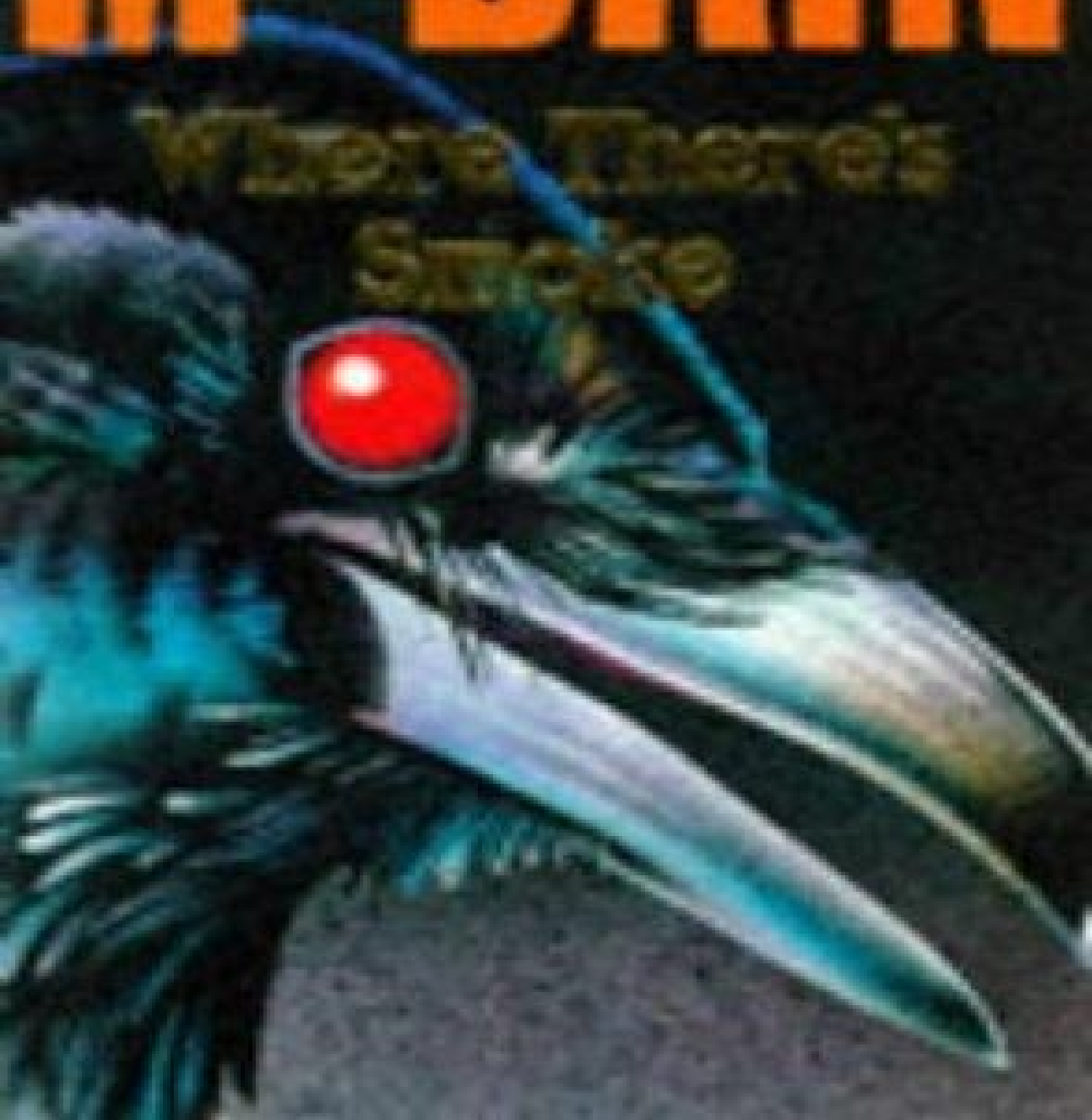


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Smoke



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WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

ED MCBAIN

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MY NAME IS Benjamin Smoke.

Spare me, please, the tired queries and pointless witticisms. I'm proudly descended from a long line of Dutch burghers, one of whom, three generations back, arrived in this country bearing the name Evert Johannes van der Smoak. A petty immigration official promptly changed my grandfather's name and recorded it for posterity as Everett Smoke. This was common practice during the early part of the century, when the American melting pot reduced to common residue European names that had survived for generations. There was neither malice nor grand design in this simplification of names too difficult to spell or pronounce; there was merely expediency, and perhaps foresight. A great deal of paperwork was involved in the naturalization process, you see. Errors both present and future could easily be avoided by taking a person named Sygmunt Laskiewicz and renaming him Sig Lasky at the port of entry. You might argue that the process was dehumanizing. On the other hand, it was small enough price to pay for admission to this great land of opportunity.

