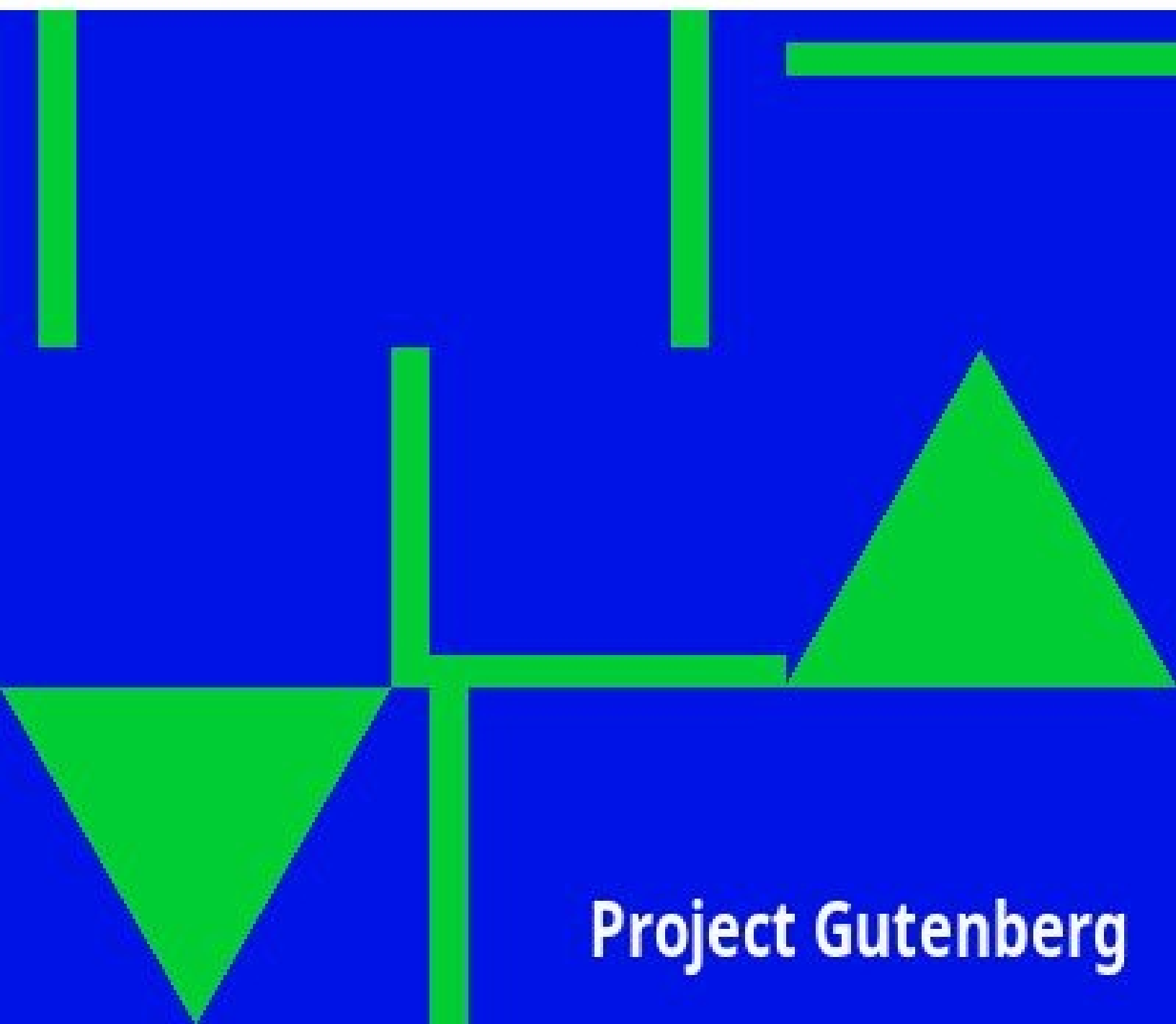


The Last Straw

William J. Smith



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THE LAST STRAW

Some hypotheses are rational—
if not logical—but,
by their nature,
aren't exactly open
to controlled experiment!

by **WILLIAM J. SMITH**

ILLUSTRATED BY GEORGE SCHELLING

"**T**here's absolutely nothing we can pin it down to with any real certainty," Kessler said. "No mechanical defects that we're sure of, no sabotage we can put our finger on, no murder or suicide schemes, nothing! We've put that plane back together so perfectly that it could almost fly again! We've got dossiers an inch thick on practically everybody who was aboard, crew and passengers. We've done six months' work and we don't have one single positive answer. The newspapers were yelling about the number of insurance policies issued for the flight but none of them looks really phony."

