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# MURDEROUS INTENT

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# DEATH OF A FATEFUL HELLO

-Jacqueline Freimor

*When a rookie reporter is thrown to the verbivores, she learns that a love of language can sometimes be lethal.*

"Mice to neat you, Leg Middle," said the tiny man, squinting at my press card in the dim light of the Hotel Warwick's Crystal Ballroom.

I blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Mice to neat you, Leg Middle," he repeated, staring up at me hopefully. When I failed to respond, he frowned. "It's a Spoonerism," he said. "You know—the first consonants of two words are reversed, so 'nice to meet you' becomes 'mice to neat you,' and 'Meg Little' becomes 'Leg Middle.' You know. A Spoonerism."

"I see, Mr.—?" I said, but I didn't. I checked the address in my notebook. Trust O'Reilly to give me the wrong information on my first day out.

"Miller. Marvin Miller. Same Spoonerized as not, to my everlasting sorrow, although some would allow Mirvin Maller. But I'm a purist."

"—Miller," I said. "Maybe you can help me. I'm supposed to be covering the annual meeting of—"

"ASPEW," he said.

"Gesundheit," I said.

"No, ASPEW," he said. "As in the American Society for the Preservation of English Wordplay. ASPEW."

Then I was in the right place after all.

"Uh huh," I said, "ASPEW," and wrote the acronym in my book.

"Of course, I wanted the invitation to read 'Bristol call room' instead of 'Crystal Ballroom,' but the bowers that pee didn't go for it." He narrowed his eyes.

"Why not?" I asked, even though the reason was perfectly obvious. But good reporters always asked probing questions, and more than anything I wanted to be a good reporter.

Marvin looked to his right and to his left and then stepped closer to me. "Politics," he said in an undertone. "It's all politics."

I entered the word POLITICS in my notebook and underscored it twice. Maybe that should be the angle for my story. O'Reilly, of course, had given me nothing to go on. "Just another weirdo organization," he'd said, "but it might be good for a little human interest. Do what you can."

"When you say 'they,' I said to Marvin, "whom do you mean?"

"Oh no," Marvin said, clapping himself on the forehead. "Oh no. Don't tell me you're one of them."

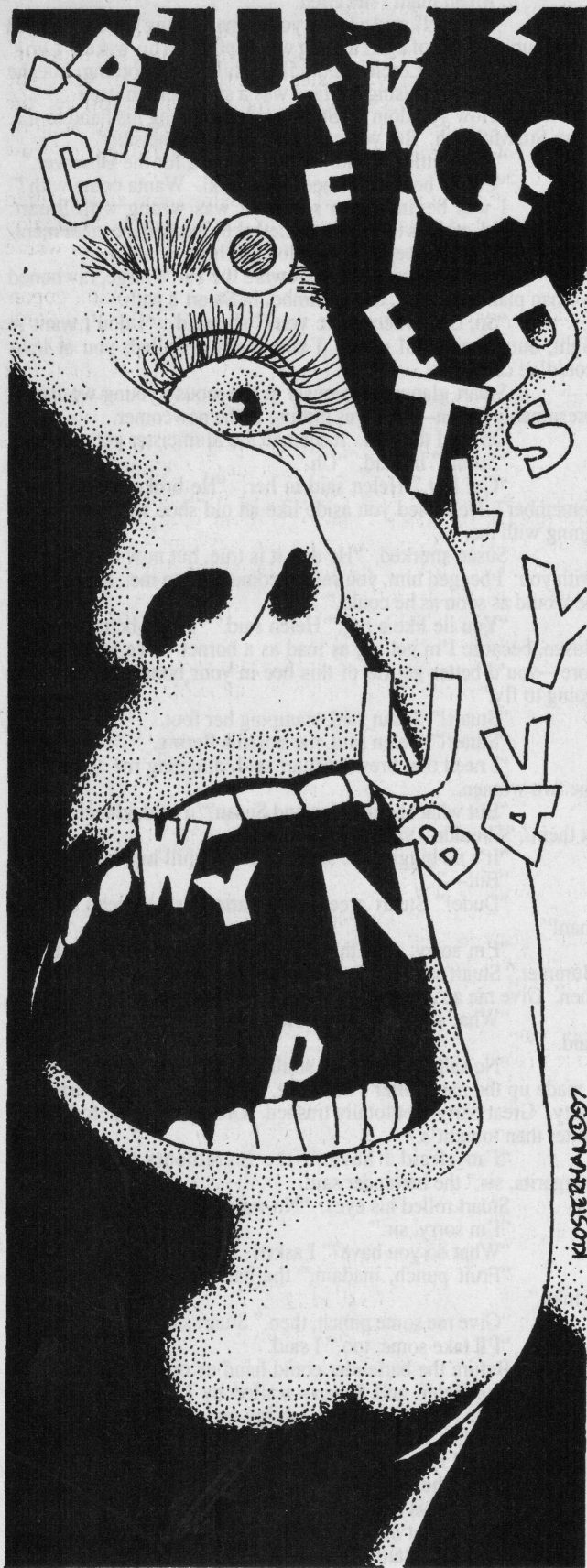
"One of whom?" I said.

