

MURDALAND ISSUE #2 PREVIEW PDF VISIT WWW.MURDALANDMAGAZINE.COM TO ORDER MURDALAND ONLINE

Copyright 2007 by the members of MUG SHOT PRESS LLC. All stories in the magazine are works of imagination.

The Emerson, 1950 **Scott Phillips**

It takes me and Frank Elting about an hour to get to the dirt road outside the little town of Kingman, where half a dozen emergency vehicles sit, leading the way to a tiny clapboard farmhouse, inside which an old woman lays bludgeoned to death on the kitchen linoleum. The house reminds me of the one my grandfather had in Wichita when I was little, tidy and freshly painted white with green trim. Next to a rusted out Model A, a sheriff's deputy is bagging a spade, its blade mottled with dirt clods and blood, less lighthearted about it than city policemen would be, and as we get out of the car, Frank feels the need to remind me not to be a smartass in front of the locals.

Outside, the dead woman's husband, eighty-seven years of age, a formerly big man shrunken and stripped of muscle, sits on the tailgate of an ambulance with an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth. Inside, the couple's son, fiftyish with a farmer's sun-wrinkled skin and badly scarred hands, the left one crippled-looking, sits without evident emotion on a swaybacked sofa in the middle of the big main room of the house, next to the kitchen. At a dining room table at the far end of the same room, a pair of sheriff's deputies are grilling the killer, who has already confessed, in an attempt to find out why she brained her eighty-four-year-old mother-in-law with a garden spade. While Frank Elting tries to coax a quote from the son about his dear mother's death-by-entrenching-tool, I get a nice shot of the killer in mid-phrase, one cuffed hand upraised and pointing as she explains her afternoon's work.

"Some of your wives and mothers is on that committee, and any one of them will tell you what she was like. Day in and day out, but especially around rummage sale time." She adopts what I assume is a shrill impression of her late mother-in-law: "That Doris Upchurch thinks she can get away with donating junk she wouldn't even have in her own home. Maelynn Murray sure made herself scarce when it was time to stick prices on them donations. Last year that Warcroft boy come in and bought all the funnybooks and told me he was going to sell them to the other little boys for a profit and I by God won't let him have a one this year. I'm the only one does any real work around this church and that includes Pastor's wife. Me me me me me." She takes a deep breath and resumes speaking in her own voice. "You ask any woman at that church if that's what Mother Carling wasn't like. Well by God if it's bad listening to for a few minutes at church a couple three times a week just you imagine what it's like living with the old biddy. This afternoon she got to talking about that rummage sale and how if it wasn't for her the whole church might as well just shut its doors and I thought all right, let's find out how the church does without you, you old butterball, and I went outside and took the spade Jacob'd left by the side of the house and went back inside and you know what? She hadn't even noticed I'd left the kitchen, she was just talking into the air. So I just hauled off and smacked the blade of it up the side of that old gray head of hers and by God that shut her up good. She dropped down to the floor and I thought I'd better get her again, I didn't want her to suffer, Lord knows, and I swung it that time just like a hockey stick. That's how my shoes and stockings got all bloody."

After I've taken four or five nice loony-looking pictures of the younger Mrs. Carling, I set about

photographing her victim in the kitchen. One of the deputies comes in to announce that the ambulance is going to take the freshly minted widower to St. Francis in Wichita and, looking askance at me, questions my shooting photos of the corpse. “You’re not going to print them pictures of Mrs. Carling, are you?” “We’ve printed worse,” I tell him.

He looks down at the dead woman. “My mother used to fix her hair. Said she’d come in once’t every two weeks and sit in the chair and jaw everyone’s ear off, nobody else could get a word in.

” You can’t read too much into the facial expression on a corpse – a lot can change in the moments after death, before police and press arrive on the scene – but damned if the old bird doesn’t look like she was in the middle of a nasty remark when the blade struck. Her tongue is nestled between her upper bared teeth and the lower incisors. Her eyes are crossed just a little, and the left one is all bloodshot and rheumy.

In the other room the son sits, placid, and mostly ignores the deputies’ questions regarding his wife and his mother. He’s loosening up now, relief revealing itself in his posture, and though he’s not smiling, he does look to have been recently relieved of some unnamed burden. I slip into what I’m assuming is the old folks’ bedroom and, after getting a picture of the disorder therein, steal a small framed picture of the old lady off the dresser and slip it into the inside pocket of my overcoat.

That’s all of the story we can give you online.

To read Scott Phillips’ ‘The Emerson, 1950’ in full alongside an additional 176 pages of dark original fiction order the second issue of ‘Murdaland’ online at www.murdalandmagazine.com.