He stood at the huge window of Senator Brogan's office, looking out at the shimmering sunlight on one of Washington's green malls. Over the treetops he could catch a glimpse of the Capitol dome.

Brogan sat comfortably in the big chair behind his desk. "But weren't there an unusually large number of policies issued?" he asked. His big hands toyed with a little silver airplane propeller, a souvenir of his long-standing interest in the problems of commercial aviation. "You know," he went on, leaning forward on his elbows and replacing the propeller neatly on the base of his fountain pen stand, "this is a matter of interest to me in more than an official sense. Eileen Bennett was one of my wife's best friends. She was on her way to Washington to visit us after a stopover in New York."

Kessler nodded. "I know that's one of the reasons you wanted to compare notes." He stood with his back to the window now, a stocky man with a jaw to match and short-cropped graying hair. "The newspapers were quite right, of course. There were an unusually large number of insurance policies issued for the flight but nearly all were for the minimum amount."

"What about Pearlow?"

Kessler frowned. "Pearlow had reason to be nervous. You know he survived a crash just three years ago. But anyway, the fact remains that we've looked into the backgrounds of every one of those people. None of them was facing any real financial difficulties!"

"That sounds odd in itself," George Brogan said, smiling slightly.

Kessler ran his hand over his hair and returned to sit in a leather chair beside the senator's desk. He smiled in response. "I know it sounds odd but it's true. Their troubles were all run-of-the-mill—getting taxes paid, the mortgage, a new car, a long-overdue raise in salary—that sort of thing. Nothing that anybody in his right mind would kill or commit suicide over."

Brogan lifted a bushy eyebrow in question. "Maybe you've put your finger on it there?"

Kessler ticked off his reply, holding up one hand. "One former mental patient, pronounced cured ten years ago and apparently perfectly normal; a well-established businessman; a used-car dealer; three currently under psychoanalysis; a college girl twenty-one; a housewife with four children; an injured veteran just out of service. None showed any violent tendencies according to their doctors."

"Any criminals?"

Kessler regarded him wryly from beneath his eyebrows. "Don't kid me, senator. I know you've done your own investigation on this. But to answer your question: Evan Prewitt's your man—only one who could qualify. Tried on a manslaughter charge for killing his brother-in-law while they were out hunting. He said it was an accident and the jury agreed. He was acquitted. True, he had one of the large insurance policies, but then I'm sure you know Miss Bennett had one, too."

The senator nodded. "I knew that. But I know very little of Eileen's financial situation otherwise. Not," he added hastily, "that I would for a moment suspect Eileen Bennett of harming a fly. She's one person I could rule out. It would be just like her to fall down the steps getting off the plane, but as for her planning her own death or anyone else's, that's out of the question. She was much too scatterbrained. I hope that's not speaking ill of the dead."



Kessler frowned. "You'll forgive me, senator, in that regard, if I ask you a question? Miss Bennett didn't drink, did she?"

"Eileen? Heavens, no! Oh, she'd have a drink to be sociable, but it was usually a sherry and half the time she wouldn't finish that. I don't suppose you were envisaging the possibility that she hijacked the plane from four officers and two stewardesses and then wrecked it?" This time he smiled the broad toothy smile that made him a favorite with Washington news photographers.

"Hardly. The thing is, I've gotten so I feel I knew every one of those seventy-three people personally. You know, I've interviewed almost two thousand friends and acquaintances of those people and I'm not quite finished yet, just hoping I'll run across something that makes sense. I could have told you Miss Bennett's habits with a glass of sherry, that's why I was a little surprised."

Senator Brogan shook his head. "Oh, no, I didn't mean to suggest anything like that. It's just that Eileen was ... well, clumsy is an unkind word ... unco-ordinated I guess, though she tried to make a joke of it. She was always bumping into things, spilling her glass of water and things like that, but not because she had been drinking too much."

"As for drinking," Kessler said, "there were quite a few real guzzlers on the plane. I don't mean that actor, who was notorious. He'd just lost a part because of his drinking and he was sober for a change. But it's amazing what you'll turn up about respectable people when you start investigating."

"I'm very interested in that aspect, as you may know," Brogan said. "We periodically get bills which would outlaw drinking aboard planes. What are your ideas on that subject?"

"Well, I don't mind a drink aboard a plane myself. Helps me relax. But I have seen some pretty unpleasant things develop during a flight when you get a nasty drunk riled up."

"Did you find any suggestion of that?"

"Not really. The plane took off from Chicago just after lunch time and a good many of the people who got on there had had a drink or two, but there wasn't really enough time to make trouble. The plane had hardly cleared the runway. All the passengers, except one, had their seat belts fastened."

"Now there is something I didn't know! Who was this?"

