

Cold Case

Birkson Investigation Services. Sounds pretty cool, doesn't it? Like something out of a classic "tough guy" private eye movie. Except almost all of our investigations involve marital infidelity or worker's compensation. We're hired by guys who think their wife is cheating on them or, more often, by divorce attorneys hired by wives who want to prove their husbands were unfaithful. And we're hired by insurance companies who want to find out if the victims they're paying are taking dance lessons or playing softball while they're unable to work. (You wouldn't believe how common that is.) Another blow to the tough guy stereotype is the fact that the head of the agency is named Ralph Birkson. Nothing wrong with that name, but I can't imagine Humphrey Bogart telling a stunningly beautiful client "Have a seat, gorgeous. My name is Ralph."

Not that I have anything to complain about, mind you. Ralph took me on as his assistant when no one else would hire me. I earned a degree in Journalism from a major university. My favorite professor was a grizzled, former newspaper reporter who stressed ethics and objectivity. "If you had something wrong with you," he asked the class, "and your doctor ordered x-rays, would you want the x-ray technician to touch up the pictures to highlight what he thought the problem was? Or would you want him to just provide the facts so that you and your doctor could decide what to do about it? Your job as a journalist is to be a good x-ray technician. Provide the facts, objectively and without opinions, so the public and the politicians can decide what to do."

That philosophy really struck a chord with me. I'd always prided myself on being a straight shooter, someone who wasn't afraid to speak the truth. That professor raised journalism from a job to a mission. When I graduated, though, I found the world had changed since the days when he was a newspaper reporter. The big media corporations, or at least the ones I tried to work for, weren't interested in objective stories. They wanted stories that would get high ratings from their customers, which meant stories that reinforced what their customers already believed. Not stories that challenged their opinions. Over time, this led to a homogeneous corporate culture, where all the reporters shared a common view.

My first job was with a liberal news organization. Their reporters were proud of the fact that none of them had ever voted for a Republican, and they bristled at the suggestion that this could indicate a lack of diversity. To them, all Republicans were either rich greedy corporations or ignorant hicks. And probably racists to boot. They didn't even like to be called "liberal." They were "progressives" who represented America's working men and women. They supported "democratic socialism," which they insisted had never failed because it had never been tried. They were not amused when I pointed out that Hitler was the democratically elected leader of the "National Socialist German Worker's Party." I didn't last long at that job.

My next job was with a conservative news organization. Their reporters were proud of the fact that they had never voted for a Democrat, and they thought liberals were either ultra-rich conspirators trying to take over world governments or starry-eyed idealists who ignored reality and dreamt of a Marxist Utopia. They didn't mind being called "conservative" because they took a conservative view of government. They wanted a limited government where the Bill of Rights was paramount and people

could live their lives free of government interference. They got a bit testy when I asked if this included the right to live in a city park and take drugs, or if Freedom of the Press gave social media companies the right to ban anyone who didn't comply with their editorial policy. I didn't last long at that job, either.

When you've been fired twice within a year, jobs are hard to find. Ralph Birkson came to my rescue. He was very forthright about the work he did so I had no illusions of glamor. He was also very clear about the fact that, in addition to helping him with investigations, the job involved answering the phone, maintaining the files, opening the mail, paying the bills, sweeping the floor, and doing anything else he didn't want to do himself. We got along fine.

I was surprised that I found the work rewarding. It wasn't glamorous, unless you find spending hours in a cold dark car parked outside a hotel room glamorous. Most of our time was spent searching the Internet. Social media, club news, obituaries – it's amazing what you can find. People want to tell the world what they're doing, even if it incriminates them. You could spend days tailing a suspect who claimed to have a debilitating back injury to see how he spent his time, or you could spend a few hours on a computer and discover he threw a 219 in league bowling last Tuesday night. Go to the bowling alley next Tuesday, and you've got photographic proof. We didn't have to retouch any x-rays. If someone was guilty we proved it, and if we didn't find any wrongdoing we told our clients that as well. Either way, there was the satisfaction of a job well done.

