

Stanley Franklin punches out from a 10-hour tour as janitor at the Roosevelt Field New York State Lottery Office, and drives to a supermarket. He blocks the dairy aisle, scratching the hair around his patterned bald spot, trying to recall what his big sister, Rhonda, wants... besides the thousand dollars he dropped at the track. Stanley bets on bread, buys a loaf, and drives to her condo overlooking the Long Island Sound.

"Wrong!"

Stanley trails Rhonda into her kitchen and dumps the loaf on the counter.

"So, sue me!"

"I'd like to drag you out there and drown you."

He smacks his forehead. "I told my boss I'd check his boat while he's away."

Stanley drives across the island and lumbers aboard the 35-foot fishing boat, where all appears ship shape. Impulsively, he starts up the engine and heads out to sea. He steers toward the Atlantic Ocean horizon, and away from the music of a Center Moriches graduation party. Stanley cuts the engine, climbs to the fly bridge, and closes his eyes, unwinding high above the water.

At that moment, a passenger jet ascending from JFK airport explodes in midair, and falls into the ocean. Stanley steadies himself against the crashing waves.

He races toward the crash site, slowing the boat in a water lane cluttered with horrific crash debris.

Smoke and dust cloud his vision, and Stanley almost misses the pocketbook and briefcase bumping against the stern. He drops a net to drag up the catch, looks

around, and returns to the wheel, gunning the motor. His boat nears the dock as scores of rescue vessels descend on the crash site.

Beaded in sweat, Stanley sits in his car in a diner parking lot, examining the contents of the soggy purse and briefcase. He discards signed, multi-lingual contracts and pockets a gold and onyx pen with a smile. He also pockets traveler's checks and three hundred dollar bills from the purse before studying the heavily-stamped passport of one Priscilla Webster.

The organized world traveler listed three home addresses in her weekly planner, the locks of which Stanley bets will match the keys on the brass key ring in the purse's side pouch. In her picture, Priscilla looks younger than her 67 years.

Stanley figures there had been a face lift or two to go with her smartly frosted blonde hair. He doubts the smiling woman in the passport survived the crash.

With a shrug, Stanley points the car toward the first Webster address, a brownstone on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. When a first floor light dims and a second floor lamp simultaneously lights up, he guesses Priscilla set timers in the empty house. Stanley is in and out of the brownstone by dawn. With him is an estimated \$150,000 in cash, jewels, stamps and rare coins.

It is still early when he rings his sister's doorbell and plunks down the thousand in her hand.

"So your ship came in!"

"Plane."

"Always with the riddles."

Stanley tells his sister about the pocketbook and dangles the keys to houses in London, England and Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.

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Casting off from Woods Hole, Massachusetts in the year's first blizzard, the ferry disappears into a thick confetti of falling snow. Passengers lock their cars and trucks, then lurch up the metal stairs to the ferry's canteen, where a crowd queues by the counter.

Hot dogs roll and wither under heat lamps. Self-conscious people laugh as they brace themselves for the rolling waves. Hot chocolate and beer are selling out fast. Here and there, manly dogs sprawl, sporting red or black bandannas. A pampered few pups keep up appearances in matching plaid sweaters and tams. A Martha's Vineyard high school chorus is returning triumphant from a state music competition in Boston. Sporadic singing fills the ferry cabin.

"Stanley, you have the keys?"

"Rhonda, I told you I have the keys."

"Well, wouldn't it be just like you to get all the way there, when you smack your head and realize they're in New York...like you did in London!"

Stanley takes a slug of beer and single-handedly crushes the can. He stands, gets back on the canteen line, and inhales the scent of the teenage girls in front of him. He smiles at this excuse to be close to them and away from the sister. She scowls at him from across the swaying crowd. Stanley ignores Rhonda, staring at his new cowboy boots and lamb's wool lined leather jacket. When he sits down

again, Rhonda frowns, both at him and at a beagle staring mournfully at her from under the next table.

"How we are going to get everything done in this weather is a mystery to me."

"Rhonda, you said if I have to leave the country, we have to come to this island while no one's here, and I have to leave before they come after me for the loan."

Rhonda waves the nosy beagle away. Its sleeping owner pulls the dog back and resumes his nap. An old gent tips his hat to them. "Happy Chinese New Year!"

"Year of the Rat, no doubt," huffs Rhonda, ignoring the man until he drifts away.

"Get over it!" Stanley sighs.