I'm a retired police lieutenant.

I used to command an eighteen-man squad of detectives in one of this city's busier precincts. I quit because I got bored. Without attempting to sound immodest (I'm normally shy and self-effacing), there's really very little challenge to police work. Once you get the knack of it, it becomes easy. And boring. You most certainly get the knack of it after twenty-four years on the force—as Patrolman, Detective Third, Detective Second, Detective First, and finally, Detective-Lieutenant in charge of a squad. Burglaries,

muggings, robberies, rapes; forgeries, frauds, arsons, and common misdemeanors; murders by ax, dagger, switchblade, shotgun, rope, ice pick, poison, pistol, shovel, hammer, hatchet, baseball bat, or fists; crimes of commission or omission—all lose whatever sense of poetry or glamour they may have once possessed. Tedium. It all reduces itself to tedium in triplicate.

I'm forty-eight years old.

I'm six feet three inches tall, and I weigh an even two hundred pounds. (My weight hasn't varied since I was twenty. Not an ounce. I make sure it doesn't.) I have green eyes and hair I prefer to think of as iron-gray, worn short but not close-cropped, parted on the left-hand side. There's a knife scar on my right cheek, memento of a scuffle I had with a cheap thief three days after I'd been promoted to Detective Third. To complete the B-sheet, I have a tattoo on the biceps of my left arm, "Peg" in a blood-red heart, blue dagger piercing it, a permanent reminder of a foolish love affair I had while serving with the United States Navy in San Francisco during World War II. Peg was a prostitute, I later learned.

Since my retirement, I've privately investigated only four cases. I do not have a private investigator's license, and I never expect to apply for one. Whatever anyone may tell you about licensed private eyes, they're hired mostly to find missing persons or to get the goods on adulterous husbands; my aspirations are higher. I have a Carry permit for a .38 Detective's Special, but I've never had to use the gun since I left the force, and I rarely bother clipping it to my belt. I also own a gold lieutenant's shield which I carry in a small leather case. It was a personal retirement gift from the Chief of Detectives, and it has served me well over the past three years. I would rather part with my pistol and my shoes than that magic little shield. I live fairly comfortably on my pension and on the dividends from some stocks I inherited when my

father died. I suppose I might be considered a happy man.

In fact, I have only one regret.

I've never investigated a case I couldn't solve. I've never encountered the perfect crime.

* * * *

ONE

I WENT TO see Abner Boone only because his urgent phone call seemed to promise something mildly interesting. I arrived at his place of business on Hennessy Street at nine o'clock on a Monday morning in September. Abner was an undertaker dressed in his customary weeds—black suit, black shoes and socks, black tie, white shirt. He led me through the front of his cheerful establishment, past two viewing rooms and a chapel, and then opened a door that led to a room in which a pair of closed coffins rested on sawhorses. Two windows with drawn shades were on one wall of the room. On the other wall, there was a door that had obviously been forced open with a crowbar; there were fresh scars and jagged splinters on the wooden jamb. No professional, this thief. "I'm glad you could come, Lieutenant," Abner said. "If word of this—"

"Abner," I said, "excuse me, but I'm no longer a lieutenant"

"But you still investigate crimes," he said.

"Hardly ever," I said.

"Lieutenant," he said, "this is a crime of great enormity."

"Have you contacted the police yet?"

“Of course not.”

“Why not?”

“Lieutenant,” he said, “I couldn’t take that chance. Suppose a newspaper reporter got wind of this? I’d be the laughingstock of the profession. I called you immediately.”

“You woke me up,” I said.

“I’m sorry about that,” he said.

“All right, tell me what happened.”

“Someone has stolen a corpse,” Abner said.

“I know that. When?”

“Last night sometime.”

“Where was the corpse the last time you saw it?”

“In the casket behind you.”

“Male or female?”

“Male.”

“Clothed or naked?”

“Fully clothed.”

“Wearing what?”

“Blue pin-striped suit, white shirt, dark-blue necktie, blue socks, black shoes.”

“Embalmed?”

“Yes, of course. I always do that at once. Certainly within the first two hours.”

“When was the body delivered to you?”

“At eight o’clock last night. It came directly from the hospital. Saint Augustine’s, on Third and Sussex.”

“How’d the man die?”

“In an automobile accident on the Harbor Highway. He broke his neck on impact when his car crashed into a concrete pillar.”

“Give me his name.”

“Anthony Gibson.”