The more I got to know Ralph, the more I admired him. He had never gone to college, but he was smart. He taught me a lot about searching the Internet. Sites to search and sites to avoid. What search terms worked best, how to exclude results you didn't want. There's an art to searching the Internet and he was a master of that art. He also had a keen insight into human behavior. He could sense when someone was hiding something, or when their Facebook posts were carefully worded to provide them with cover. He knew which suspects were most likely to use aliases, and given a bit of knowledge about the suspect he could even guess what aliases they might use. There are a lot of similarities between journalism and private investigation, and I learned more about research working for him than in any of my Investigative Journalism classes.

Physically he looked like an average, middle-aged man. He didn't strike me as being particularly muscular, but he wasn't pudgy either. His dark hair was speckled with an occasional gray strand, and his scalp showed through a thinning area on the back of his head. His looks were ideal for tailing a suspect, as he wasn't someone who'd stick in your memory. I was surprised when I found out he didn't carry a gun. I thought all private eyes did that. He said that the people he investigated weren't dangerous, and that if he did get caught tailing someone he wasn't about to pull a gun on them.

"That could get dicey," he explained, "and if anything happened I'd be responsible because I was the one who started it. If they pulled a gun on me, there's no way I could pull my gun before they shot me, and if I tried they'd claim self-defense. If I don't have a gun, maybe I can talk them out of shooting. The police know I don't carry, so if anybody does shoot me they'll know it was murder."

We shared a common office – the sole room dedicated to the business – so I had a good opportunity to observe his habits. He didn't keep his desk as neat as I did, but he knew where everything was and he

could find a desired paper in an instant. He seemed to remember all the past cases. If a name sounded familiar from a previous case he could find that case in a few minutes.

Most of the time he appeared to be happy, with a wry sense of humor and occasional outbursts of brutally honest sarcasm, but I sensed there was an underlying sadness. It was mostly in his eyes, I think. Even when he was laughing, his eyes looked sad. When business slacked off, which it did periodically, and he didn't have a case to focus on he became morose. He would sit in his chair and stare out the window, ignoring me as I answered the phone and otherwise went about my business. Sometimes late in the afternoon he would announce that he was going to work out and tell me to lock up when I was finished. Since I paid the bills I knew that he had a gym membership, but I also noticed a few charges at a local bar during times when he was supposedly working out.

Being an "investigative journalist" (I had trouble seeing myself as a private eye) I tried to learn more about Ralph's background. I had occasionally asked him about his past, or about the company's history, but his replies quickly veered off to a different subject. Even with all the skills he taught me, I couldn't find much. I discovered he had been born in Illinois, he was 53 years old, and he had married a woman named "Evelyn" when he was 27. She was eight years younger than he was, and she died about ten years ago. She died "after a long struggle," according to the obituary. I assumed that was the reason for his underlying sadness. Other than that, I could find nothing. He didn't keep any social media accounts, which wasn't surprising considering how we used them in our job, and as near as I could tell he didn't belong to any clubs, have any hobbies, or have any friends who posted on social media. But, his past and his private life were his business. He was a fair boss and we got along fine, and that was all that really mattered.

When I said we had the satisfaction of a job well done whether we found a subject guilty or innocent, I was referring to our satisfaction, not our clients. Our clients weren't interested in learning if the suspect was guilty or innocent. They already thought he was guilty or they wouldn't have hired us in the first place. They wanted proof. When we told them we could find nothing suspicious in a suspect's behavior it cost them money, and they saw that as a failure on our part. After I'd worked at the agency about two years we had the misfortune of being hired to investigate several honest people. Business fell off. A lot. We didn't have enough case work to keep Ralph busy, let alone an assistant investigator. Ralph said not to worry about it, that these things happened every now and then but that business would pick up. I couldn't help worrying about it, though. I opened the mail and paid the bills. I knew how much money was coming in and how much was going out. I didn't see how we could stay in business much longer. I began to put out feelers, discretely of course, looking for other opportunities in the expectation that Ralph would soon realize he couldn't afford to keep me on the payroll.

The next morning I told Ralph I'd finished my last case and asked for something else to work on. He suggested I go through the files.