"That's twice!" he shrieked. "Two 'whoms'!"

"My dear Marvin," said a tall, middle-aged woman who appeared at my side, "please refrain from making a spectacle of yourself. The hotel manager nearly refused to let us use the ballroom until I assured him there would be no reprise of the incident at the Christmas party. And you're making a terrible impression on our new member."

"I'm not a new member," I said. "My name is Meg Little. I'm a reporter for the Observer."

"Even more reason for Marvin to comport himself with



dignity," she said, taking my arm and guiding me away from the little man, who stared after us, wringing his hands. "I dearly wish I didn't have to say it, but Marvin Miller is someone up with whom one should not have to put."

Wow. "And you are—?" I said, pencil poised over my book.

"Where are my manners?" she said, extending her right hand. "I'm Lorelei Fedder, treasurer of ASPEW."

"Pleased to meet you. So why shouldn't I put up with Mr. Miller? He seems nice enough."

"He is a man obsessed," she said. "He thinks that we editors are determined to abolish his beloved Spoonerisms from the language. Well, pish-tosh, I say! Spoonerists and the like are not the enemy." She stopped dramatically in front of a buffet table on which two yellowish slabs of cheese lay sweating, surrounded by saltines and wilted crudité.

SPOONERISTS ARE NOT THE ENEMY, I wrote.

"They're not?" I said.

"Not at all. The Spoonerists—and the metaphorites, and the poetasters, and the alliterates, among others—may indulge themselves in the more childish varieties of wordplay, but they don't constitute a real threat to the language. No, my dear, the boil on the neck of American English is that vulgarian of vulgarians, the advertising copywriter! Don't you realize that by misusing a single apostrophe, the advertising copywriter can destroy decades of careful schooling of the American populace? Why, I remember when I was a girl..."

"Uh huh," I said. "But if we could get back to Mr. Miller for a minute. What did he do at the Christmas party that almost made it impossible for ASPEW to return to this hotel?"

She pursed her lips, and for a moment I thought she wasn't going to answer. Then she sighed. "Mr. Miller overturned the punch bowl on another member's head."

"Really!" I said. "Why would he do something like that?"

"Lorelei!" said a portly man, rushing up to her, grasping her hands in his, and kissing her on both cheeks. "How lovely to look upon you in such a luxe locale!"

"Philip!" she cried. "How delightful to see you! Meg Little, meet Philip Philpot, president of ASPEW. Miss Little is a reporter, Philip. I was just telling her about Marvin's most recent escapade."

Philip's eyes lost their twinkle. "Has that horrid homunculus been harassing Helen again? Why, I'll hit him so hard—"

"Who's Helen?" I said. "And why did Marvin crown her with a punch bowl?"

"Helen is our youngest, and most impressionable, member," Lorelei said. "She also happens to be Philip's niece. But Marvin didn't attack her; he attacked Stuart."

"Stuart," I said.