"Preston, a lawyer from New Jersey. You know how tentative any reconstruction of events must be under the circumstances, but we're pretty sure of this, especially since there was no fire. Preston apparently broke a fingernail trying to fasten his seat belt and one of the stewardesses had brought him a little first-aid kit. He had torn open a Band-Aid and was trying to fasten it around his finger. Obviously this was just before the crash."

"But how do you know he did it with the seat belt?"

"Guesswork, except that it wasn't fastened and we think maybe it just got overlooked after he hurt himself."

"Was he one of the drinkers?"

"No, not at all. Never touched it. In point of fact, nobody was really drunk at the time of the take-off. The flight engineer however had had two drinks at lunch."

Brogan raised his eyebrows. "You *were* thorough. You're sure?"

Kessler nodded. "Brown was a problem drinker though it didn't seem to interfere with his work. The two drinks are all he had that day so far as we can determine. He showed up for lunch at a girl friend's apartment with a black eye. Made some joke about walking into a door and wouldn't tell her anything else about it. She gave him the drinks at his request, and a big lunch, and put a little makeup on his eye because he'd been pulled from a flight a few months before when he showed up looking as though he'd been in a scrap."

"How did he really get the black eye?"

"There you've got me. Maybe he was telling his girl friend the truth. He had an estranged wife, incidentally, but she hadn't seen him for years. Good riddance, she said."

Senator Brogan picked up the propeller again and rolled it reflectively between his palms. He looked intently at Kessler. "Nothing seems really conclusive, does it? You know some of the wild rumors that have been going around about this crash?" Kessler nodded and started to speak. Brogan held up his hand. "Let me finish. You know and I know—or at least we think we do—that there's nothing to most of these rumors. And I'm not even talking about the wilder ones, like the little people from outer space who are knocking our airplanes down without

leaving a trace. You get three or four of these unexplainable accidents and somebody is sure to come up with a really crackpot idea. The general public will not be convinced that this sort of thing can happen with no discoverable reason. Usually we have no way of reconstructing what happened before the accident. Just a couple of unintelligible remarks on the radio, as there were here, and then everyone is dead, the plane is totally demolished, and witnesses on the ground come up with ten different hysterical accounts—if there are any witnesses at all!"

"But this was a little different, after all, senator," Kessler interjected.

Brogan held up his hand again. "Just let me have my say. You know we folks down here in Washington always have a lot to say and we hate being interrupted." He smiled briefly. "This sort of thing has been going on in aviation history for the last fifty years—these unexplained accidents—and there's nothing especially new about this last one. You're shaking your head, but let me continue. One of the reasons they are now getting so much attention is that with the big jets the loss of life is apt to be pretty appalling when an accident does happen, but the actual number of accidents per flight—as you well know—is far fewer than it used to be and has been going down steadily over the years."

Kessler, slumped deep in his chair, fingers arced together before him, stared morosely but said nothing. "Secondly," Brogan went on, "it is not true that these accidents are happening more to American planes than foreign ones. Again it is chiefly that we are scheduling more and more flights. On the law of averages we are doing very well. You know how many crashes the foreign carriers have chalked up in the last year. And just about the same proportion are these so-called unexplainable crashes. It's not that they are unexplainable! It's simply that we don't have the information that would explain them! The very circumstances preclude that. Am I making any sense?"

Kessler nodded. "Yes, senator, I suppose you are, but it doesn't make me any happier. I want to find out why and stop them."

"So do I, I assure you. But let me finish briefly. Among the other wild rumors are suggestions that we are being sabotaged by foreign agents or by their tools. Well now, I'd be the last one in the world—you know my record—to deny the possibility of some folks doing this if they thought they could get away with it. If I thought for one moment—or if I thought that you thought for one moment—that there was some international sabotage going on here, I'd say go on with your

investigation till you get the answer!"

Brogan flung himself back dramatically in his big chair, throwing out his arms. "Meanwhile, what are you accomplishing? You've spent—and I happen to know this for a fact—almost a million dollars on this investigation. By your own account you have personally talked to two thousand people about it! You have kept this accident in the public eye and given it far greater importance than it deserves—through no malicious fault of your own, to be sure! But what have you got? Nothing. Exactly what I came up with. Nothing. Tell me, for example, where you got with the political possibilities of this thing. I know you didn't overlook it!"

Kessler smiled wearily. "Just about everything you say is true, George. Only, you see, I would probably never have ended up running this investigation if I were the sort of person that comes up with a question mark for an answer. I said 'human error' in my report, but that doesn't satisfy me. I want to know what human error. I don't think anything happens without a reason. Somehow I feel that it's all there, the answer, in those couple of million details we've pieced together about the plane and the crew and the passengers and it's staring me in the face if I could only see it."