"Look through every folder and make certain there aren't any papers that have been filed with the wrong case. I had an assistant a couple years ago who botched things up. Going through the files will give you an idea of what we've done in the past. How we've solved cases. That'll make you a better investigator when things pick up. Oh, and if you find any cases that have had no action for ten years you

might as well throw them out. We've got folders stacked up on top of the file cabinets now because there's no room for them. Make some room."

This wasn't a job that was going to bring in any money to help our situation, but I realized it was something that needed to be done. Besides, I had nothing else to do. This would keep me busy for a few days. I took another look at the file cabinets. OK. It would keep me busy for a few weeks, if my job lasted that long. I opened the drawer marked "Ajax – Allman" and pulled out the first folder.

I was surprised at how much I learned over the next few days. There were no narratives in the folders, but the basic facts were there. The statement of work in the client's contract described who Ralph had been hired to investigate and why, screen captures and investigation notes showed what he had found, and the final bill summarized the results of the investigation. Ralph's investigation notes were pretty Spartan, but they provided a basic outline of the steps he had taken with an explanation of any unusual step. It was always possible Ralph could be called upon to testify in court, and his notes provided the important dates, times, and events. (Our cases seldom went to court because if we found evidence of wrongdoing it was embarrassing to the suspect and they settled out of court.)

Several days later I was surprised to find a case that was significantly different from the others. This case didn't involve marital infidelity or insurance fraud. It sounded like something out of a private eye movie. A woman named Margaret Sanders had hired Ralph to investigate the murder of her daughter Desiree. The statement of work was very sparse, it simply said Ralph would investigate the murder and report weekly. The investigation notes only had one entry of interest. Ralph had talked to Detective Lt. Mike Petronika who told him he had nothing to add to what was in the newspapers. He promised to keep Ralph informed if there were any developments. There were notes documenting when Ralph had called to update Mrs. Sanders over the next few weeks. There was no final bill, but there was a letter Mrs. Sanders had sent four years ago asking if Ralph had found anything new.

"Hey Ralph," I said. "Is this a closed case? It was opened twelve years ago, but there's no final bill and there's a letter in the file from four years ago. The client was a Mrs. Sanders, but the file is labeled 'Gallendi'."

I looked up after I said this and for a fleeting moment I saw a strange look on his face. I couldn't tell if it was surprise, disbelief, fear, or all three. It disappeared in an instant and he looked down at the magazine he had been reading, as bored and impassive as ever.

"That case has been closed for years," he said. "There never really was a case. That lady didn't believe the police report about her daughter's death. She was distraught and so insistent that something was wrong that I promised to look into it, just to put her mind at ease. I looked into it, but the police had a solid case so I told her the report was correct. That's why I never billed her."

"She wrote a couple years ago, asking for an update," I said.

"It's a closed case!" Ralph was emphatic. "She just won't accept it. Throw it out. I told my worthless assistant to throw it out a few years ago, but he never did anything right."

I threw the file in the trash and pulled another folder from the cabinet. Ralph continued reading his magazine, but he seemed uneasy. About an hour later he stood up and threw his magazine in the trash.

"I'm going to work out," he announced. "Lock up when you're finished."

I watched out the window until I saw him drive off. Then I pulled the Gallendi folder out of the trash. I made copies of all the papers inside to take home, then I put the folder back in the trash. Unlike my worthless predecessor, I actually did throw out the case file when Ralph told me to.

It didn't take long to find details of the Gallendi case on the Internet. The local TV news station, which generally provided whatever information the police officially released, had reported that Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Gallendi were found shot to death in their home. Detective Lieutenant Mike Petronika said that the investigation was still ongoing, and that police hadn't ruled out a murder/suicide. Surprisingly, there were no follow-up stories from that source. News sources from other stations and blogs by various "citizen journalists" provided more details. Or at least, more speculation. Several reports said that Jacob Gallendi was believed to be a drug dealer. Most called him a "drug lord." There was speculation that he and his wife had been assassinated by a rival drug gang. Others said neighbors had heard Desiree and Jacob Gallendi arguing just before there were two, almost simultaneous gunshots when that they shot each other. One report differed from the others in that it said Mr. and Mrs. Gallendi had been shot by different weapons but only one weapon had been found at the scene. This led police to believe that at least one other person had been involved, a belief that was strengthened by the discovery of a man's watch, not believed to belong to Mr. Gallendi, at the crime scene.