"Oh, it's so terribly complicated," Lorelei said, sighing. "You see, Helen was Marvin's fiancée until the dreadful Stuart joined our group. A few months ago, just before the Christmas party, Helen broke her engagement to Marvin and began to date Stuart, and Marvin hasn't been able to accept her defection. Hence the punch bowl incident. Preceded, of course, by some nasty comments to our Helen, which left her quite discomposed."

"I'll rip him to ribbons," Philip said, his wattles mottling. "I'll reduce him to rib roast."

"Now, now, Philip," Lorelei said. "I doubt such drastic measures will be called for. Besides, I believe the real problem is Stuart. Not Marvin."

"What's wrong with Stuart?" I said.

A shudder spasmed through Lorelei's lanky frame. "What isn't wrong with Stuart?" she said. "He is that most despicable of creatures I spoke of earlier—a despoiler of language! He is bent on stripping our native tongue of all meaning! He is"—she struggled visibly to contain herself—"a verbicidal maniac!"

"A what?" I said.

"An ad man!" she cried.

"Philster!" said a lanky young man loping his way toward our group, a mouse of a girl trailing worshipfully in his wake. "Lori!"

"Stuart," Lorelei said icily. Philip said nothing, but the deepening color suffusing his face was a statement in itself.

"How you doin'?" Stuart said, extending his hand to me.

"I'm Stu McHugh. But you can call me the Stumeister."

"Meg Little," I said. "I'm a reporter for the Observer."

"Cool," he said. "I need a brewski. Wanta come with?"

I was beginning to see what was wrong with Stuart. "Sure," I said, curious to discover whether he loathed the other members of ASPEW as deeply as they loathed him.

Before we could move toward the bar, a large, rawboned woman planted herself, arms akimbo, in Stuart's path.

"So, Stu, where were you?" she said. "I don't want to fight, but I waited all night. I was really appalled; you at least could've called."

Stuart glanced nervously at the mousy young woman—presumably Helen—who was glaring at the newcomer.

Oh ho, I thought. It seemed the Stumeister got around.

"Susan," he said. "Uh."

"Get lost," Helen said to her. "He broke up with you, remember? He tossed you aside like an old shoe when he started going with me."

Susan smirked. "He did, it is true, but now he's through with you. I begged him, you see, to come back to me. He said that he would as soon as he could."

"You lie like a rug," Helen said. "You'd better shut up, Susan, because I'm getting as mad as a hornet. I've told you before—you'd better get rid of this bee in your bonnet, or the fur's going to fly."

"Stuart!" Susan said, stamping her foot.

"Stuart!" Helen said, her nostrils flaring.

"I need that brew," Stuart said, dragging me away from the two women.

"But what about Helen and Susan?" I said, glancing back at them. "Shouldn't you do something?"

"It's no biggie," he said. "They'll chill in a few."

"But—"

"Dude!" Stuart greeted the bartender. "I need a brew, man!"

"I'm sorry, sir," the bartender said. "I have no 'brew. Bummer," Stuart said, his face falling. Then he brightened. "Okay, then. Give me an American Heart Association margarita."

"What's an 'American Heart Association' margarita?" I said.

"No salt," Stuart said, smiling broadly. "Get it? No salt. I made up the name after I had, like, six of them at the Christmas party. Great party; got totally trashed. Great munchies, too. Way better than tonight's."

"I'm afraid I haven't the ingredients to mix an...a margarita, sir," the bartender said.

Stuart rolled his eyes. "No way! That really bites!"

"I'm sorry, sir."

"What do you have?" I asked.

"Fruit punch, madam," the bartender said. "And soft drinks."

"Give me some punch, then," Stuart said. "Jeez Louise."

"I'll take some, too," I said.

Before the bartender could hand us our drinks, an obviously furious Helen and Susan—trailed by Lorelei, Philip, and Marvin—came rushing up to us, talking and gesticulating at once. Someone, I didn't see whom, bumped Stuart from behind, and he stumbled toward me.

"Hey!" he said.

I caught his arm. "Careful."

