

# **Collecting Ackermans**

## **Enough Rope collection**

**by Lawrence Block, 1938–**

**Published: 1999/2002**



On an otherwise unremarkable October afternoon, Florence Ackerman's doorbell sounded. Miss Ackerman, who had been watching a game show on television and clucking at the mental lethargy of the panelists, walked over to the intercom control and demanded to know who was there.

"Western Union," a male voice announced.

Miss Ackerman repeated the clucking sound she had most recently aimed at Charles Nelson Reilly. She clucked this time at people who lost their keys and rang other tenants' bells in order to gain admittance to the building. She clucked at would-be muggers and rapists who might pass themselves off as messengers or

deliverymen for an opportunity to lurk in the hallways and stairwell. In years past this building had had a doorman, but the new landlord had curtailed services, aiming to reduce his overhead and antagonize long-standing tenants at the same time.

“Telegram for Miz Ackerman,” the voice added.

And was it indeed a telegram? It was possible, Miss Ackerman acknowledged. People were forever dying and other people were apt to communicate such data by means of a telegram. It was easier to buzz whoever it was inside than to brood about it. The door to her own apartment would remain locked, needless to say, and the other tenants could look out for themselves. Florence Ackerman had been looking out for her own self for her whole life and the rest of the planet could go and do the same.

She pressed the buzzer, then went to the door and put her eye to the peephole. She was a small birdlike woman and she had to come up onto her toes to see through the peephole, but she stayed on her toes until her caller came into view. He was a youngish man and he wore a large pair of mirrored sunglasses. Besides obscuring much of his face, the sunglasses kept Miss Ackerman from noticing much about the rest of his appearance. Her attention was inescapably drawn to the twin images of her own peephole reflected in the lenses.

The young man, unaware that he was being watched, rapped on the door with his knuckles. “Telegram,” he said.

“Slide it under the door.”

“You have to sign for it.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Miss Ackerman said. “One never has to sign for a telegram. As a matter of fact they’re generally phoned in nowadays.”

“This one you got to sign for.”

Miss Ackerman’s face, by no means dull to begin with, sharpened. She who had been the scourge of several generations of fourth-grade pupils was not to be intimidated by a pair of mirrored sunglasses. “Slide it under the door,” she demanded. “Then I’ll open the door and sign your book.” If there was indeed anything to be slid beneath the door, she thought, and she rather doubted that there was.

“I can’t.”

“Oh?”

“It’s a singin’ telegram. Singin’ telegram for Miz Ackerman, what it says here.”

“And you’re to sing it to me?”

“Yeah.”

“Then sing it.”

“Lady, are you kiddin’? I’m gonna sing a telegram through a closed door? Like forget it.”

Miss Ackerman made the clucking noise again. “I don’t believe you have a telegram for me,” she said. “Western Union suspended their singing telegram service some time ago. I remember reading an article to that effect in the *Times*.” She did not bother to add that the likelihood of anyone’s ever sending a singing telegram to her was several degrees short of infinitesimal.

“All I know is I’m supposed to sing this, but if you don’t want to open the door—”

"I wouldn't dream of opening my door."

"—then the hell with you, Miz Ackerman. No disrespect intended, but I'll just tell 'em I sang it to you and who cares what you say."

"You're not even a good liar, young man. I'm calling the police now. I advise you to be well out of the neighborhood by the time they arrive."

"You know what you can do," the young man said, but in apparent contradiction to his words he went on to tell Miss Ackerman what she could do. While we needn't concern ourselves with his suggestion, let it be noted that Miss Ackerman could not possibly have followed it, nor, given her character and temperament, would she have been likely at all to make the attempt.

Neither did she call the police. People who say "I am calling the police now" hardly ever do. Miss Ackerman did think of calling her local precinct but decided it would be a waste of time. In all likelihood the young man, whatever his game, was already on his way, never to return. And Miss Ackerman recalled a time two years previously, just a few months after her retirement, when she returned from an afternoon chamber music concert to find her apartment burglarized and several hundred dollars' worth of articles missing. She had called the police, naively assuming there was a point to such a course of action, and she'd only managed to spend several hours of her time making out reports and listing serial numbers, and a sympathetic detective had as much as told her nothing would come of the effort.

