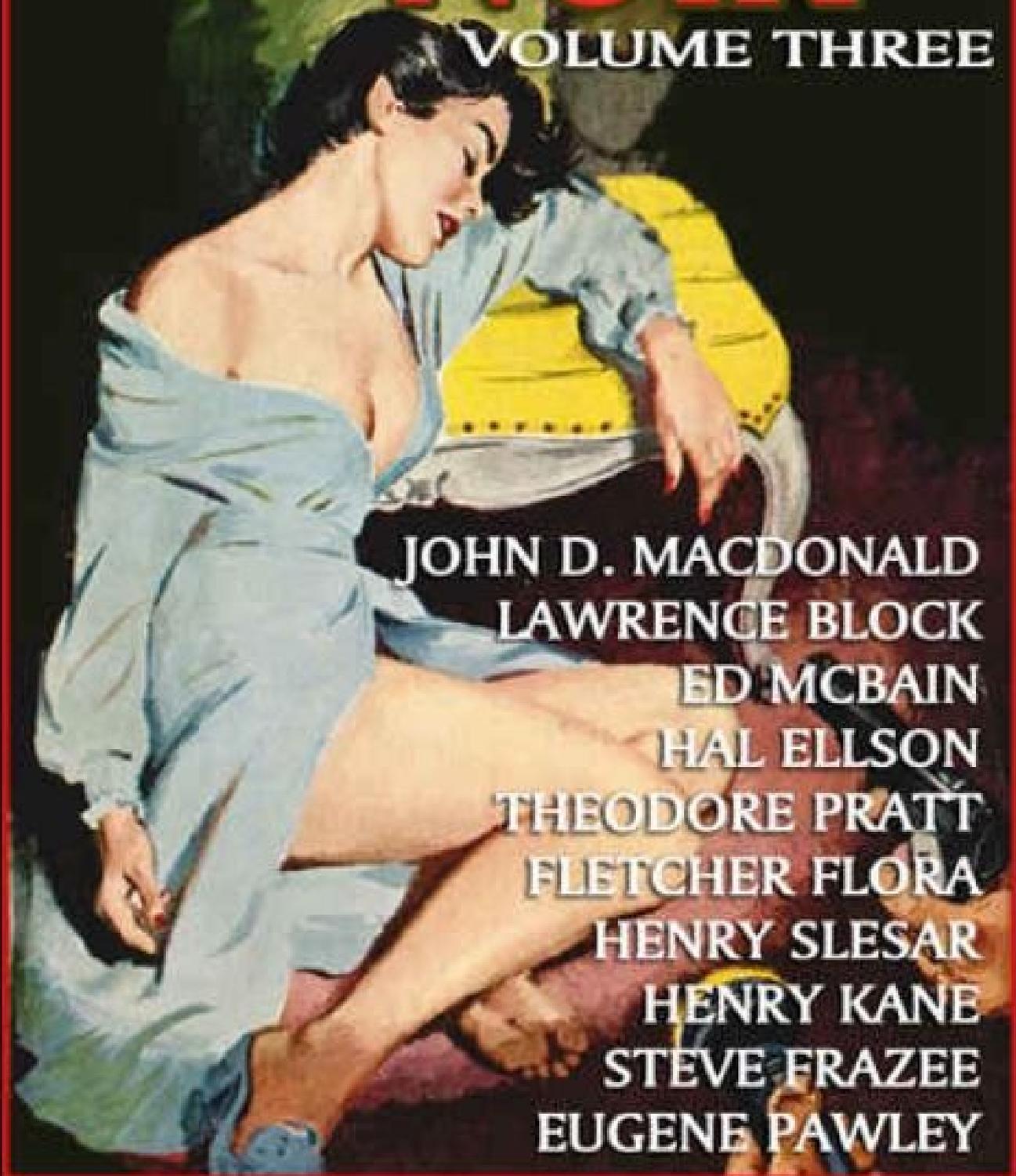


MASTERS

OF NOIR

VOLUME THREE



JOHN D. MACDONALD

LAWRENCE BLOCK

ED MCBAIN

HAL ELLSON

THEODORE PRATT

FLETCHER FLORA

HENRY SLESAR

HENRY KANE

STEVE FRAZEE

EUGENE PAWLEY

A MYSTERY ANTHOLOGY



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SIX FINGERS by HAL ELLSON

JUST WINDOW SHOPPING by LAWRENCE BLOCK writing as SHELDON LORD

PRECISE MOMENT by HENRY KANE

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NOIR MASTER SERIES

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STRANGER IN THE HOUSE by THEODORE PRATT

Her regular cleaning woman had not appeared that morning, and by the time Mrs. Belding decided she was not coming, and had called the employment agency to send over another to her apartment, it was nearly ten o'clock.