He stared at me, his mouth working soundlessly.

"Stuart?" I said. "You okay?"

"Total, major downer," he said, and a thin ribbon of blood slipped slowly from between his lips. Before my mind could register what I was seeing, he fell face forward onto the floor.

\* \* \*

"What the hell does this mean?" said Lieutenant Saperstein, waving the piece of paper that had been impaled on the knife stuck between Stuart's shoulder blades. "Can any of you freakin' English freaks tell me what the freakin' hell this means?"

I shut my eyes. The little things, the details, kept flashing through my mind. Stuart's look of profound surprise as he was thumped from behind. How in his last moments, his mouth chewed on the words he couldn't articulate. How the note stuck to his back fluttered like some sort of hellish "Kick Me" sign when he fell to the floor.

My eyes snapped open. Like a hellish "Kick Me" sign; not bad. I flipped open my notebook.

"What the hell do you think you're doin'?" said Saperstein.

"Just taking some notes. I'm a reporter, you know. I'm covering this story."

Saperstein sneered. "Yeah, yeah, freedom of the press, the public's right to know, yadda yadda yadda. Instead of wasting my time taking notes, Lois Lane, why don't you do something really useful and take a look at this one? It mean anything to you?"

He passed the note to me, and the other ASPEW members clustered around, jostling each other for a clearer view. Not that there was much to see. Printed neatly in block letters was one nonsensical sentence:

BECAUSE THIS FATEFUL HELLO CULLED HELEN'S  
LIVE FOR ME, NOW HE DUST MY.

It meant nothing to me. And even if it had, I wouldn't have told Saperstein. That Lois Lane crack hadn't gone down particularly well.

After a moment, Lorelei broke the silence. "Why, it's a collection of Spoonerisms," she said. "How peculiar."

"A collection of what?" Saperstein said, his eyes narrowed.

"Spoonerisms," Lorelei said. "Pairs of words with their sounds reversed. In this note, for example, 'fateful hello' is... 'hateful fellow. Oh, yeah?' Saperstein said, looking slightly more interested. 'Fateful hello,' 'hateful fellow'—I get it. But what's this part about 'culled Helen's live'? What's that?"

Killed Helen's love, I said slowly. "And 'dust my' is—'must die'!"

"Are you telling me that once you run a decoder ring over it, this note says"—he cleared his throat—"Because this hateful fellow killed Helen's love for me, now he must die?"

"Right," I said.

"That is correct," Lorelei said.

He pursed his lips. "Who the hell would write something like this, full of spoon...uh...spoons..."

"Spoonerisms," Lorelei said.

"Whatever. What the hell kind of sick ticket would write something like this?" Before anyone could speak, he held up his hand. "Let me put it another way: which one of you sick tickets would write something like this? Because it's gotta be one of you. Only the six of you were near the victim when he bought it."

Slowly—reluctantly, I liked to think—five heads turned in the direction of Marvin Miller.

"What," Marvin said. "What?" Then, "Oh my God. Me? Me? You think I did this?"

No one said anything.

"Well, it's trot new! It's a lamb die!"

Saperstein raised an eyebrow. "Oh, is it? Seems like you talk the talk, mister. And it seems to me that I heard something about a little love triangle between you and the deceased and this Helen that's in the note."

"Well, I—"

"Isn't it true," Saperstein said, advancing on the cringing Marvin and poking him in the center of the chest with a stubby index finger, "that the dead guy stole your girlfriend?"

Marvin's teeth were chattering audibly. "Well, yes, he—"

"And isn't it true"—poke, poke—"that you attacked the dead guy at the Christmas party?"

Marvin bobbed his head furiously. "Well, yes. But I was only—"

"And isn't it in fact true"—POKE!—"that you killed the dead guy here tonight and left that crazy note? You wrote the note! Admit it—it was you!"

"No!" Marvin shrieked. "It bust me someone else. They stilled Cue, not me! I never would have—"

"Marvin Miller," Saperstein said, "you are under arrest for the murder of...uh...the dead guy we been talking about. You have the right to remain silent..."