"I agree with you." Brogan raised his hand again in his imperious gesture then dropped it to the desk. "No. I asked to have my say. Now you have yours." He sat patiently.



Kessler grinned. "Thanks, senator. As for the political sabotage possibilities, you've undoubtedly seen a copy of my confidential report. Three of the passengers had definite subversive connections in the past. I know, I'm not trying to make much of this. Their associations all date back to the 1930s and one of them was just a girl flirting with a Communist fellow student, but we didn't want to overlook any possibilities. Pearlow, on the other hand, was Russian born. He's the one who barely survived another airline crash three years ago."

"Pearlow was perfectly loyal. Just an ironic coincidence, that's all. I know the papers tried to make something out of it but I find it hard to believe that you took it seriously. As for Stepowski, he testified openly about his past here in Washington five years ago."

"I know. I even know that Stepowski's favorite television program was 'I Led Three Lives.' I tell you there's very little I don't know about anybody who was aboard, with one possible exception."

Brogan was alert. "Who's this?"

"Oh, it's no great mystery, senator. Robert J. Spencer, of Keokuk, Iowa. We know quite a bit about him, actually, but it's all third hand. He was a retired court stenographer, seventy-three years old, going to New York for his sister's funeral at the time of the crash. He boarded the plane at Chicago. He took a train to Chicago because he didn't like to fly, then he got sick there, apparently from some mushrooms he picked at home and had for lunch before he left. He had to lay over in Chicago for a day and then he got on the plane at the last minute so he wouldn't miss the funeral."

"Sounds to me as though you knew everything about him."

"Funny thing, though," said Kessler, "I have yet to speak to a single person who ever exchanged ten words with Robert J. Spencer. He lived alone, a complete recluse. Neighbors never saw him. Probably his sister would have been able to tell me something about him but she's dead. Actually, while I'm here in Washington I'm going to stop by and see an old acquaintance of his, a Miss Valeria Schmitt. They worked together as court stenographers in Iowa City more than twenty-five years ago. They were engaged but they never married. She moved here during World War II and they never saw much of each other after that." He shrugged. "I know it's a long shot, but I don't want to miss a chance."

Senator Brogan shook his head, smiling. "I have to admire you, Kessler. But may I express some little reservation? Do you really think looking up an acquaintance of Mr. Spencer's from twenty-five years ago is going to help materially in solving the mystery of a plane crash that occurred just last February? Or that the taxpayers could be very happy at this sort of expenditure of their money?"

Kessler flushed darkly and leaned forward in his chair, clasping his hands. "Senator," he said, his voice cracking a little, "the taxpayers are not spending a cent currently on this investigation. My staff has been dismissed or returned to their regular duties. I went off the payroll three weeks ago. My final report has been submitted. I'm doing this at my own expense because I feel that I have to. I'm not satisfied. There has to be an answer!"



Brogan turned the emotion away from himself with professional skill. "Bob, look," he said, addressing Kessler by his given name for the first time during their interview, "I'm not criticizing you personally for a second. And that's not why I asked you to stop by. I asked you to come over and see me as a favor. You're not working for me and I don't pretend to be in any position of authority as far as your investigation goes. I asked you here because I'm deeply concerned myself about these accidents and I wanted to know if you could enlighten me in any way. May I say one personal thing though? Aren't you getting emotionally involved in this?"

"Of course I'm emotionally involved!" Kessler burst out. "I'm sorry, George." He passed his hand over his face and went on in a lower voice. "It's just that I've been eating, breathing, sleeping, dreaming this thing for the last six months. I feel as though I knew everyone of those seventy-three people personally. The Patterson girl, who looked as though she might be going to have a little good luck for a change. I even know that the pilot nicked himself shaving that morning. His friends called him Mike even though his name was Edward. He had a fight with his wife the night before. She wanted to eat out and he wanted to stay home. He was working with this crew for the first time though they all knew each other very well."

"Really?" Brogan perked up. "I suppose I knew that. Is it possibly significant?"

"Possibly, possibly. Everything is possibly significant but nothing really adds up. The routines were all standard, the four men were all vets. Aside from the pilot they had all worked together for years, off and on."

"Still, couldn't wires have gotten crossed as a result of some misunderstanding with a new pilot aboard?"

"Sure they could. What with the flight engineer being a souse and the pilot new to the crew and the co-pilot just back after a two-month layoff because of a ski accident. 'Human error,' that's what I said."

"Ski accident? I thought it was the stewardess that had the ski accident? I'm not going to trip you up in your own bailiwick now, am I?"

"Stewardess?" Kessler frowned. "You must be mistaken, senator."