"You get over it," she hisses. "All that money gambled away and nothing but trouble!"

The voices of the high school chorus push against, but cannot penetrate their silence. Other passengers clap as the serenade in the storm continues. Stanley rises for his third beer in a half-hour and Rhonda's face is crimson with fury.

When he returns, she leans forward to lash out at him again.

"You know I can't drive in this, you big jerk, so quit gulping beers."

"I'm perfectly able to drive," he says, as if addressing the village idiot. "Anyway, the house isn't far from the dock and a place called Five Corners. If you're so worried, walk."

Rhonda is the first passenger on foot to stamp prints in the snow headed for Five Corners. Stanley slowly catches up to her in his new Cherokee, cursing at the stiffly-braced figure of his willful sister. In this fashion, the two eventually arrive at the darkened Victorian house near Owens Park.

"Ain't this quaint," says Stanley as a simple skeleton key opens the side door of the house to a mud room.

A ticking clock and aged furnace work the space, oblivious to the demise of its gingerbread-happy owner. At the entrance, the front porch swing, settee and planters are brittle from unplanned exposure and skirted by snow drifts.

Panels of tea-stained lace grace the French doors to the parlor, library and dining room. Stanley peeks in to explore the gourmet kitchen and den, guessing he will need every box in the Cherokee to clear out the place. His head bangs against a hanging copper pot and he bumps into a bakery rack, clattering its display of antique china tea cups. He opens a freezer stocked with steaks, fowl and seafood for guests who never came, and whistles. "Prissy Webster, you party animal!"

Rhonda winces as the floorboards creak on the stairway to the second floor and in the hall to the master bedroom. Street light, filtering through the crochet canopy on the four-poster bed, sheds a snowflake pattern on the white spread.

She approaches the bedroom doorway, shivering as ghostly shadows of tree limbs stir across the bed like tumbling lovers. Rhonda hears Stanley's heavy footsteps behind her and sees his flashlight splatter into the room. She pushes the flashlight down to flood the carpet. He huffs. "No one's looking at this old house," again directing the flashlight around the room. It stops on an oval mirror and their hulking reflections. Stanley smiles at himself.

"Picking up that purse is the luckiest thing that ever happened to you" says Rhonda, nodding at his smiling face.

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What precious little eternal peace Priscilla Webster has felt shatters as Stanley's face converges upon her from the mirror and doorway. She studies its blandness, failing to recognize it among the haze of anguished rescuers and passengers' family members who had flocked to the plane crash scene.

Like any other doomed passenger, Priscilla had hovered over the plane wreckage, long resisting the reality of her death, sorely missing her body, and feeling naked without her pocketbook.

At the moment, Stanley and Rhonda's presence seem equally appalling. Priscilla, who had not counted on guests entering this nightmare, had settled for her first winter in the Vineyard alone.

From the start, other restless island souls had regarded Priscilla as a foreigner. Some peeked at her through lace curtains, but otherwise gave her the cold shoulder. And Priscilla herself had been standoffish, though she often observed with interest the ghost of one tall gent roaming the adjacent meadow.

The shimmer of his stiff white collar and cuffs suggested a turn-of-the-last-century life held him here. He stayed out-of-doors, and only occasionally entered the shed that local conservationists filled with drying wildflowers and herbs.

Priscilla thought him obsessed with the leaves that fell unattended through the autumn. He had kicked at the growing piles, utterly frustrated.

Priscilla wishes she had approached him before this frightful night. She follows the strangers to the kitchen and watches them raid her pantry and wine closet.

The thug drinks too much Cabernet. He litters the butcher block island with cracker crumbs and pate as the lumbering woman sacks the place.

"Can't you help?" Rhonda whines every so often.

"I got you here, didn't I?"

Stanley stomps outside and trudges down the hill to Priscilla's boat dock. The colonial house to the right remains dark as it had been since Labor Day. On this still evening, no one outside notices the bruiser.

Priscilla watches from the third-story widow's walk. She feels violated as the man hoists himself onto the 32-foot sailboat, and pokes about. She sees him step back as a ginger tabby cat and four kittens burst out from the uncovered bow, jump ship, and high step it through the snow.

The sight of the cat family makes Priscilla happier than she has been since she died. Turning, she notices the Victorian chap is also chuckling in the meadow. With all of her might, she wills him to her house. He bows stiffly and glances toward the intruder. "Bit of trouble, then?"

"I don't know these people *and* I want them out of here."