"Don't let them make tea Jew tail!" Marvin wailed as a uniformed officer snapped handcuffs on his wrists.

But they hook Tim Jew tail.

I mean, took him to jail.

\* \* \*

"That about wraps it up, folks," Saperstein said, yawning hugely. His colleagues had hauled Marvin away hours before, and he had been left to take our statements. "Once you sign your John Hancocks, you can go on home."

"We thank you for your prompt resolution of this dreadful, dreadful incident," Lorelei said to him, ripping off a sheet of paper from a legal pad and handing it to him. "Of course, although the death of an advertising copywriter is of no great consequence to the progress of Western civilization per se, murder is an act that by its brutality threatens the very foundation of the social order. And I'm sure there must be someone on this earth who will mourn Stuart's passing, although that possibility is difficult to imagine."

Helen put her head in her hands and wailed. Susan began to sniffle.

"Oh, dear," Lorelei said. "That was tactless of me. I do apologize."

"Hold your water," Saperstein said, frowning. "Where'd you get the idea that the victim was an ad guy?"

Helen and Susan stopped bawling and exchanged quizzical glances with Lorelei and Philip.

"Why, from Stuart himself," Lorelei said. "That's what he told us when he joined the group. In fact, the one criterion for becoming a member of ASPEW is having an occupational or academic interest in the English language, and I remember distinctly that Stuart told us he was a copywriter for a large agency. Don't you remember, Philip?"

Philip nodded, as did Helen and Susan.

"If he didn't work in advertising, what did he do?" I said, flipping my notebook open.

Saperstein stared at me for a moment as if deciding whether I needed to know. Then he shrugged. "He was an accountant." He pulled a business card from his inside breast pocket and read from it. Stuart M. McHugh, CPA, Internal Revenue Service.

There was a collective gasp.

"What?" I said. "The Stumeister—Stuart—worked for the IRS? Then why did he tell everyone he was an ad man?"

Again Saperstein shrugged. "Who knows? Who cares? All that matters is who killed him, and we got that Marvin Nutjob Miller down for it, all tied up nice and neat like a Christmas present."

The case was indeed all neatly tied up, but something about the packaging was bothering me. It was something somebody said—about Christmas, in fact. Stuart? Had Stuart said something about Christmas? Or was it Marvin? I shook my head, willing myself to remember.

Something else was bothering me, too; if Marvin killed Stuart, why did he leave a note that so obviously incriminated him—

self? Everyone in ASPEW must have known about his love of Spoonerisms. I raised the point with Saperstein.

"Listen, Lois," he said, exhaling audibly, "the last thing I need is some nosy reporter sniffing around my investigation. We got the killer. The case is closed. Closed."

"But leaving that note was such a stupid thing for him to do!" I said.

He shrugged. "So what? Killers aren't usually the brightest lights in the chandelier."

"Well, okay," I said, another point occurring to me. "But tell me something else. Have you noticed anything out of the ordinary about Marvin Miller?"

Saperstein snorted. "Other than the fact that he speaks in tongues?"

"He is extremely short," I said triumphantly, "almost abnormally so. Whereas Stuart was fairly tall. How did Marvin manage to stab him squarely between the shoulder blades? It would have been awkward for him, at the very least. Someone would have seen him do it."

Saperstein narrowed his eyes. "Go on."

"Well, since no one saw Marvin stab Stuart, he couldn't have done it," I finished lamely.

Saperstein curled his lip and started to turn away. "If that's all you got..."

"No, wait!" I said, flipping through my notes. I was sure the solution to the case lay in something one or more of the ASPEW members had said to me during the course of the evening. I just hoped I'd had the foresight to write it down.

Saperstein sighed. "Look, Lois," he said, "it's been a long day. Why don't we just—"

And then I had it. Of course: Saperstein had said Stuart worked for the IRS; Stuart had said he had gotten drunk at the Christmas party; and Marvin Miller had said he had high standards for his Spoonerisms.

"Lieutenant," I said, "do you mind if I ask Lorelei a question?"

He grunted.