The woman the agency sent was a big creature. She was so tall that she stooped, giving her broad, harsh face a rather ridiculous look as it peered out from under a crazy, flopping little hat set on a mass of straggly gray hair. Her blood-shot gray eyes lighted up, blazing, upon seeing Mrs. Belding, as if in fierce anticipation at working for so lovely a lady.

She was so formidable in appearance that Mrs. Belding was a little disturbed at the idea of having her in the apartment all day. She had heard stories of how strange servants had robbed their employers. She hesitated as she looked at the woman. But when she thought of the reputation of the employment agency and saw again the woman's funny hat, she asked the woman if she were willing, considering how late she had come, to work until six instead of five.

The woman boomed out readily, in a deep and husky voice, "Sure, Ma'm, sure am." She didn't smile, but seemed deathly serious, as if sincerity might be a passion with her. Her name, she said, was Hattie.

Mrs. Belding regretted her decision a little when Hattie had prepared herself for work by simply setting her hat on a chair in the hall. Without her crazy hat perched on her frizzly head, the woman no longer seemed amusing. She was now almost threatening. But when Mrs. Belding explained what was to be done, and Hattie had started, attacking the tasks with a surprising willingness and speed, Mrs. Belding decided that her fears were groundless.

At the same time, it occurred to her, for the first time, that she would have to stay in the apartment all day. It wouldn't do to leave it in charge of an unknown cleaning woman. Mrs. Belding had meant to shop for some new stockings to go with the evening dress she would wear that night when she dined out with friends. She considered doing her shopping anyway, wondering if she could trust Hattie.

She thought of calling up the employment agency and asking about Hattie. But agencies couldn't know everything about the people they sent, and besides she couldn't very well make the inquiry with Hattie listening. She saw Hattie moving the piano to clean in back of it, thrusting the heavy instrument aside as if it were little more than a heavy chair. She decided that the old stockings, mended, would have to do.

Mrs. Belding watched Hattie closely, but the only thing she saw was the woman's strength. She had difficulty composing herself, or finding a comfortable place to sit, as Hattie bustled about, doing work in a few minutes that ordinarily took the better part

of an hour to accomplish. It rather alarmed Mrs. Belding. It made her feel nervous. But she reflected that ability, speed, willingness, and strength were no qualities to complain about in a cleaning woman. She had been accustomed to laziness and sometimes downright shirking—such as the regular woman not coming at all today and sending no message.

She felt angry with the regular woman, and friendly toward Hattie, resolving to keep Hattie permanently if she turned out to be all right in other respects. She examined the work that had already been done, and was pleased.

If Mrs. Belding watched Hattie, and contrived to stay much in the same room with her, Hattie followed the same tactics herself. She didn't seem to mind being supervised at all, but appeared to like having Mrs. Belding with her, and several times followed her about. She kept looking at Mrs. Belding, as if in deep admiration, but this did not interfere with her work. She went steadily about it all that morning, almost grimly, and silently—except when an especially energetic outburst made her pant a little.

At noon, when Mrs. Belding began preparing lunch, Hattie suggested, "You let me fix it, Mrs. Belding." And when she was told she could do so if she wished, she said with serious gratitude, "Yes, Ma'm."

Hattie's meal was dainty and delicious. She served it to Mrs. Belding as if she had been long a retainer in the household. She was highly solicitous, several times interrupting her own lunch, which she was having in the kitchen, to come in and inquire if everything were satisfactory. She hovered about anxiously wanting to please. Mrs. Belding had never before experienced such attention and devotion in the short course of a meal.

Hattie was almost loving in her service. Mrs. Belding complimented her and the woman replied, from a voice choked with emotion, "Sure, Ma'm."

By this time Mrs. Belding was assured that Hattie did not mean to rob her. If the woman meant to, she would certainly have attempted it before this, instead of working so hard and efficiently all the time. She looked at Hattie's face and found it drawn. Trying to make a good impression and overdoing the effort, thought Mrs. Belding. Poor thing.

Mrs. Belding did not object when, in the afternoon, Hattie slowed down considerably and became talkative. The woman had started on the closets. And when she came to the one in Mrs. Belding's bedroom, she spent some time in it. She busied herself at examining the clothes there, sometimes touching them, as with envious hands.

"You got fine clothes, Mrs. Belding," she announced.

Her voice went through the room, through the whole apartment, resounding against the walls. "All women's clothes, too. No man's clothes here. You don't have a man, Mrs. Belding?"