"We've been saying on the island that forever, but it don't stop them from coming - more every year."

Priscilla resists the urge to lash out at this predictable bit of island snobbery.

"What can I do?" she frets.

"You've got a problem, all right."

"Do you have any supernatural powers?"

"None to speak of," he admits. "Done me in being called back by my brother."

"Any friends?"

"Sure, we're a pretty tight group on the island, but this time of year most prefer West Tisbury or Edgartown to Vineyard Haven. Very festive."

"Can we go get them?"

"Hmm, not with you so new."

"What then?"

"I guess I could find out if some could come here," he said. "Maybe, Isabelle Dante, the former cosmetician at Bayview Funeral Home, or Fred Zeis, last manager of the Auto Bathe."

Alone again, Priscilla continues to spy on the intruders, utterly beside herself as they ransack the house.

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"You look like hell," blurts the unceremonious Isabelle.

"I beg your pardon," says Priscilla, shrinking under this verdict.

"No. I beg *your* pardon," says Isabelle. "It's just a shock coming upon someone so...undone."

Priscilla delicately bares her soul to the cosmetician, whose sympathy resonates from her formidable essence.

"So, you don't know what became of your body?"

"I suppose it's still in the water or... nowhere. But he has my pocketbook, all my make-up."

"Wish I could give you a makeover and a proper burial."

"For now, I'd be eternally grateful if you just get rid of those thieves."~

Isabelle studies Rhonda as she wraps crystal paperweights in the library and stores them in a box.

Priscilla waits for some profound insight.

"Will you look at her roots!"

Priscilla despairs of the ghost from the funeral home, judging her too scattered to launch an all out offensive against the intruders. By now, Isabelle has moved on to croon at the kittens asleep in a corner of the mud room. To his credit, the thug had ushered in the kittens from the cold, and opened a can of tuna for them.¶

At that moment, Fred Zeis from the car bathe shows up. He enters the library and circles Rhonda. Then he goes into the kitchen, where Stanley is pouring wine into a large goblet.

"You got an alarm, lady?" asks Fred.

"Silent alarms for the bedroom safe and on the French doors."

"So, we just have to get them to set off an alarm," said Fred, problem solved.

But the thieves content themselves with visible loot until they collapse; she on the canopy bed upstairs and he on a couch in the parlor.

Isabelle and Fred toss around ideas for disposing of the thieves. Priscilla firmly rules out fire, flood and other catastrophic measures.

It is four o'clock in the morning when the Victorian gent arrives with a former Edgartown official, Liz Pruitt. During introductions, Priscilla learns the gent's story. Joshua Campbell, a Scottish immigrant's son, had left the Vineyard to fight in the Spanish Civil War, and died at sea. Priscilla reconsiders Joshua from this shared vantage point.

"Shouldn't have left the Vineyard in the first place," sniffs Liz Pruitt.

"And how could you have avoided your fate, Miss Pruitt?" blurts Priscilla in his defense.

There is an awkward silence. Priscilla wonders if they all plan to vanish and leave the uppity foreigner to her own devices. Instead, they suddenly turn their attention en masse to the living room French doors. Mother cat is on the porch, scratching and pawing a square of glass. The cat meows at them and pads to the next door.

"Joshua, remember the Halloween film festival at the library?" asks Isabelle.

"No, I was checking Internet chat sites."

"Fred, you remember the ghost movie, where he spooks a cat into jumping on the bad guy?"

"If you say so, Isabelle."

They turn their attention to the pile of sleeping kittens. Nothing happens. They concentrate harder. Still nothing. But soon the most curious kitten cocks an ear and stirs to his mother's tiny racket outside the living room. Two other kittens waken and the three tumble into the living room, sniff the French doors and then paw and poke at it to reach their mother.

"I don't hear any alarm," says Liz Pruitt darkly.

Still, the feline ruckus makes Priscilla's spirit soar, even more so when a police cruiser stops in front of the house. The officer ambles up the walk, flashlight set on the house and beagle in sporty bandanna trailing at his heels.

"So, you're the culprit," the officer says to the dog-wary cat, kneeling to scratch its head. He shines his light on the kittens inside. "But this is a summer place."

He notices the tire tracks to the garage.

Officer Fletcher Peterson introduces himself to the man at the door and walks back to the kitchen, "You're visiting for the weekend?" he asks politely, as her looks around.