"I felt quite sure," Brogan said musingly.

"I know your reputation for a fact, senator," Kessler said uncomfortably, "but a

stewardess with a ski accident. Oh! Oh, yes. But not recent. That was Miss Sosnak, but it was almost a year before. The newspaper accounts got garbled. Both she and the other stewardess, Miss Prentiss, were ski enthusiasts. They were thinking about spending the weekend at Stowe after they got to New York, even though they had both broken ankles previously. Their friends in San Francisco were joking with them about it before they left. They gave Miss Sosnak a doll with a cast on its leg as a gag. The doll was found in the wreckage. Apparently Miss Sosnak had given it to the little girl who was killed on the flight, Barbara Patterson, who actually had a cast on her leg at the time. She had fallen and hurt herself a few days before."



A buzzer on Senator Brogan's desk hummed two short discreet hums. Brogan made no attempt to answer it. He stood and came around the desk, putting his hand on Kessler's shoulder. "Don't get up just yet," he said. "My secretary buzzes me every fifteen minutes in case I want to show my constituents how busy I am. If there's anyone waiting, let them wait. There's just a little bit more I'd like to say." He sat in the wide embrasure of the window and leaned forward on a crossed knee. He looked the picture of negligence but he was obviously pausing to choose his words with care. Kessler shifted his chair to face him.

"I won't mince words," Brogan said, "because I think we understand each other. We always have. Thanks to your splendid investigation, and my only little efforts perhaps, we know more about the circumstances of this crash than any other in aviation history. I had exactly your feeling that the answer ought to be there. But I don't see it and you don't see it. We know absolutely everything but one thing. We don't know what caused it. And we're never going to know that. I really think you are doing the aviation industry, yes and the country itself, a real injury by going on. I won't say what I think you're doing to yourself because it will sound like a sentimental appeal and you've known me too long not to know I'm pretty hard-headed."

"The investigation is over," Kessler said sullenly.

"Yes, I know, officially, but you've just told me you're going on with it personally."

"It's one last remote chance."

"Well, tell me this, Bob, if this last remote chance doesn't work out, will you call it quits and not start in on another last remote chance? Will you and Margaret get on up to that place of yours in Maine and take a good long vacation?"

Kessler smiled wryly. "Margaret has ideas of her own along that line. She's followed through on this with me all the way but she came down to Washington to meet me today and she says she's going to drag me off when I'm through here."

Brogan smiled his famous smile. "Good girl, Margaret. If she's here and has a leash on you, I know I don't have anything to worry about. There's nothing I admire more than a woman who has a mind and uses it. I'll tell you something else," he said, standing and permitting Kessler to rise this time. "I was truly sorry about Eileen Bennett's death on this plane, but Eileen was getting along like me. Sarah Pollitt's was the really tragic case, to have accomplished so much so young and with that fearful handicap! From childhood, too, wasn't it?"

"Actually, she was about seventeen. Someone threw a firecracker in a car in which she was riding, but she could see partially with one eye."

Brogan nodded. "But a beautiful woman, for all that. And then to have achieved so much. I understand nothing about chemistry but I know her international repute. She had just become head of the chemistry department at Wellesley, hadn't she?"

"Radcliffe."

Brogan laughed loudly. "I might have known I couldn't trip you up. But tell me this," he added slyly, "did you know that Dr. Pollitt had once been a good friend of Bergmann?"

"Our former Commie on the plane? Yes, as a matter of fact, we came across that quite accidentally. You did a good job, senator."

"Well, you know we have some sources not generally accessible."

"Then you undoubtedly found out that though Sarah Pollitt and friend Bergmann knew each other well at one time she dropped him like a hot cake when he suggested she do a little undercover work for the Commies. Their being on the same plane was the sheerest coincidence."

Brogan stood with his hand on the door which led to the corridor. He nodded.

"That was a little hard to take, wasn't it? We really thought we had something there for a while." He sighed. "It's like the whole thing, Bob, irrational and unexplainable. And believe me, I hope I haven't sounded critical of the job you did. I hope we can call on you whenever we need really expert advice?"

"Of course, senator, though I don't feel much like an expert on anything right now."

"You did your best, Bob." He patted him on the shoulder in farewell.

Kessler walked down a long marble corridor to a rotunda. His wife waved to him from across a staircase. She looked pert and cool and girlish in her ice-blue suit and perky hat. "Here, darling! Oh, you look so discouraged! Did George give you a hard time? He can be a brute when he wants to."

"Not really. He thinks I ought to call it quits."

"And don't you think so, dear?" she asked, taking his arm as they started down the stairs.