Mrs. Belding smiled at this inquisitiveness that had been so long in coming out, and replied, "No, Hattie."

A little later, Hattie observed the things that had been laid out on the bed and said, "You got your evening dress ready. I'll bet you got a man coming to call for you tonight, ain't you, Mrs. Belding?" And Hattie touched the dress softly.

"No, I ... "

Something in the way Hattie asked this made Mrs. Belding check herself. This was no business of Hattie's. Even if Hattie seemed all right, possibly it was not a good plan to admit that there was no man about the place. She tried to cover up her admission. "Yes," she said, "there is a gentleman calling for me later."

Hattie laughed. It was a long, throaty laugh, full and unrestrained. Caressing the clothes with big, affectionate hands, and stooping over them, she said, "I like to imagine how you'll look in that dress, Mrs. Belding. I sure like to work for a beautiful woman like you, Mrs. Belding."

Hattie's laugh remained in the room, echoing, for minutes after she left it.

Mrs. Belding had been disturbed by the whole thing. But she, finally, decided that Hattie's comments on the clothes had simply been in the nature of a hint that she be given some old clothes, either those of a woman, or of a man. Cleaning women were always wanting clothes, and asking for them by admiring those of the people for whom they worked. That was the way they obtained much of their clothing.

Mrs. Belding laughed herself when she pictured Hattie in any of her cast-off things; they wouldn't cover half the woman. But then, maybe she wanted them for a sister—or a friend.

Late in the afternoon, Mrs. Belding was sitting on the stool before her dressing-table mending a run in the top of one of the stockings she was to wear that evening. She had not heard Hattie at her work for some time. She listened, and when a number of minutes went by and there was still no noise, she rose and went out to see what Hattie was doing.

Hattie was not in the living room. She was not in the hall nor in the kitchen. Mystified, Mrs. Belding glanced at the closed bathroom door. The woman must be there. She called her name.

From behind the door, muffled, but still booming, came Hattie's voice. "Yes, Ma'm, you want me, Mrs. Belding?"

"I didn't know where you were," Mrs. Belding said, speaking in the direction of the bathroom.

"I'll be ready in a minute, Mrs. Belding," Hattie said from behind the door.

Mrs. Belding went back to her bedroom. Something about Hattie's reply bothered her, but she didn't know what it was. She thought Hattie had finished in the bathroom, but evidently she hadn't.

Mrs. Belding took up the mending of her stocking again. She listened for Hattie, but heard nothing. When a longer time than before went by without any noise being made, she called out as she had before, but this time from where she sat.

There was no answer. She called again. Still there was no reply. She wondered what Hattie could be doing. Whatever it was, she was taking a long time about it. Mrs. Belding wanted her to get through, for she meant to take a bath in a few minutes. Surely the woman must have heard her. She put down her mending, got up, and went out into the hall.

"Hattie!" she called. There was no reply. "Hattie!" Her call was nearly a cry this time. But no answer came from the bathroom. Nor was there any sound of movement.

What had happened to the woman? She must still be in the bathroom. Or had she sneaked out, perhaps to let someone else in the apartment?

Mrs. Belding turned quickly about, looking. There was no one to be seen. There was no sound in the apartment.

She took a step toward the bathroom door, then stopped, cautiously. It was indeed strange.

"Hattie!" she called again.

Only silence answered her.

Mrs. Belding stood there, her heart beating fast. The thought came to her that Hattie had left without saying anything, without collecting her wages. While trying to figure out why the woman would do such a thing, she looked for Hattie's hat.

The crazy little thing was still on the chair. Hattie was still in the apartment.

Mrs. Belding wanted to call in a neighbor, or the building superintendent, or a policeman, to help her investigate. But she hesitated at the prospect of raising a hue and cry over what might be nothing.

In her irresolution at deciding what to do, another thought, a more logical solution, came to her. She remembered the drawn look on Hattie's face, and how Hattie had slowed down at the work, as though tired. The woman had probably gone beyond the capacity of her strength and fainted in the bathroom. That was it, of course. That was why she hadn't answered.

Concerned, and a little irritated, Mrs. Belding went to the door and opened it. Hattie was not to be seen. Mrs. Belding stepped into the bathroom.

As soon as she was well into the room, the door swung closed behind her, snapping shut with a sharp click. There was a movement there, and she whirled around quickly to see what it was.

An utterly naked man, who looked gigantic, stood against the door.

