on tv and make everything crystal clear."

"So, you did see the video, Doug?" Jimmy asked, trying to pull him back on track.

Doug continued his account of the events. “Anyway, the clerk backed the video up, and I saw Ruthie come out of the hotel, and a car drove up near where she was standing. She went over to it. I could tell the passenger window was rolled down because Ruthie put her hands on the door, bent down a bit, and looked in. I could see her mouth moving, then she stepped back, and crossed her arms. The driver got out, ran around the front of the car, grabbed her, and shoved her into the back seat. Then he ran back around the car, got in, and drove off. Fast.”

“And?” he said. “Could you see what the driver looked like?”

Jimmy realized he was standing next to his desk now, no longer sitting. His body had automatically responded to the information he was receiving. He knew he was becoming invested in the situation; he was part of it now. His instincts were telling him it was time to go. There wasn’t much that Jimmy could do from his home office; he needed to be on site.

“More than what he looked like,” Doug said. “Jimmy, I could see *who* it was. It was Jack Powers.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE BLUE BRIDGE IS REAL, a familiar landmark to the locals and others who like to take a more leisurely drive on US17 south from Kingsland and St. Marys. Look for more landmarks, side stories, and anecdotes about people, places, and things in and around Camden County in this and subsequent Blue Bridge Mysteries.

Most of the landmarks in this book are real, but Jimmy's house near the Blue Bridge on US17 over the St. Marys River is not. There is no house where Jimmy's home supposedly sits. Railroad tracks and marshland occupy the space where Jimmy's house would be.

Robert Pepé Perez is an actual retired New York and Naval cop and good friend. He is my go-to for law enforcement and weapons information. He is not a private investigator, but he is on the security team at church. I asked him if I could use him in the book, and he said, "Sure." That's one thing I love about Pepé – he (almost) always says yes without hearing the question first.

Kingsland and St. Marys are wonderful cities in southeast Georgia, as is Woodbine, the county seat that

is just a few miles north on US17. You should come visit!

By the way, you can take a look before you visit. Check out <https://visitstmarys.com/>.