Other than the flurry of speculation that followed the initial report of the crime, I could find almost nothing about the incident. A few brief announcements that police were still investigating the murders appeared in the months following the crime, but nothing else. The case had apparently gone cold. I could understand why Mrs. Sanders had hired Ralph. Unless the police had told her a lot more than they told the local news reporters, I wouldn't have been satisfied with their explanation either. It didn't look like Ralph had been able to find any additional information to give her, but he obviously didn't want to talk about it. Feeling frustrated, I picked up my copy of the case file, closed the office, and went home.

Something about this case bothered me. I spent the next few days mechanically going through other files, but this case was always at the back of my mind. Festering. Any unsolved case is intriguing, especially a murder. But this murder happened a long time ago. It didn't involve anyone famous. There were no obvious suspects, and nobody seemed to have profited from the crime financially or politically. If the reports of two simultaneous gunshots were correct, it may just have been a lover's quarrel gone horribly wrong. But I couldn't put it out of my mind. I think it was Ralph's uncharacteristic reaction to the case file that made me fixate on it.

I couldn't ask Ralph about it, of course. He had made it abundantly clear that he considered the case closed and didn't want to talk about it. Outwardly we went on as if nothing had happened. But I couldn't let go. I finally decided to contact the blogger who had mentioned the watch. His post seemed

more detailed than the other speculations I'd read, and the watch didn't sound like something that anyone would make up out of thin air. I wondered if he had inside information.

His blog was posted under the name "Carl Grant," which I assumed was a pen name. There was a "contact me" link on his blog page, and to my surprise he responded to my email within minutes. He said he remembered the case, but before he would discuss it he wanted to know who I was and why I was interested in this specific case. I told him I was a private investigator representing a relative of one of the deceased. That was stretching things a bit, but not entirely untrue. He immediately wanted to know what detective agency I worked for.

I almost stopped right there. I was pretty sure that if I made something up he'd check into it and I'd lose all hope of getting information from him. If I told him the truth and he checked into it, Ralph might find out I was looking into this case. Still, I was the one who answered the phone and opened the mail, so I could probably intercept his inquiry and Ralph would never know about it.

"Birkson Investigation Services," I typed in reply.

"Say hello to Ralph for me!" was his immediate response.

Oh God! He knew Ralph. I wondered how well he knew him. Even if he was only a casual acquaintance, if he called he'd surely say "let me speak to Ralph." Ralph's desk was just across the room from mine, and Ralph would get suspicious if I told anyone "he's not in the office right now." I sat on pins and needles for what seemed like an eternity, waiting for a call. Instead, I received another email.

"I don't know anything more than what I put in my blog, but I know someone who might have additional information. Let me contact them and see if they'd be willing to answer questions." I breathed a sigh of relief. It didn't sound like he was going to call.

The next day I got an email from Carl.

"My source is willing to talk to you under conditions of anonymity. I suspect that after talking to him you could track him down if you tried, so I need you to give me your word that you won't try. I don't think you'd be working for Ralph if I couldn't take your word as bond."

I gave him my word, and we made arrangements to meet at his house on Saturday afternoon. When I got to Carl's house (Carl Grant turned out to be his real name) I was surprised at how old he was. The picture on his blog page showed a middle-aged man in a business suit. This man looked to be in his mid-70's. Short, bald, wearing thick glasses, and stooped. He shuffled a little as he walked. I didn't think I let my surprise show, but he either picked up on it or he was used to people being surprised.

"You're probably surprised that a geezer like me is running a blog," he said. "I used to run the news department at a local TV station. We got bought out by a national chain. They wanted somebody younger to run the news, so they gave me a generous severance package. I wasn't ready to retire completely, so I started a blog to discuss local news. I've been using computers to gather news for over

forty years now, but people don't expect old guys to know what they're doing so I put an outdated photo on my site. The man you want to talk to is in the living room." He motioned me to follow him into the house.

