

SHELL SHOCKED

Film Noir Redux
By Art Stevens

I was sitting in my office whiling away the time. I had just solved a murder case in which a stunning divorcee confessed to beheading her chauffeur because he hadn't washed the car when asked.

I was waiting for my next case and hoped that it would be a good one. My talents far exceeded sharpening pencils all day which I never use and am forced to contribute to a local kindergarten class only to discover that the students used the pencils to pick their noses and had to go to the infirmary as a result. Who needs pencils when there's mental telepathy?

I was pondering all this when she made her entrance. To say that she was beautiful is like saying the sky is blue. You just don't have to say it. It was so evident that the starch in my shirt collar began to raise reddish marks on my neck after my having told the dry cleaner never to put starch in my shirts. Her hair was arranged in bangs and multiple pony tails which made the Venetian blinds behind me twist and shout. Her hair didn't nearly begin to capture the full magnitude of her charisma, charm and je ne sais quoi. Even before she uttered a sound I could tell that this would be the most exciting case I'd worked on in quite some time.

I played it cool. I said, "Will you marry me?" I bit my tongue the moment I said it and had to stem the flow of blood with my Hermes tie. What a waste. I had bought it in Paris and it was hardly out of the box. She smiled at my small accident. I, too, began to laugh at the absurdity of the situation. Here I was a seasoned private detective and was bleeding all over myself because of a beautiful woman. I imaged my chums from my youth laughing at me because despite my suave exterior they knew that deep inside me resided a clumsy oaf straining to become a leading man.

I retraced my steps. I said "What I meant to say is please have a seat and tell me what I can do for you. I'm rather busy today. I have another case pending in which a stifled plumber was excoriated by a competitor and there's hell to pay. I can only give you three hours of my time. "

She got serious. "You've come highly recommended by the seven dwarfs you managed to free from Snow White. Your case was featured on Judge Judy's recent show and I was truly impressed. My situation is somewhat different though. I've come to you to help me extricate myself from a life and death situation."

I said: "Can you be more lucid and jocular? You're straying from the subject."

"You're right. I'm obfuscating. I'll come right to the point. I recently bought a lottery ticket at a tattoo parlor without thinking about the possibility of my winning. It was just a nonchalant gesture while waiting for a tattoo on my left shoulder of the profile of Millard Fillmore, the greatest president in U.S. history. Three days later I discovered that my lottery ticket was the winner and worth \$500 million dollars. I haven't gone public as yet to claim my winnings. This is where I need your help."

I was impressed with her mastery of luck of the draw. \$500 million. That's a lot of egg rolls. It could buy me the private island in the Persian Gulf I've dreamed of all my life. And then some. My mind was gyrating. I was in the process of devising a scheme to get my hands on some of that money when I could

see she knew what I was thinking and slapped me hard across the face. It hurt. I said "What was that for?"

She said: "To make sure you heard me correctly. Your eyes rolled up into your head the way an oyster fights hard to remain in its shell when you nonchalantly bring it towards your mouth."

I tried being flippant and did a quick somersault and hand stand to demonstrate that I was in full control and on top of my game. I tried to win back her overwhelming confidence in my skills.

"I don't need your money. I'm into bit coins and am now in control of my destiny and am captain of my own ship. Let's get down to brass tacks. What kind of help are you seeking?"

She spilled her beans. "I will give you one million dollars if you take my winning lottery ticket and pretend you're the big winner. This way, I could keep my life private and no one will be the wiser."

"Aha," I implied. "So what you're really saying is that you're hiring me to be your lackey and stand in for you. Would I have to wear a dress also?"

"No, you object of my non-affection. All you would have to do is receive the check in person for the \$500 million, smile a lot, tell the TV news anchors that you'll use the money to build a new penitentiary for the downtrodden and walk away."

"But what if I'm hounded by low lifes who come after me for my money?" She looked puzzled. "Aren't I getting across to you?" she asked. She was about to slap me again but I sidestepped it on the basis of my adolescent training as an ambidextrous robot but almost toppled over. Another embarrassing moment which would be sure to generate a smirk from my shrink as he would give me that I told you so look.

She said "You'll have a million dollars to get plastic surgery, fit in with circus clowns, claw your way back to respectability and live in a witness protection community. Think of all that money you would have." It didn't take me long for me to reach a conclusion. I looked her in the eye and said: "You and I aren't worth hill or beans in this crazy, mixed up world. I'd like to help you but my inert underwhelming interior would only go on the alert for further sessions with my shrink which I'm getting tired of because he falls asleep every time I mention my mother.

"So the short answer is no. I won't help you with this debatable deed. You may go now." So she gave me a wide eyed look of surprise, began to laugh hysterically and slinked out. Did I do the right thing? Damn it, ten more sessions with my shrink.