"Who me?" He grinned with sudden boyishness. "You know me. Never say die! If I thought we ought to give it up would I be trying to find this old bag Valeria Schmitt or whatever her name is? Brogan was right, that's just about as farfetched a notion as has come down the pike in a long time."

"Well, it may be farfetched, but she's not an old bag. I called her to make sure she'd be at home. I didn't know how long you'd take in there. She was very excited that you were coming to see her."

"Did she know who I was?"

"Of course, even aside from the letters. She's been following the investigation very carefully. She didn't seem to think it was at all curious that you wanted to see her because she knew someone twenty-five years ago."

Kessler laughed as they stepped out into the hot sunlight. "Well, if she's not a bag she's a bat. The more I think about it the crazier it seems. Suppose we get it over with now and start for Maine tonight. We'll be all set to go."

"Good! Good! That's the way I like to hear you talk. We'll make it a second honeymoon."

Margaret was still musing dreamily when they finally got to the car and started off in the direction of Silver Spring, where Valeria Schmitt lived in maiden retirement. "It will be just wonderful, dear," she said and then sighed. "Oh, but it reminds me of those poor Valentines, going off on their honeymoon."

"Now, now. I'm the one who's supposed to be obsessed with the crash, not you."

"Oh, but that was so sad. He was so handsome. And she was a pretty little thing, too, if you could tell from the wedding pictures. And then having postponed the wedding twice, too! It seems just like some fate was dogging them."

Kessler chuckled. "I don't think mumps really qualifies as an evil fate."

"No, but can you imagine! First him and then her! If it had been only one or the other they would both be alive and happy today."

"Alive anyway. I talked to some of his friends who suggested he was a mean one even before he had mumps." He smiled at his wife. "Even if he was good-looking. And now will you look out for Miss Schmitt's number before I pile us up and we miss out on our second honeymoon?"



Miss Schmitt proved to look as well as sound much younger than Kessler knew her to be, a bright and plump little woman with very very blond hair tightly curled. Margaret had come along into her little apartment without much urging. Miss Schmitt had apparently been expecting both of them because she had three flower-painted glasses out for lemonade.

"I suppose I'm old-fashioned," she was saying cheerfully before they were even settled, "but I don't hold by cocktails. Nothing more cooling than good old lemonade. Real lemons, too, not this bottled stuff. You know what they say—you can take them out of the country but you can't take the country out of them!" She laughed breathlessly. "I've been living in the big city for twenty-five years now but I'm still an Ioway girl. Get back almost every year, too, still perfectly at home there. I'll be sitting out on the veranda next month drinking lemonade and shooping flies like I'd never been away!" She laughed her breathless laugh again.

Margaret was obviously enjoying herself as much as Valeria Schmitt. Even Kessler was relaxed now, leaning back in the choice chair by the window with

his collar pulled open. His search *had* been a neurotic one, he decided, as he listened to Miss Schmitt's pleasant chatter. He realized he would learn nothing here, but now he was not angry even with himself.

Miss Schmitt had taken the first opportunity to explain that she was a lot younger than her old boy friend, who had died in the crash at the age of seventy-three. "Of course my family were against Bob Spencer for that reason, too. He was almost fifteen years older than me." Kessler suppressed a smile. He knew the difference in age was more like ten years, but Miss Schmitt was secure in her blond, plump good cheer. "It's a little too much," she went on, "fifteen years, but then we never really did hit it off. Never really broke off, either." She held up her hand, displaying a ring. "See. Just got it out a few months ago. Haven't worn it for I don't know how many years. When I left Iowa City—"

"I thought it was Keokuk?" Margaret interrupted. She was perfectly at home with Valeria as she sipped her lemonade.

"No, honey." It was girl-talk now and Kessler was happy to let it go on, feeling suddenly very tired. "We worked together as stenographers in Iowa City. I was from right near there, but Bob was from Keokuk. That's where he retired to. Anyway I got this job in Washington during the war—World War II, that is—and I went back pretty often and saw Bob but I was young and foolish at the time and kept putting off and putting off the wedding and then it just never did happen. I offered Bob his ring back but he wouldn't hear of it. Said maybe it would still work out for us. Course by this time I knew it never would."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Kessler caught the note of real sincerity in Margaret's voice. "That seems too bad."

"Oh, why be sorry?" Valeria asked gaily. "I'm not. Bob was real sweet in his way but he was a real stick-in-the-mud even when I first met him."

"I understand he was actually a recluse in his later years," Kessler said.