In the confusion and shock of her first horror, Mrs. Belding looked about for Hattie. All that was to be seen of her were a heap of clothing and a wig of straggly gray hair lying on the floor. Other than that, there was only the man standing there starkly nude, exposed and horribly ready, staring down at her from his blood-shot eyes which were now wide and burning.

Mrs. Belding's lips parted to emit a scream that her terror had so far denied her, but, before she could get it out a firm, large hot hand was placed over her mouth, twisting her about so that the back of her head was pressed against a hard sweaty chest that was breathing fast, and another hand began to tear viciously at the clothing on her shoulder.

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MAY I COME IN? by FLETCHER FLORA

The night was hot and humid. I lay in my room on a sheet sodden with the seepage from my pores, and suspended above me in the dark like a design in ectoplasm was the face of the man named Marilla, and the hate within me stirred and flowed and seeped with the sweat from my pores, and the color of my hate was yellow.

I got off the bed and walked on bare feet across the warm floor to the window, but there was no air moving at the window or outside the window, and the adherent heat had saturated my flesh and soaked through my eyes into the cavity of my skull to lie like a thick, smothering fog over the contours of my brain. I could hear, across the narrow interval that separated houses, the whirr of blades beating the air, and because my eyes were like cat's eyes, I could see behind the blades into the black, gasping room, and it was the bedroom of Mrs. Willkins, and she was lying nude on her bed under the contrived breeze, and her body was gross and ugly with flesh loose on its bones, and I hated her, just as I hated the ectoplasmic face of the man named Marilla, with all the force of my yellow hate.

Turning away from the window, I found in the darkness a pint of gin on a chest and poured two fingers into a tumbler. I sat on the edge of the bed and drank the gin and then lay down again, and the face of Marilla was still suspended above me, and in a moment the face of Freda was there too, and I began to think deliberately about Marilla and Freda, and the reason I hated Marilla.

I stood with Freda in front of the shining glass window, and she pointed out the coat to me on the arrogant blonde dummy. I could see Freda's reflected face in the glass from my angle of vision, and her lips were slightly open in excitement and desire, and I felt happy and a little sad at the same time to see her that way, because it wasn't, after all, much of a coat, not mink or ermine or any kind of fur at all, but just a plain cloth coat that was a kind of pink color and looked like it would be as soft as down to the touch.

"It's beautiful," Freda said. "It's, oh, so beautiful," and I said, "You like it? You like to have it?" and she said, "Oh, yes," in a kind of expiring, incredulous whisper that was like the expression of a child who just can't believe the wonderful thing that's about to happen.

We went into the store and up to the floor where the coats were sold, and Freda tried on the coat, turning around and around in front of the mirror and stroking the cloth as if it were a kitten and making a soft little purring sound as if she were the kitten she was stroking. I teased her a little, saying that, well, it was rather expensive and would raise hell with the budget, but I knew all the time that I was going to buy it for her, because she wanted it so much and because it made her look even more beautiful than before, and after a while I went up to the credit department and made arrangements for monthly payments, because I didn't have the price. When I came back down, she was still standing in front of the mirror in the coat, and I said, "You going to wear it?" and

she said, "Oh, yes, I'm going to wear it and sleep in it and never take it off," and I kept remembering afterward that it wasn't after all, so much of a coat, not fur or anything, but just pink cloth.

We went down in the elevator, and she clung to my arm and kissed me over and over with her eyes, and I thought it was the best buy I'd ever made and cheap at the price, even if I had had to arrange monthly payments. We went out onto the street through the revolving door, walking close together in the same section of the door because Freda wouldn't let loose of my arm, and the street was bright and soft and cool with the cool, bright softness of April, and it was just the kind of day and street for a new pink coat. We walked down the street toward the drug store on the corner, and I was thinking that I'd take Freda into the store for some of the peppermint ice cream with chunks of stick peppermint in it that she liked so much, and it occurred to me that the ice cream was just about the color of the pink coat, and then there were a couple of explosions inside the drug store, and after a second or two a woman began to scream in a high, ragged voice that went on and on, and the door of the store flew open, and a man ran out with a gun in his hand, and the man was Marilla, the man they were later to call a psychopathic killer.