A young man sat nervously in his living room. He introduced himself as "Bob," but said apologetically that wasn't his real name. I'd guess he was maybe five years older than I was.

"I used to be a crime scene photographer," Bob said, "but I had to give it up. Too gory. Now I do weddings, baby pictures, you know, the usual stuff. Doesn't pay as well but I can sleep at night."

I asked him about the Gallendi murders.

"I'll never forget that one," he said. She was sitting up in bed, naked. He put three bullets in her chest. There was blood everywhere. He was lying face down on the floor, just inside the door, in a pool of blood. There was a gun on the floor beside him."

"Was there a gun beside her?" I asked.

"No, only the one gun. That's what made the detectives think there must have been someone else involved. That and the watch on the table."

"Tell me about the watch."

"It was a man's watch. Gold. Looked expensive. With some initials engraved on the back. There was a big flap about it later because it was never checked in to the evidence locker. They interviewed me about it. I told them I saw the detectives tag it and put it in a bag with the other evidence. I don't know what happened to it after that."

"Could it have been Mr. Gallendi's watch?"

Bob shook his head. "I don't think so. He was wearing a watch, and I overheard the detectives say the initials on the watch weren't his."

"I read somewhere that neighbors heard two, almost simultaneous shots. Any idea why they heard two shots if she was shot three times and he was shot once?" I asked.

Bob shook his head again. "I never heard anything about that."

Carl intervened. "I think that was a story made up by someone who never bothered to visit the crime scene. The nearest neighbor lived at least two miles away."

"Could it have been a murder/suicide?" I asked.

"I don't think so," Bob answered. "Suicides don't usually shoot themselves in the chest. And when they rolled him over so I could take pictures of the entrance wound, I didn't see any powder burns around it. Scuttlebutt at the station was that the bullet that killed him didn't match the ones that killed his wife."

I felt like I'd come to a dead end. Bob had convinced me that Gallendi hadn't been killed by his wife, and he hadn't committed suicide. The stranger's watch made it unlikely that the murders had been committed by a rival gang, but the watch's disappearance left me with no clue as to who the other shooter was.

"I wish that watch hadn't disappeared," I said. "You don't happen to remember what the initials were, do you?"

"No," Bob said, "but the crime scene photos would show it."

"I don't think the police will let me see those," I said. "Even on a cold case like this, they don't make evidence public. Evidence can sometimes embarrass innocent parties, and the police want to be able to reopen the investigation at any time if new evidence shows up."

Bob looked down at the floor. "I might have a copy of the photos," he said. "We weren't supposed to keep copies, but I wanted to build a portfolio of my professional work in case I ever needed it to get another job."

Carl suggested that Bob scan the photos and send them to him, and he would resend them to me. That would preserve Bob's anonymity. That was fine with Bob and me, and I made it clear that I was only interested in photos of the watch. I had no interest in looking at pictures of dead people.

A few days later I got the pictures from Carl. It's probably a good thing that Bob got out of the crime scene photography business because the pictures weren't all that great. They were a little out of focus, and the engraving, which was the really important part, was half in shadows. That plus the fact that the engraving was in a fancy script made it hard to read:

EB
RB
4/7/96-10

The "-10" on the date confused me. Ten years before 1996 would be 1986, but I'd never seen a date expressed that way. I felt it must be significant, but I couldn't figure out what it meant. For once, the Internet was no help. When I was driving home from work a few days later I was stopped at a red light, looking around and thinking about the inscription, when I noticed a jewelry store in a little shopping center. If anyone could explain an inscription, it would be a jeweler. As soon as the light turned green I pulled into the shopping center.

The sales clerk took me to the back of the store, where the jeweler had a small workshop with a wooden workbench, a tiny vise, and bright work lights. He was a withered old man with wisps of gray hair and a thick pair of glasses. A set of magnifying lenses, flipped up out of the way, was clamped to his glasses. I told him I'd recently inherited a watch with an inscription on the back that included a date with "-10" after the date. I asked him if he knew what that meant.