Actually, calling the police wouldn't really have done her any good this time, either.

Miss Ackerman returned to her chair and, without too much difficulty, picked up the threads of the game show. She did not for a moment wonder who might have sent her a singing telegram, knowing with cool certainty that no one had done so, that there had been no telegram, that the young man had intended rape or robbery or some other unpleasantness that would have made her life substantially worse than it already was. That robbers and rapists and such abounded was no news to Miss Ackerman. She had lived all her life in New York and took in her stride the possibility of such mistreatment, even as residents of California take in their stride the possibility of an earthquake, even as farmers on the Vesuvian slopes acknowledge that it is in the nature of volcanoes periodically to erupt. Miss Ackerman sat in her chair, leaving it to make a cup of tea, returning to it teacup in hand, and concentrated on her television program.

The following afternoon, as she wheeled her little cart of groceries around the corner, a pair of wiry hands seized her without ceremony and yanked her into the narrow passageway between a pair of brick buildings. A gloved hand covered her mouth, the fingers digging into her cheek.

She heard a voice at her ear: "Happy birthday to you, you old hairbag, happy birthday to you." Then she felt a sharp pain in her chest, and then she felt nothing, ever.

"Retired schoolteacher," Freitag said. "On her way home with her groceries. Hell of a thing, huh? Knifed for what she had in her purse, and what could she have, anyway? Livin' on Social Security and a pension and the way inflation eats

you up nowadays she wouldn't of had much on her. Why stick a knife in a little old lady like her, huh? He didn't have to kill her."

"Maybe she screamed," Ken Poolings suggested. "And he got panicky."

"Nobody heard a scream. Not that it proves anything either way." They were back at the station house and Jack Freitag was drinking lukewarm coffee out of a Styrofoam container. But for the Styrofoam the beverage would have been utterly tasteless. "Ackerman, Ackerman, Ackerman. It's hell the way these parasites prey on old folks. It's the judges who have to answer for it. They put the creeps back on the street. What they ought to do is kill the little bastards, but that's not humane. Sticking a knife in a little old lady, that's humane. Ackerman, Ackerman. Why does that name do something to me?"

"She was a teacher. Maybe you were in one of her classes."

Freitag shook his head. "I grew up in Chelsea. West Twenty-fourth Street. Miss Ackerman taught all her life here in Washington Heights just three blocks from the place where she lived. And she didn't even have to leave the neighborhood to get herself killed. Ackerman. Oh, I know what it was. Remember three or maybe it was four days ago, this faggot in the West Village? Brought some other faggot home with him and got hisself killed for his troubles? They found him all tied up with things carved in him. It was all over page three of the *Daily News*. Ritual murder, sadist cult, sex perversion, blah blah blah. His name was Ackerman."

"Which one?"

"The dead one. They didn't pick up the guy who did it yet. I don't know if they got a make or not."

"Does it make any difference?"

"Not to me it don't." Freitag finished his coffee, threw his empty container at the green metal wastebasket, then watched as it circled the rim and fell on the floor. "The Knicks stink this year," he said. "But you don't care about basketball, do you?"

"Hockey's my game."

"Hockey," Freitag said. "Well, the Rangers stink, too. Only they stink on ice." He leaned back in his chair and laughed at his own wit and stopped thinking of two murder victims who both happened to be named Ackerman.

Mildred Ackerman lay on her back. Her skin was slick with perspiration, her limbs heavy with spent passion. The man who was lying beside her stirred, placed a hand upon her flesh and began to stroke her. "Oh, Bill," she said. "That feels so nice. I love the way you touch me."

The man went on stroking her.

"You have the nicest touch. Firm but gentle. I sensed that about you when I saw you." She opened her eyes, turned to face him. "Do you believe in intuition, Bill? I do. I think it's possible to know a great deal about someone just on the basis of your intuitive feelings."

"And what did you sense about me?"

"That you would be strong but gentle. That we'd be very good together. It was good for you, wasn't it?"

"Couldn't you tell?"

Millie giggled.

“So you’re divorced,” he said.

“Uh-huh. You? I’ll bet you’re married, aren’t you? It doesn’t bother me if you are.”

“I’m not. How long ago were you divorced?”