He ran toward us along the sidewalk waving the gun, and he ran with a queer, lurching gait, as if he were crippled, or one leg were shorter than the other, and as he ran he made a sound that was something like a whimper and something like a cry. Between us and him was a kid carrying a shoe shine box, and the kid stopped and stood stiffly with the box hanging at his side, and then the gun in Marilla's hand began to explode again, and the kid set the box down on the sidewalk and fell over sideways across it. I stood looking at the kid, and I realized suddenly that Freda had let go of my arm, and I turned to see if she was still there, but she wasn't, and I couldn't see her anywhere. Marilla ran past me, and I could see directly into his big eyes that were like black puddles of liquid terror, and he pointed the gun at my face and pulled the trigger, and I could hear the dull click of the hammer on a dead shell. I could have tackled him and brought him down, but I didn't, because just then I saw that Freda was lying on the sidewalk like the kid up ahead, but in a different position, on her back with the new coat spread open around her like something that had been put there in advance for her to lie on. I knelt down beside her on the sidewalk and lifted her head and began to say her name, and at first I thought she'd fainted, but then I saw the small black hole that was about three inches in a straight line below the hollow of her throat, and I knew that she was dead.

They caught Marilla in a blind alley. He was sitting in a corner with his knees drawn up and his head resting on his knees, and he was whimpering and crying, and his voice would rise now and then to a thin scream of terror, and the men who found him first almost beat him to death before the police came and took him away. Right after that, the next day or so, they began to say he was crazy, that he was just a crazy kid only twenty years old, and the psychiatrists had big words for the kind of craziness it was supposed to be, but I knew that nothing they could say would do him any good at all, because he had killed a man and a woman in the drug store and the shoe shine kid on

the street, and above all he had killed Freda in her new pink coat.

They asked him why he had killed all those people, and they didn't even make any distinction between Freda and the others, and he said he hadn't hated any of them or anything like that, hadn't even wanted to kill them at all, but had killed them anyhow because he'd been told time and again to do it and finally had to do as he was told. They asked him who had told him to kill the people, just any people, and he said it was a thin little man with a pointed nose and a pointed chin who wore yellow pointed shoes. The man had appeared in all sorts of odd places and told him to go out and kill some people.

It was part of the big lie, of course, that ridiculous part about the man coming and telling him to kill some people, it was part of the plan to keep him from paying for killing Freda, and anyone could see right through it, it was so transparent. You can buy some psychiatrist to verify something like that any time you've got the price, and I knew they'd hang him in spite of what any psychiatrist said, because God wanted him to hang just as much as I did, God and I hated him equally for what he'd done to Freda right when she was so happy.

I waited for them to try him, and finally they did, and I went and sat in the court room every day to watch him and to feel the yellow hate like pus inside me. He sat at the long table with the lawyers who defended him, and he always sat with his head bowed and his hands folded on top of the table in a posture of prayer, but once in a while he would look up briefly into the crowd, and the light of terror and inner cowering were there in his great liquid eyes, and I felt a fierce exaltation that he was suffering, and that the suffering he now felt was only the beginning of the suffering he would feel before he was through. He looked very small in the chair by the big table, hardly larger than a child, with narrow shoulders slumped forward and a slender neck supporting a head that was too big for his body, and the head looking even bigger than it really was because of the thick black shining curls that covered it. I kept watching him sit there like he was praying, and I kept thinking that he could pray all he wanted to, but God wouldn't hear him, and that he could plead and lie and try all the tricks he could think of, but no one would believe him or pity him or do anything to help him, no one at all.

They put him on the stand at last to tell about the man who had come to tell him to kill, and he described the man again, just as he had to the psychiatrists, his pointed nose and pointed chin and yellow pointed shoes, and he spoke in a very soft voice that could barely be heard but contained all the time, somehow, the threat of rising abruptly to a shrill scream. It was all put on, part of the plan, but he was very clever, a great actor, and he told how the man had appeared the first time while he was standing on a bridge looking down at the water, and had sat down beside him another time in a movie theater, and had met him another time while he was walking along a path in the town park, and had then begun coming to his room late at night to knock softly on the door. No one was supposed to believe that the little man had actually come to him in those ways, or in any way at all, but everyone was supposed to believe that it had happened in his mind, that the little man was an hallucination of insanity, but I knew it

hadn't happened that way either, that the man hadn't even appeared in Marilla's mind, and that it was all a story made up to get him out of it. I knew they'd hang him, and I tried to feel within myself the way he'd feel while he was waiting, and walking out to the scaffold, and standing there in the last instant with the black hood over his head and the rope around his neck.

But in the end they didn't hang him at all.

They let him out of it.

They said he wasn't guilty because he wasn't in his right mind and wasn't responsible for his acts, and they sent him off somewhere to a place with cool white rooms and a cool green lawn and doctors to look after him and nurses to wait on him.