"Later years! Lord, he was a recluse when he was thirty-five. Worried about everything. I never regret it. My friends used to say I was snapping him out of it but I could never see much sign of it. Wore gloves all the time to protect his hands and so he wouldn't get any germs. It must have been the lemonade I was making a little while ago, Mrs. Kessler, when you called, reminded me of one time when he was visiting me back in Iowa. Just like I said, we were sitting on the veranda drinking lemonade I do believe and swatting flies and Bob was

laughing and talking along with everyone else. Well, he was in a rocker just like this one and I gave him the fly swatter because he was laughing at me and I said, 'O.K., mister, you go ahead and try to hit one if you're so smart.' And he gave a great big swing, laughing, and that rocker went right over the edge of the veranda!" She laughed her breathless laugh till she had to dab at her eyes.

Kessler and Margaret smiled at her innocent memories. Kessler suppressed a yawn. "Oh, my," Margaret said, "the poor man! How embarrassing if he was that shy."

Miss Schmitt examined her lacy handkerchief in sadly smiling recollection. "I shouldn't laugh now," she said, "but it was so funny. He didn't think so, of course! He stomped right out of the yard without a word. I wouldn't have thought it was funny then if I'd known how bad he hurt himself. He was laid up for about three weeks. I guess that was the beginning of the end for us. Bob said every time he went out something terrible happened to him. Poor fellow. He was right at that. Just a bad luck artist."



Miss Schmitt was prepared to reminisce indefinitely. Kessler decided he had better come to the point. "I don't suppose, Miss Schmitt," he asked, "that you and Mr. Spencer ever discussed politics?"

She shrugged. "Why, yes, I guess we did a little, being among politicians in court and all. We were both good solid Republicans though, so we didn't have much to say back in those days. I voted for Roosevelt in 1940 but Bob didn't mind."

"This may sound farfetched, Miss Schmitt, but to your knowledge was Mr. Spencer ever interested in Communism?"

"Bob?" she asked incredulously. "Bob interested in Communism? We didn't even know what Communism was out there. Never! You can count that out, mister."

"I'm sure we can," Kessler said. "Did he drink?"

"Not a drop! I wouldn't have put up with that myself."

"Would you ever have thought he was suicidally inclined?"

She thought about this one. "You mean he might have put a bomb on the plane?"

Like that fellow did a few years ago?" She shook her head slowly. "I can't believe Bob would kill anybody else just to kill himself. What would be the point?"

"Exactly. He left no one behind him. Didn't even take out an insurance policy. But, of course, people sometimes do crazy things."

Miss Schmitt's plump little face was silent and reflective. "Bob was an odd one. And, of course, I haven't seen him for years but I got a Christmas card and a little note every single year and he always seemed perfectly sane to me. As for killing himself or anybody else, I'd say he was much too timid a man for that. God forgive me if I'm being cruel to an old friend who's gone now, but he was afraid to step outside the house. I don't know how he got to work. He was always getting sick or getting hurt and staying home for weeks. I think he welcomed sickness just so he could hide at home safe." There were tears of another sort in Miss Schmitt's eyes now. Kessler thought he detected a brightness in his wife's eyes. "No," Miss Schmitt said, "Bob was afraid of life. Just plumb scared." She refused to let the tears flow. "Oh, but I'm being a terrible hostess! I have so few visitors now. How about some more lemonade?"

Margaret flicked a glance at her husband and gave him the floor. "You've been a wonderful hostess," Kessler said, rising, "and I want to thank you for being good enough to talk to us."

"Well, I'm afraid I haven't been much help," she said, rising to flutter over the glasses.

"That's not your fault," Kessler said. "As you know, we haven't come up with an answer on this investigation, but at least they can't say I didn't try."



Miss Schmitt waved to them from the window of her apartment as they got in their car. "She was sweet, you know," Margaret murmured as she waved back gaily. "Sad about them, too."

"Well, investigation's over," Kessler smiled at Margaret as he drove away. "Results, nil. Second honeymoon, anyone? We've got nothing to keep us now. How do we get to the highway from here?"

"Yes, dear," Margaret murmured, still bemused by Miss Schmitt. "But wasn't it a shame they never got married? He was such an unhappy man. She might have brought him out of it."

"I doubt that," Kessler said, adjusting the sun blind against the evening glare of the sun.

"Like she said, he was a hard luck artist. It's a personality type, it doesn't change."

"What?" Kessler asked, maneuvering a corner in heavy traffic.

"Accident prone. You know, everything happened to him. Like those mushrooms he got sick on just before he left home; falling off the porch. No wonder he didn't want to leave home."

They drove in silence for some time, Kessler intent on the evening flood of traffic, Margaret almost drowsing in the evening sunlight and the cool of the breeze in her hair. When Kessler pulled up at a drug store she said, "What?" sleepily.

"Phone call I have to make. You wait here," he said. She nodded.

Kessler got through to Senator Brogan's office quickly. "Hello, Miss Persons? I'm glad you're still there. This is Bob Kessler. Do you have any idea where the senator is now? Good, would you put me through to him?"