He looked puzzled, and blinked several times as he thought. "No," he finally said. "Never a minus sign. Once in a while people will engrave a plus sign. Usually for an anniversary, but occasionally for a birthday. A wedding date with '+50' would be a fiftieth anniversary."

I thanked him and excitedly drove home. I pulled up the engraving photo on my computer and zoomed in on the date. Yes! It was a plus sign. The blurriness and the shadow line had obscured the vertical stroke. So, EB had given RB the watch on their tenth anniversary. It was a man's watch, so RB must be a man. . .

With a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach, I searched for the web site where I had found the details of Ralph's wedding. Evelyn Davis had become Evelyn Birkson on April 7th, 1996.

Suddenly a lot of things made sense. That was why Ralph had reacted so strongly when I found that case file. That was why he'd never done any real investigation into the case. He probably only took the case so that woman wouldn't hire a different detective. A detective who might actually do his job and find out who the watch belonged to. A detective who might discover who shot Jacob Gallendi.

After the initial shock subsided, I begin to think about what I should do with this new revelation. The obvious answer was to call the police. After all, Ralph had murdered Jacob Gallendi. Well, maybe it wasn't exactly murder. It looked like Ralph was having an affair with Gallendi's wife. Gallendi caught them in the act and murdered his wife. He probably would have shot Ralph next, so maybe Ralph acted in self-defense. Still, he killed Gallendi, and if Ralph hadn't been having an affair maybe Gallendi and his wife would still be alive. But by all accounts, Gallendi was a local drug kingpin. So would things be better if he hadn't been killed?

You can drive yourself nuts with thoughts like this. I tried asking myself if things would be better if I went to the police. Things certainly wouldn't be better for Ralph. It wouldn't help me any, either, but that wasn't important. Mrs. Sanders would finally know the truth about what happened to her daughter, but the truth was that her daughter was murdered by her husband because she was having an affair. Was that a truth she really wanted to hear? On the other hand, if I didn't go to the police, did that make me complicit in a murder? And even if I wasn't technically breaking the law, could I live with the knowledge that I'd known about a crime and done nothing? For the rest of my life? How did that square with my pride in being a "straight shooter" who wasn't afraid to tell the truth?

I didn't sleep much that night. Or the following night. When I dragged myself into work after two nights with no sleep I was feeling miserable. I'd pretty much resigned myself to keeping quiet, and feeling miserable about it for the rest of my life. But I just couldn't turn Ralph in. Not after all he'd done for me.

Ralph looked at me as I slouched behind my desk.

“You look miserable, kid. Maybe this will cheer you up.” He tossed something onto my desk.

I picked it up and looked at it. It was the gold watch with the engraving.

“What’s this?” I asked, trying to sound perplexed.

“It’s the watch from the Gallendi murder. I figured you’d be looking for it.”

I stared at him uncomprehendingly. Not because I didn’t know what it was, but because I didn’t know why he was showing it to me.

“Don’t feel like you need to pretend you don’t know what that is,” Ralph said. “I can read people. I couldn’t be a detective if I didn’t know how to do that. I knew you’d investigate that cold case you found because it’s in your nature. Because you’re a good detective. And because I would have done the same thing if I’d been in your shoes. For days you’ve been distracted. You hadn’t figured it out. Yesterday you were depressed. You finally figured it out.”

“It’s really none of my business. . .” I began.

“It’s your business because now you figured it out. I haven’t got much time. I’ve already called the police, and they’re on their way over. I want to tell you my side of the story before they get here, so please don’t slow things down by pretending you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“Detective Petronica and I were good friends. He was convinced Jacob Gallendi was responsible for several murders, extortions, and a lot of drugs around here, and with good reason. But Gallendi was a too clever to leave any direct evidence. The police had a lot of circumstantial evidence, but nothing to nail him with. They had him dead to rights on one murder, but he had a witness who was ready to swear he was out of town that night. Word on the street was that Gallendi’s wife was fed up with him, and Petronica asked me to make friends with her and see if she’d say anything that would blow his alibi. I know I don’t look the part now, but back then I was a pretty handsome guy. Back then when I said I was going to work out, I really did go to the gym and work out.”