I thought a lot about the twelve people on the jury who let him out of it, and I began to hate them the same as Marilla, and I wished they were all dead, dead as Freda, but the more I thought about them the more they seemed like all other people, and after a long time I realized it was because they really were like all other people on earth. Freda was dead, and no one cared, all the people on earth had said it was all right because of a ridiculous story about a little man with a pointed nose and a pointed chin and yellow pointed shoes who had told a man named Marilla to kill her. Always I saw the face of Marilla and the face of Freda, and they seemed to get mixed up with other faces that I'd never seen before, and I wondered if I was insane myself, but I wasn't, of course, any more than Marilla was.

And now I lay in my room in the hot and humid night, and across the interval between houses, behind the futile beating of blades, Mrs. Willkins' gross body stirred in her black and gasping room.

And there was something else. Something new.

A man was walking the dark and airless streets of town beneath layers of lifeless leaves.

He walked with mincing steps, and he was far away in the beginning, when I first saw him, and I lay on my bed in my room and followed his progress with cat's eyes through light and shadow across the pattern of the town. At times he was swallowed completely by darkness, and then no eyes could see him but mine, but the people who stirred in wakefulness in the houses he passed could hear the echo of his mincing steps, and he moved with surety of purpose and a pace that never varied through the silent, dappled streets until he came at last to the corner above my house and down the street to the house itself. Without moving from my bed, I could see him standing on the sidewalk below with his face lifted into the milky light of the moon, and then he came up across the porch into the house and up the stairs into the hall and stood outside my door.

I waited in the hot stillness, and after a while he knocked softly, and I got up in the

dark, and my hand, swinging out, struck the tumbler on the table by the bed and knocked it to the floor with a sound of brittle thunder that rocked the room. I waited until the reverberations had diminished and died and the soft knock was repeated, and then I crossed to the door and opened it.

The warm fog inside my skull pressed closely on my brain, and though my head didn't ache exactly, it felt very light and queer. The man in the hall looked at me and bowed in a peculiar, old-fashioned way from the waist and smiled politely.

"Excuse me for disturbing you at this hour," he said, "but I must talk with you about a number of people. About Mrs. Willkins first of all, I think. May I come in?"

He was a little man with a long pointed nose and a pointed chin. He wore yellow pointed shoes.

I saw Marilla from my window. He was walking in the yard below with the same man in white who comes now and then to my room, and he sat for a while on a bench under a tree, and I could see him quite clearly. The queer thing is, there was no hate, no longer any hate, and I'm thinking that perhaps I will be allowed to walk in the yard soon, and that Marilla and I may meet and sit together under the tree and talk about these things that happened. It will be pleasant to talk with someone who knows and understands....

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THE KILLERS by JOHN D. MACDONALD

1.

We certainly got sick of John Lash. A lot of the guys stopped coming after he started to attend every meeting. It's a skin diving club—you know, just a few guys who like to swim under water in masks and all, shoot fish with those spear guns, all that. We started originally with six guys and we called ourselves The Deep Six. Even when it got up to about fifteen, we kept the name.

When it started we just had masks and fins and crude rigs. We live and work on the Florida Keys. I work in a garage in Marathon. Dusty has a bait and boat rental business in Craig. Lew manages a motel down on Ramrod. That's just to give you an idea of the kind of jokers we are. Just guys who got bitten by this skin diving bug. We tried to meet once a week. Dusty had an old tub that's ideal for it. We meet and pick a spot and head for it and anchor and go down and see what's there. You never know what you'll find. There are holes down there that are crawling with fish.

Once the bug gets you, you're hooked. There are a lot of little clubs like ours. Guys that get along. Guys who like to slant down through that green country, kicking yourself along with your fins, hunting those big fish right down in their own backyard.

We got better equipment as we went along. We bought snorkel tubes when those came out. But the Aqua-lungs were beyond our price range. I think it was Lew who had the idea of everybody chipping in, and of putting in the money we got from selling the catches. When we had enough we bought a lung and two tanks, and then another. In between meetings somebody would run the four tanks up and get them refilled. There was enough time on the tanks so that during a full day everybody got a crack at using one of the lungs.

It was fine there for quite a while. We'd usually get ten or twelve, and some of the wives would come along. We'd have food and beer out there in the sun on that old tub and we had some excitement, some danger, and a lot of fish.

Croy Danton was about the best. A little guy with big shoulders, who didn't have much to say. Not a gloomy guy. He just didn't talk much. His wife, Betty, would usually come along when she could. They've got some rental units at Marathon. He did a lot of the building himself, with the help of a G.I. loan. Betty is what I would call a beautiful girl. She's a blonde and almost the same height as Croy, and you can look at her all day without finding anything wrong with her. She dives a little.