Brogan sounded anything but sleepy. "Yes Bob? Finally wind it up?"

"I think maybe I have," Kessler said. "I've seen Miss Schmitt."

"Ah, Spencer's old flame? And what did you learn?"

When Kessler was finished telling him there was a long pause. "Are you still there, George?" he asked.

Brogan's voice was heavy. "Yes, Bob, I'm still here. Where are you calling from? A public phone? Well, I think maybe you'd better come up here. We have more to say than you have dimes and it won't hurt to keep this to ourselves if we can—or till we're sure. Better bring your complete files. Good. One point, though! Did anything I said this afternoon help? I wondered. I couldn't really believe it myself. If you'd said something, I wouldn't have felt I was going crazy. I've been sitting here wondering if I should see a head doctor."

Margaret smiled philosophically when Kessler told her he had to go back to see Brogan. "Some second honeymoon," she complained. "Well, anyway, what about that drink and a steak dinner. I'll get us a hotel room. Maybe tomorrow, like I always say."



It was nearly ten o'clock when Kessler and Brogan met Margaret at the hotel dining room. "It's about time!" she declared. "I'm starving. Hello there, George. What are you doing to my husband? Or vice versa? We were going to go on a second honeymoon and now he has that fiend-for-work look in his eye!"

"My dear Margaret," Brogan said, holding her hand and smiling gallantly, "I must deeply apologize for keeping Bob. And I'm almost frightened to say that it looks as though it will be for some time longer. We will have to go back after dinner and it may be some days before either of us has much free time."

Margaret looked at them suspiciously, with the brightness in her eye that came from her first martini. "What are you two up to now? Some of this top secret stuff? I might know! I can't get away from it! Never mind, I'll worm it out of Bob when I get him alone. If that ever happens!"

They carefully avoided any further reference to the investigation until they were halfway through dinner in the nearly deserted dining room. Margaret, mellowed by a second martini and all of her steak which she ate, sighed. "Poor Miss Schmitt," she said. "I've been feeling sorry for her all evening when I haven't been feeling sorry for myself."

"Why Miss Schmitt?" Kessler asked, chewing.

"Oh, I shouldn't, I know. Bob Spencer would probably have been a worse husband than you are. But at least I'm glad I went along with you to visit her. I settled something that's been bothering me."

"What was that, dear?" Kessler asked, raising a juicy morsel of steak to his lips.

"Why, that he was accident prone."

Kessler lowered his fork. "Yes, you mentioned that before," he said carefully. "I was telling George about it. But why did you think he might be?"

Margaret looked at their startled faces. She fluttered her hands. "Well, everyone else on the plane was."

The three of them stared at each other. "Did I say something wrong?" she asked nervously. "Well, they were, you know! The stewardesses both had broken their legs. And the flight engineer got a black eye walking into a door. You remember, Bob, you couldn't be sure how it happened, but that must have been it. Even the pilot had cut himself shaving. That very morning!"

Kessler and Brogan had stopped eating and were watching her intently. "Stop staring," she said indignantly. "You're making me nervous. What's wrong?"

"Nothing, dear," Kessler said quietly. "It's very interesting. Go on."

She looked at him suspiciously. "Well, when it comes to the passengers! What do you mean? You know all this!"

"Go on," Brogan said.

"Well, one man was even in another plane crash before. I forget his name."

"Pearlow," Kessler murmured.

"Pearlow, yes. And Dr. Pollitt who was blinded in an accident. I don't really know about your friend Miss Bennett, senator."

Brogan nodded. "She qualifies."

"And the little girl, Barbara? Who had the automobile accident? The veteran? Prewitt, who accidentally killed his brother? At least two of those people were going to psychiatrists. Well, Mr. Spencer had me worried because I didn't know if the mushrooms qualified him as accident prone. Then, of course, when I found out about him definitely I figured the Valentés qualified, too, with the mumps. The man who broke his fingernail! Oh, just about everybody I think."

Kessler and Brogan glanced at each other. Brogan nodded. "Just about everybody," he said. "And all on the same plane. It's something that would happen once in ten thousand times. Like being dealt a solid suit in bridge. But it can happen. It seems to have happened this time. And I think maybe it's happened before. Maybe one person who was not accident prone could make the difference. But when I think about a plane taking off with those particular seventy-three people aboard it really scares me."

Margaret looked from Brogan to Kessler, confused. Kessler put his hand over hers on the table cloth and gripped it tightly. "Darling," he said, "when we have finished our coffee, George and I are going back to his office and I think maybe you'd better come along with us. We have a lot of thinking to do, the three of us, and we could use a feminine touch."



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