“This case was personal with me. My wife was an addict. When she was clean we had a beautiful life together, but then she’d have a relapse and life was hell. I blamed the people who supplied the drugs. I loved her, so I couldn’t blame her. I thought if I could just put the pushers in jail she’d stay straight. So I was more than willing to go along with Lt. Petronica.”

“Well, the problem was we had no idea how unhappy Gallendi’s wife was. As soon as I acted friendly she was all over me. And she was a knockout, too. When you’re living with an addict . . . well, I was weak. My fault I know, but I was weak. And I got way too involved. The first time we fooled around I was stunned to find a gun under her husband’s pillow. She just laughed and said he was a nervous man.”

“He must have gotten suspicious, because one day he told her he was going out of town for a few days, but he didn’t go out of town. She called and asked me to come over, and the first thing we knew the bedroom door flew open and he was standing there screaming at her. Then he shot her. Three times. Not three quick shots. There was hate in this killing. He shot her once, laughed as she stared at him in shock, shot her a second time, and when she slumped back with blood running out of her mouth he shot her a third time. That was his undoing. While he was focused on killing her, I had time to pull the gun out from under the pillow. When he turned to shoot me I shot first.”

“I was scared out of my wits. I’d never killed a man before, and I hope to God I never have to do it again. I pulled on my clothes and got the hell out of there. I had the foresight to take the gun with me, but I forgot my watch. I crossed a bridge as I drove back to town and I threw the gun into the river. When I got home I called Lt. Petronica and told him what happened. I wasn’t afraid of going to jail as much as I was afraid of hurting my wife. I thought if she found out I’d been unfaithful, and that I’d left the watch she gave me in another woman’s bedroom, she’d get depressed and go back on the drugs. Lt. Petronica said he’d take care of it. Somehow he got the watch back, and the investigation into Gallendi’s murder led nowhere.”

“So I’ve been living with that for twelve years. At first I couldn’t tell anyone because of my wife and because I didn’t want Lt. Petronica to get in trouble for covering it up. Then I got the letter from that Sanders woman and I realized she’d be hurt if she knew how her daughter really died. So I kept quiet. Killing the pusher didn’t help my wife. She found another source for drugs and two years later she overdosed. Lt. Petronica died three years ago. After you found that case file I looked up Mrs. Sanders and discovered she died last March. So I don’t have to live with a lie any more, and I don’t want you to have to live with it either.”

He stared into space for a bit. Then he looked at me with a wry smile. “To paraphrase your professor, I’m tired of retouching the x-rays.”

There was a knock at the door, and Ralph opened it to admit a detective and a uniformed police officer. They placed Ralph under arrest and took him back to the station. They took the watch with them, too. Ralph was out on bail that afternoon, and after reviewing the evidence the DA decided it was self-defense and declined to prosecute. The case was officially closed, and Ralph got his watch back.

One result we hadn’t anticipated was that Ralph lost his Private Investigators license. When he threw the gun into the river he destroyed evidence and obstructed justice. Birkson Investigation Services was out of business. It was probably a relief to Ralph that it ended that way, as we were going under financially and he would have had to lay me off anyway. To my surprise he called Carl Grant, who still had enough connections at the TV station to get me a job as a reporter. I’m not one of the handsome reporters who appears on the nightly news, but I do the research and write the reports that they read on the air. I guess local news isn’t as polarizing as national politics, as I’m pretty much free to report the news as I see it. I don’t have to retouch the x-rays.

I ran into Ralph about a year later, as I was gathering news. I’d heard he had been hired by the police department as a dispatcher, so I was surprised to see him at a crime scene. Turns out they

couldn't hire a man who'd lost his PI license to be a detective, but with a wink and a nod to the HR department they hired him as a dispatcher and then detailed him to the Investigations division to relieve a manpower shortage. He looked great. His eyes didn't look sad anymore.