

# Gertrude



BY ANTHONY GAROT

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by Anthony J. Garot

The secondhand clicked into position. A final drag off a half-smoked cigarette, then the killer snubbed it in the ashtray emblazoned with “No smoking!” on the bottom. She picked up her heavy black coat and walked out of the cheap motel to be enveloped by the cold damp city.

A homeless man lay sleeping on the sidewalk, an empty bottle of Thunderbird at his side. She grabbed a handful of bills of unknown denomination from her jeans-pocket and tucked it under his arm. Even this late—or was it early?—the subdued rumble of traffic permeated her somber, if not dismal, mood. No amount of scrubbing would ever wash away the filth of the city.

Her gaunt reflection in a store window caused her to jump. “I hate mirrors,” she spat. Hastening away from the apparition, she revisited the notion that there must be a way out—of this city, of her life, of all of this crap—if only she could think of how. But now was not the time to entertain such thoughts.

A police officer ahead quickened her heartbeat but not her pace. “Figures.”

An impassive, innocent face replaced her vacant

expression, and she buried herself deep within the masculinity of the dark coat. Short hair and boyish looks completed the deception, at least from a distance. She locked eyes and nodded to the graying officer who said, “This street isn't any place to be this time of night . . . um . . . miss.”

“No worries officer,” she countered, “I'm not going far.”

His paternal words trailed behind her, “. . . does your mother know where you are?” The grin that crept onto her face could not be helped—her first smile of the day. She wondered why so many cops prefer thick mustaches. It couldn't just be a coincidence . . . there must be a regulation banning beards.

She conjured an unopened pack of cigarettes from the depths of her coat pocket then performed the tapping ritual. Before the cellophane wrapper was unfurled, she sighed in disgust and put the pack back into her pocket. Some steps later, she reached again. Smoke and surrender mingled with disgust during the first exhale. “Damned things” she muttered in irritation, and she flung the full pack—minus the one—onto the sidewalk. Several steps later, she returned to the cigarettes. “Who am I kidding?” and she returned

them to her coat pocket. A glance at her wristwatch accelerated her pace.

A dark figure ahead caused her to turn around the next corner. She hugged the shadows and worn brick walls. Her thoughts mimicked the prior words of the police officer, “This *back street* isn't any place to be this time of night.” Walking like a cat to suppress her footfalls, she strained to hear any indication of danger as her eyes darted from shape to shadow.

After thrusting her hands into tight blue gloves—they weren't Latex; she was allergic to Latex—, she resheathed her hands to the warm coat pockets and hugged her arms close to her body.

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The rear door was unlocked, as it should be. “Plus one for William,” she counted. The brighter than ordinary exit sign provided ample illumination. “Nice touch,” she thought, “Now you have two.” Disdainful beady red eyes from behind the slop sink glared at her untimely and irregular appearance. She didn't like rats. A shudder coursed down her back as she stepped on a

cockroach. Cockroaches weren't her favorite, either.

*Left, two flights of stairs, second door on the right, room 306.*

No light shone under or at the jambs of 306. The warmth of her LadySmith penetrated her Nitrile gloves as she eased it from its holster. “That's right, Gertrude, come to mama.”

The mark's door was locked.

“Minus one, William,” she mused with her second smile of the day. This was a welcome excuse to take William down a notch. Even so, it meant the plan was compromised. “Not just yet, dear,” she said as she eased the .357 Magnum back into the concealed double strap holster. Time to improvise.

With practiced deftness, she slid out of her dark coat, reversed it to reveal a light tan color, then put it back on. She fished out a matching printed satin headscarf from an outer pocket and tied it under her chin. Gold tear-drop dangle earrings added a touch of class. To look cheap, she applied too much blush and bright red lipstick. A movie line popped into her head, “. . . it's called Revlon, not Dutch Boy.” For a touch of respectability, she

put on a pair of tinted black framed glasses. The final addition was a fake mole over her mouth in direct line with her left eye.

“Perfect,” she thought as she slipped a mirror back into her coat pocket. Feeling the bulge of the pack of cigarettes, she reached inside her coat and fumbled for the pack. After lighting the cigarette, she blew out the words, “Now perfect.”

Standing in plain view of the peep hole, she knocked.

No answer.

“Figures.” A hasty glance verified the still-clear hallway.

Lifting her pant-leg, she revealed precision metal tools.

Concentration dripped down her face in the form of sweat as she performed the “rite of passage.” The play on words evoked another smile—her mood was improving. After many purposeful glints of the steel pick, she eased the tension wrench to open the deadbolt. Replacing the tools, she coaxed Gertrude to come out and play.

The darkness swallowed her as she stepped inside. She locked the door behind her, and with her back against the wall, she flipped the switch to summon light.

“Damn,” she said in consternation. The hairs on her neck

lifted in pilomotor response to form goosebumps.

In an instant, she assayed the room: glass window, no adjoining room door, bed made, dead guy on chair. Everything looked in order—except that the mark was slumped in a chair with his head hung at a most unnatural angle. “It’s just not your day today, Gertrude.” She returned her handgun to the underarm holster.

A quick examination of his coat pockets established a wallet, keys, loose change, business cards, a small bag of marijuana, and there was a walking-amount of cash in the wallet. She dumped his belongings on the bed. In the closet was an overcoat—more business cards, ChapStick, two dollars, and a wedding invitation from two years ago. These items she also dumped onto the bed. In the bathroom she found two used glasses. Two. They smelled of whisky. No bottle.

*Knock, knock, knock!*

“Figures.”

With heightened awareness and the grace of a capoeirista, she danced quick, fluid, complex moves in time to her chanting of

the mantra, “Rely on the training . . . rely on the training . . . rely on the training . . . .”

She gathered the used glasses, their paper doilies, and the foot towel then glided to the bed. She assembled a bundle from the towel into which she put everything she had gathered. Then she melted out of her coat and wrapped it around the towel.

“Open up! It's the police!”

“Rely on the training . . . rely on the training . . . .”

Without ceremony, Gertrude was yanked out of the holster. As though rudely awakened, Gertrude screamed loud, lead invectives. The killer's eyes were closed as Gertrude dispatched bullets with uncanny, almost prescient, precision.

*Bedside lamps, mark's neck, deadbolt, window.*

In one sinuous motion, the killer ran and leapt toward the window giving Gertrude free rein to release her remaining fury at the glass barring their way. Glass shards sprayed outward like a plume of smoke.

Return fire tore up the room as the killer passed through the window. Her final thought before impact: “William! I need you

now!”

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Gasping for the air that was knocked out of her, she rolled off a pile of old mattresses and cardboard boxes that lined the dark alley. “Plus one, William. That’s two total.” Second story shots trailed her as she scurried down the alley. The streetlamp before her imploded with an unnatural sound. “Oh, you clever boy. Make that three.”

Gertrude and the killer dissolved into the damp dark morning.

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