

Gertrude



BY ANTHONY GAROT

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by Anthony J. Garot

The secondhand clicked into position. She took a final pull from a half-smoked cigarette and snubbed the rest in an ashtray labeled “No smoking!” at the bottom. Cute. Donning a heavy black coat, she walked out of the cheap motel and was enveloped by the dank city.

A homeless man lay sprawled on the sidewalk, an empty bottle of Thunderbird likely the cause of his slumber. She grabbed an unknown number of bills and tucked it under his arm. The subdued rumble of traffic permeated her somber mood despite the time. No amount of scrubbing would ever wash away the filth of this city.

A gaunt reflection in a store window caused her to flinch. “I hate mirrors,” she spat. She revisited a notion she had been playing with for months—there must be a way out of this city, of this life. She pushed the thought out of her head—now was not the time.

A heavy-set silhouette ahead—a cop! She maintained her pace, but not her heartbeat.

Her face turned impassive, innocent even. She buried herself deep within the dark coat. Her short hair and boyish looks

completed the deception, at least from a distance. She locked eyes and nodded to the graying officer. “This street ain’t a place to be this time of the morning.”

She kept walking. “I’m not going far.”

Fortuitously, someone nearby yelled “F&*% you!” with such potency that her throat would surely be sore tomorrow. This broke the cop’s attention, and once past him, a cold grin crept onto her face. She wondered why so many cops wear mustaches. It couldn't just be a coincidence

A bit of conjuring produced an unopened pack of cigarettes from the depths of a coat pocket. The tapping ritual ensued, but before the cellophane wrapper was unfurled, she replaced the unopened cancer sticks. Fewer than ten steps later, the pack appeared in her hand again. “Who am I kidding?” The smoke relaxed her, comforted her.

Her wristwatch quickened her pace.

A dark figure ahead prompted a decisive 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, she strained to hear any indication of danger, eyes darted from shape to shadow.

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

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The rear door was unlocked per plan. “Plus one for William,” she counted. She liked to make a game of counting William’s preparations. An exit sign, brighter than usual, provided sufficient illumination. “Nice touch—now you have two.” Disdainful red eyes glared at her from behind the slop sink. “Rats. I hate rats. She suppressed a shudder. Moments later, she did shudder when she stepped upon a cockroach. “Someone should alert the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene” That someone would not be her.

She remembered:

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

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, it’s time to play.” She smiled as she remembered the game her sister played with her dog: “Bite the mama.”

Gingerly applying pressure, she realized that the mark's door was locked.

“Minus one, William. You are down to one now.” Another smile. She wondered why she smiled more when she was on the job. She would ask a shrink about it one day. For now, she enjoyed the prospect to take William down a notch. His arrogance was nonpareil, but he was untouchable because he was the best in the business. Despite this “ammunition” for their next encounter, the plan was compromised. She eased the .357 Magnum back.

Walking to the end of the corridor, and with the deftness only practice can provide, 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. Reaching the end of the corridor, she used the

window for a mirror. 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.” A pair of gold-tinted wire-framed glasses added a touch of class, and a blonde wig completed the ensemble. Well, almost. She reached inside her coat and fumbled for the package of cigarettes. Exhaling, she blew out the word in smoke, “Perfect.”

Returning to the door, standing in plain view of the peep hole, she knocked.

No answer.

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

Strapped to her leg, she pulled a pick and rake of the right size. “Another point to William, you’re at two again.”

Sweat dripped down her face as she performed the “rite of passage.” The play on words evoked another smile—her mood was improving. Replacing the tools, she coaxed Gertrude to come out and play.

The darkness swallowed her as she slipped inside, closing

and locking the door behind her. She crouched low, reached up to the switch, and summoned light. She remembered the T-shirt of a boy she dated in college. It said something like “And God Said” followed by Maxwell’s equations. She didn’t date him long. She then realized that this is just the kind of T-shirt William would wear.

The scene in front of her provoked a single expletive: “Damn!” The hairs on her neck lifted. Something was wrong.

She assayed the room: glass window, no adjoining room, a double door—made, not slept in—and most important, a dead guy on chair. It was the mark who was slumped in the cheap hotel chair with his head hung at an unnatural angle.

Easing her gun back, she whispered, “It’s just not your day today, Gertrude.”

A quick examination of the mark’s houndstooth coat pockets established a wallet, keys, loose change, business cards, a small bag of marijuana, and a walking-amount of cash in the wallet. She dumped these belongings on the bed. In the closet was an overcoat—more business cards, ChapStick, two dollars folded

around a MetroCard, 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!

She nodded her head and sighed.

With heightened awareness and the grace of a capoeirista, she invoked a quick, fluid, complex dance in time to her chanting a mantra, “Rely on the training . . . rely on the training . . . rely on the training” She hated that instructor a lot less at the moment.

Gathering the used glasses into a scratchy hotel towel, she glided to the bed to assemble the other items into a bundle.

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

She melted out of her coat and wrapped it around the bundle.

On cue, “Open up! It's the police!”

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

Without the usual ceremony or deference, Gertrude was yanked out of the holster. This irritated the Lady, and she screamed loud, leaden invectives. The assassin's eyes were slits as Gertrude

dispatched bullets with uncanny—almost prescient—precision. One bullet each for the bedside lamps, one for the mark's neck (to add to the confusion), one to blow out the door's lock, and at least one officer was down behind the door.

In one sinuous motion, she ran, leapt, and release the remaining few bullets at the window. Glass shards sprayed outward.

Return fire tore up the room as the assassin passed through the window, a new clip was already in Gertrude before she passed the sill. "William! If I never needed you before, I *really* 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, seven high, that were ridiculously stacked like a junior college enactment of *The Princess and the Pea*. "Plus one, William. That's three total. I owe you one for that." Shots from above trailed her as she scurried into the shadows and down the alley. The streetlamp before her imploded with an unnatural sound. "Oh, you clever boy. Plus four."

Gertrude and her wielder dissolved into the damp dark
morning.

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