Like I said, it was fine there for a while, until Lew brought this John Lash along one day. Afterward Lew said he was sorry, that Lash had seemed like a nice guy. In all fairness to Lew, I will admit that the first time John Lash joined us he seemed okay. We let him pay his dues. He was new to the Keys. He said he was looking around, and he had a temporary job tending bar.

One thing about him, he was certainly built. One of those guys who looks as if he was fat when you see him in clothes. But in his swimming trunks he looked like one of those advertisements. He had a sort of smallish round head and round face and not much neck. He was blonde and beginning to go a little bald. The head didn't seem to fit the rest of him, all that tough brown bulge of muscle. He looked as if a meat axe would bounce right off him. He'd come over from California and he had belonged to a couple of clubs out there and had two West Coast records. He said he had those records and we didn't check, but I guess he did. He certainly knew his way around in the water.

This part is hard to explain. Maybe you have had it happen to you. Like at a party. You're having a good time, a lot of laughs, and then somebody joins the party and it changes everything. You still laugh, but it isn't the same kind of laugh. Everything is different. Like one of those days when the sun is out and then before you know it there is a little haze across the sun and everything looks sort of funny. The water looks oily and the colors are different. That is what John Lash did to The Deep Six. It makes you wonder what happened to a guy like that when he was a kid. It isn't exactly a competitive instinct. They seem to be able to guess just how to rub everybody the wrong way. But you can't put your finger on it. Any of us could tell Dusty his old tub needed a paint job and the bottom scraped and Dusty would say we should come around and help if we were so particular. But John Lash could say it in such a way that it would make Dusty feel ashamed and make the rest of us feel ashamed, as though we were all second rate, and John Lash was used to things being first rate.

When he kidded you he rubbed you raw. When he talked about himself it wasn't bragging because he could always follow it up. He liked horseplay. He was always roughing somebody around, laughing to show it was all in fun, but you had the feeling he was right on the edge of going crazy mad and trying to kill you. We had been a close group, but after he joined we started to give each other a bad time, too. There were arguments and quarrels that John Lash wasn't even in. But they happened because he was there. It was spoiling the way it used to be, and there just wasn't anything we could do about it because it wasn't the sort of club where you can vote people out.

Without the lung, with just the mask, he could stay downstairs longer than anybody. Longer than Croy Danton even, and Croy had been the best until John Lash showed up. We had all tried to outdo Croy, but it had been sort of a gag competition. When we tried to outdo John Lash some of the guys stayed down so long that they were pretty sick when they came back up. But nobody beat him.

Another thing about him I didn't like. Suppose we'd try a place and find nothing worth shooting. For John Lash there wasn't anything that wasn't worth shooting. He had to come up with a fish. I've seen him down there, waving the shiny barb slowly back and forth. The fish come up to take a look at it. A thing like that attracts them. An angel fish or a parrot fish or a lookdown would come up and hang right in front of the barb, studying this strange shiny thing. Then John Lash would pull the trigger. There would

be a big gout of bubbles and sometimes the spear would go completely through the fish so that it was threaded on the line like a big bright bead. He'd come up grinning and pull it off and toss it over the side and say, "Let's try another spot, children."

The group shrunk until we were practically down to the original six. Some of the other guys were going out on their own, just to stay away from John Lash. Croy Danton kept coming, and most of the time he would bring Betty. John Lash never horsed around with Croy. Croy, being so quiet, never gave anybody much of an opening. John Lash never paid any special attention to Betty. But I saw it happen. Betty wasn't going to dive after fish. She was just going to take a dip to cool off. John Lash had just taken a can of beer out of the ice chest. He had opened it and it was a little bit warm. I saw him glance up to the bow where Betty was poised to dive. She stood there and then dived off cleanly. John Lash sat there without moving, just staring at the place where she had been. And the too-warm beer foamed out of the can and ran down his fingers and dropped onto his thigh, darkening and matting the coarse blonde hair that had been sundried since his last dive. I saw him drain the can and saw him close his big hand on it, crumpling it, before throwing it over the side. And I saw him watch Betty climb back aboard, sleek and wet, smiling at Croy, her hair waterpasted down across one eye so that as soon as she stood up in the boat, she thumbed it back behind her ear.

I saw all that and it gave me a funny feeling in my stomach. It made me think of the way he would lure the lookdowns close to the barb, and it made me think of the way blood spreads in the water.

After that, John Lash began to move in on Betty with all the grace and tact of a bulldozer. He tried to dab at her with a towel when she came out of the water. If she brought anything up, he had to bustle over to take it off her spear. He found reasons to touch her. Imaginary bugs. Helping her in or out of the boat. Things like that. And all the time his eyes burning in his head.