"Lorelei," I said quickly, "when we were deciphering the killer's note, you explained what Spoonerisms were to the Lieutenant. Do you remember what you said?"

She furrowed her brow. "I believe I said something on the order of 'Spoonerisms are sets of words with their sounds reversed. That's almost exactly what you said,' I said. "Almost exactly."

She gave a tight-lipped, lemon-sucking smile. "I have an eidetic memory."

I ignored her. "Earlier this evening," I went on, "Marvin had to explain to me what Spoonerisms were. I'm afraid that his definition didn't quite agree with yours: he said that Spoonerisms were pairs of words with the first consonants reversed."

"Well," she said, sniffing, "there's very little difference between the two definitions. I can't imagine that it matters in the least."

"On the contrary," I said, "it matters a great deal. For example, Marvin told me that although some Spoonerists would find it acceptable to call him Mirvin Maller, he could never accept it because he was 'a purist. Lieutenant Saperstein,' Lorelei said, "will I be required to listen to much more of this? It's been an exceedingly trying evening, and frankly, I'm exhausted."

"Get to the point, Lois," Saperstein said.

"My name is Meg," I said with some heat, "not Lois. And my point is that Marvin did not write that note. He would never have written that particular note, because the phrase 'culled Helen's live'—which we translated as 'killed Helen's love'—was not an acceptable Spoonerism to him. But as we have just heard, it was an acceptable Spoonerism to someone else. And that someone is the real killer."

Slowly, speculatively, all eyes turned to Lorelei.

"How cunning!" Philip said. "A culprit caught by her carelessness with consonants!"

"She must be crazy as a bedbug!" Helen said.

Susan said nothing, but she nodded rhythmically.

It took all four of them to pull Lorelei off me.

"I still don't get how you figured her for it," Saperstein said a little while later.

"Well," I said, "I didn't actually suspect her at first. I just didn't think that Marvin could have done it. He was too short, for one thing. And it would have been extremely stupid for him to incriminate himself with the note, for another. And—well, he just didn't seem like the type."

Saperstein snorted.

"Well, he didn't," I said. "But what really clued me in was when you told us Stuart was an accountant working for the IRS. That started me thinking about why he would misrepresent his occupation to the group—and, in fact, about why an accountant would want to join the group in the first place."

"Why would anyone join this group in the first place?" Saperstein said. "Buncha nutjobs."

"The only reason I could come up with," I continued, "was that he was investigating financial wrongdoing by the group or one of its members. As treasurer of ASPEW, Lorelei was a likely suspect. And when I remembered her mistake with the Spoonerisms, I realized she was the one who was trying to frame Marvin—because she herself was the killer."

"In her confession," Saperstein said, "she said she'd been stealing from the group for a long time. At first, it was just a little here and there, but then it got so out of hand that she had to start to fiddle the books and monkey with the group's tax returns. She spent as much as she could spare on the Christmas party so that no one would suspect that the group's money was running out; she thought she'd be able to put all of the cash back by now. Of course, she couldn't—there was almost nothing left to pay for the shindig tonight."

I nodded. "Stuart kept complaining about tonight's party, comparing it unfavorably with the Christmas party. That also made me wonder what had happened to ASPEW's finances in the past few months."

"Well, it was a good guess," Saperstein said grudgingly.

"Guess!" I said. "I think I did better than guess, Lieutenant. You got yourself a murderer tonight!"

"And you got yourself a story," Saperstein said. "Why don't you go write it, Lois, instead of busting my chops?"

O'Reilly was just as impressed with me as Saperstein had been. "Not bad" was all he said, cutting five inches from my copy. Then he assigned me to cover the flower show at the Javits Center. "Just another convention," he said, "but it might be good for a little human interest. Do what you can."

"The flower show it is," I said, flinging my notebook into my bag and slinging the bag's strap over my shoulder. "Well, I'll be zinnia."

And then I realized that of all of the forms of wordplay I had encountered at the ASPEW meeting, one had been conspicuously absent.

And as far as I was concerned, it was the one that was the most pun.

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