Stanley, groggy with wine and sleep, is disoriented, talking to the officer. The mother cat snakes through their legs, purring over her kittens. Fletcher looks around the kitchen at the packing boxes. "Cute kittens, Mr.?"

"Webster, names Webster. They're just strays I let in for the night."

"You the owner?"

"Nah, my aunt is. Was."

"She died?"

Stanley nods. "Just clearing it out."

"I saw you on the ferry leaving the world, didn't I?"

Stanley, uneasy, looks at the dog and shrugs."

Fletcher continues, "Nice, the singing, eh?"

Stanley shrugs again.

"Mighty rough weekend to come to the Vineyard," says the officer as he resets the alarm.

Fletcher is driving toward Five Corners when he gets a call to return to the Webster house for another alarm. This time he lets himself and his beagle into the mud room, and enters the kitchen.

"Mr. Webster?"

Fletcher climbs the stairs and stops at the master bedroom doorway. He sees the wall safe flung open. The disheveled Mr. Webster bends over to hurriedly pocket a wad of bills. The woman at his side jumps back when she sees the policeman, her hand covering the emerald choker necklace around her throat. The beagle wags amiably at the woman.

The ecstatic, Priscilla, Joshua, Isabelle, Fred and Liz make a victory circle around the thieves. They follow them down to the kitchen and watch the officer hold his hand out for their identification.

"I must have left my wallet at home," says Stanley.

"This is my married name," blurts Rhonda, handing over her driver's license.

Fletcher shakes his head. "Hope you don't mind the wait, but there's just one more thing, folks."

He goes to the patrol car and calls in for a check of the Cherokee's license.

Stepping back into the house, Peterson asks the brother and sister to put on their boots and coats for the ride to the station.

Fletcher grabs for Rhonda's hand, but not before she swings a copper pot at her brother's head. They bicker all the way to the squad car. Utterly self-satisfied, Joshua, Fred and Liz bid Priscilla goodbye and leave the house.

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That afternoon Priscilla and Isabelle huddle together, watching a Humane Society volunteer pull up in a van, and cart the cat and kittens away. As things quiet down, Isabelle rattles off what to do on Martha's Vineyard in winter.

"There's the Wintertide," she says. "You do know about the Sunday Jazz & Jam sessions?"

Priscilla feels terribly restless and bored. She struggles to be polite to the chatty cosmetician, wondering how to get rid of the only remaining guest of the frigid day. The intruders had left her place in total disarray. Yet, for all her fierce possessiveness, Prissy realizes she has lost interest in the contents of the summer place and the vast time stretching out ahead of her.

Isabelle studies the woman, "It's good if you can picture wonderful people getting all of this," she says, whirling from room to room.

"But if nothing is left that's mine, what will become of me?"

"Well, you can leave here anytime you're ready."

"Why haven't you, then?"

"Soon," said Isabelle. "The new woman's almost broken in at the Bayview, my kids are grown, but they have their problems."

"How will you leave?"

"Oh, there's a nice service here and one in Oak Bluffs."

"What kind of service?"

"Holistic approach with hypnosis, I think."

Isabelle amuses herself examining the dent in the copper pot on the kitchen counter. "Some people say we've made up all of this life and we can do the same for death," she says. "Just start dreaming up your own version of your death, or do it with a group of your religious persuasion."

"I'm not religious."

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The clock and furnace work the empty space as shadows of tree limbs fall upon the canopy bed. Priscilla pictures herself on the bed, engaged in deep relaxation. She imagines relaxing her former limbs and torso, her neck, face and head. She remembers the sensation from yoga class, waves of numbing, tingling, fading self, ending the internal dialogue, the incessant chatter.

"Looks like you're on your way, Miss Webster!" sighs Isabelle, as Priscilla's spirit flees the room.

As Isabelle moseys into the hall, she admires the pattern in the deep red Oriental runner. She pokes into the guest room, pausing by a Victorian doll house, a perfect miniature of the Webster place. Inside the doll house, a tiny dining room chandelier tinkles.

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It is dark when Isabelle joins Joshua downstairs in the kitchen and happily draws him into the parlor.

"Been waiting to get back into this place for ages," he says.

"It is worth the wait, don't you think?"

"Yep, and a bargain's a bargain, so I'll let you stay, too, Isabelle."

"Joshua, you old fashioned Vineyard gent," Isabelle croons.

"We will have Fred Zeis to contend with," figures Joshua

"Oh, he can have the doll house."

The tiny chandelier in Priscilla's doll house tinkles and sways.

"Maybe not."