At first you could see that Croy and Betty had talked about it between meetings, and they had agreed, I guess, to think of it as being sort of amusing. At least they exchanged quick smiles when John Lash was around her. But a thing like that cannot stay amusing very long when the guy on the make keeps going just a little bit further each time. It got pretty tense and, after the worst day, Croy started leaving Betty home. He left her home for two weeks in a row.

Croy left her home the third week and John Lash didn't show up either. We sat on the dock waiting for latecomers. We waited longer than usual. Dusty said, "I saw Lash at the bar yesterday and he said today he was off."

There were only five of us. The smallest in a long, long time. We waited. Croy finally said, "Well, let's go." As we took the boat out I saw Croy watching the receding dock, no expression on his face. It was a funny strained day. I guess we were all thinking the same thing. We had good luck, but it didn't seem to matter. We left earlier than usual. Croy sat in the bow all the way back, as if in that way he'd be nearer shore, and the first one home.

2.

Croy came around to see me at the garage the next morning. I was trying to find a short in an old Willys. When I turned around he was standing there behind me with a funny look on his face. Like a man who's just heard a funny sound in the distance and can't figure out just what it was. He looked right over my left shoulder, and said, "You can tell him for me, Dobey, that I'm going to kill him."

"What do you mean?"

"He came around yesterday. He was a little drunk. He scared Betty. He knew I wouldn't be there. He came around and he scared her. The Sandersons were there. She got loose of him and went over where they were. He kept hanging around. She had to stay with them most of the day. He's got her nervous now. You tell him for me if he makes one more little bit of a move toward her at any time, I'll sure kill him stone dead." He turned around and walked out with that funny look still on his face. It was the most I ever heard him say all at one time.

At noon I went over to the bar where John Lash was working. He'd just come on. I got a beer and he rung it up and slapped my change down. He seemed a little nervous.

"Get anything yesterday?"

"Lew got a big 'cuda. Croy got some nice grouper. Where were you?"

"Oh, I had things to do."

"You better not have any more things like that to do."

He looked at me and put his big hands on the bar and put his face closer to mine. "What kind of a crack is that?"

"Don't try to get tough with me. You messed around Betty Danton yesterday. You scared her. She told Croy. Croy came in this morning and gave me a message to give you. He says you bother her in any other kind of way at any time and he's going to kill you." It sounded funny to say it like that. As if I was in a movie.

John Lash just stared at me out of those little hot eyes of his. "What kind of talk is that? Kill me? With all the come-on that blonde of his has been giving me? Why don't he come here and tell me that? You know damn well why he didn't come here. By God, I'd have thrown him halfway out to the road."

"He told me to tell you. It sounded like he meant it."

"I'm scared to death. Look at me shake."

I finished my beer and put the glass down. "See you," I said.

"I'll be along the next time."

I walked out. One thing about that Lash, he didn't scare worth a damn. I would have been scared. One of those fellows who do a lot of talking wouldn't scare me much. But the quiet ones, like Croy, they bottle things up.

It was nearly three o'clock when Betty came into the garage. She had on a white dress and when she stood there it made the old garage with all the grease and dirt look darker than ever before. She is a girl who looks right at you. Her eyes were worried. I wiped my hands and lit a cigarette and went over to her.

"Dobey, did Croy talk to you?"

"He was in."

"What did he say?"

"Wouldn't he tell you what he said?"

"He just said he gave you a message for John Lash. What was it, Dobey? He won't tell me. He acts so funny. I'm scared, Dobey."

"He told me to tell Lash if he messed around you he was going to kill him. He said Lash scared you."

"Well, he did scare me, sort of. Because he was drunk. But the Sandersons were there. So it was all right. Croy says I have to come along with you next time. What did Lash say?"

"What do you think he said? You can't scare him off that way. I don't think anybody ought to go out next time, Betty. I think we ought to call it off. I think it's going to be a mess."

"Croy says we're going. He's acting funny. We'll have to go. You've got to come along too, Dobey. Please."

3.

That's the way it was. It was something you couldn't stop. Like one of those runaway trains in the old movie serials. Picking up speed as it went. I had time during the week to get hold of the other guys and tell them what was up. I don't know now why we didn't form a sort of delegation and go see John Lash and tell him to move along, off the Keys. There would have been enough of us. But there was something about Lash. Something wild and close to the surface. You could have done all that to a normal guy, but he wasn't normal. I'm not saying he was crazy.

Anyway, I loaded the little Jap automatic I had brought back from Saipan and put it in the paper sack with my lunch. That's the way I felt about the day.