“It’s almost five years now. It’ll be exactly five years in January. That’s since we split, but then it was another six months before the divorce went through. Why?”

“And Ackerman was your husband’s name?”

“Yeah. Wallace Ackerman.”

“No kids?”

“No, I wanted to but he didn’t.”

“A lot of women take their maiden names back after a divorce.”

She laughed aloud. “They don’t have a maiden name like I did. You wouldn’t believe the name I was born with.”

“Try me.”

“Plonk. Millie Plonk. I think I married Wally just to get rid of it. I mean Mildred’s bad enough, but Plonk? Like forget it. I don’t think you even told me your last name.”

“Didn’t I?” The hand moved distractingly over Millie’s abdomen. “So you decided to go on being an Ackerman, huh?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“Why not indeed.”

“It’s not a bad name.”

“Mmmm,” the man said. “This is a nice place you got here, incidentally. Been living here long?”

“Ever since the divorce. It’s a little small. Just a studio.”

“But it’s a good-sized studio, and you must have a terrific view. Your window looks out on the river, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, sure. And you know, eighteen flights up, it’s gotta be a pretty decent view.”

“It bothers some people to live that high up in the air.”

“Never bothered me.”

“Eighteen floors,” the man said. “If a person went out that window there wouldn’t be much left of her, would there?”

“Jeez, don’t even talk like that.”

“You couldn’t have an autopsy, could you? Couldn’t determine whether she was alive or dead when she went out the window.”

“Come on, Bill. That’s creepy.”

“Your ex-husband living in New York?”

“Wally? I think I heard something about him moving out to the West Coast, but to be honest I don’t know if he’s alive or dead.”

“Hmmm.”

“And who cares? You ask the damnedest questions, Bill.”

“Do I?”

“Uh-huh. But you got the nicest hands in the world, I swear to God. You touch me so nice. And your eyes, you’ve got beautiful eyes. I guess you’ve heard that before?”

“Not really.”

“Well, how could anybody tell? Those crazy glasses you wear, a person tries to look into your eyes and she’s looking into a couple of mirrors. It’s a sin having such beautiful eyes and hiding them.”

“Eighteen floors, that’s quite a drop.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing,” he said, and smiled. “Just thinking out loud.”

Freitag looked up when his partner entered the room. “You look a little green in the face,” he said. “Something the matter?”

“Oh, I was just looking at the Post and there’s this story that’s enough to make you sick. This guy out in Sheepshead Bay, and he’s a policeman, too.”

“What are you talking about?”

Poolings shrugged. “It’s nothing that doesn’t happen every couple of months. This policeman, he was depressed or he had a fight with his wife or something, I don’t know what. So he shot her dead, and then he had two kids, a boy and a girl, and he shot them to death in their sleep and then he went and ate his gun. Blew his brains out.”

“Jesus.”

“You just wonder what goes through a guy’s mind that he does something like that. Does he just go completely crazy or what? I can’t understand a person who does something like that.”

“I can’t understand people, period. Was this somebody you knew?”

“No, he lives in Sheepshead Bay. Lived in Sheepshead Bay. Anyway, he wasn’t with the department. He was a Transit Authority cop.”

“Anybody spends all his time in the subways, it’s got to take its toll. Has to drive you crazy sooner or later.”

“I guess.”

Freitag plucked a cigarette from the pack in his shirt pocket, tapped it on the top of his desk, held it between his thumb and forefinger, frowned at it, and returned it to the pack. He was trying to cut back to a pack a day and was not having much success. “Maybe he was trying to quit smoking,” he suggested. “Maybe it was making him nervous and he just couldn’t stand it anymore.”

“That seems a little far-fetched, doesn’t it?”

“Does it? Does it really?” Freitag got the cigarette out again, put it in his mouth, lit it. “It don’t sound all that far-fetched to me. What was this guy’s name, anyway?”

“The TA cop? Hell, I don’t know. Why?”

“I might know him. I know a lot of transit cops.”

“It’s in the *Post*. Bluestein’s reading it.”

“I don’t suppose it matters, anyway. There’s a ton of transit cops and I don’t know that many of them. Anyway, the ones I know aren’t crazy.”

“I didn’t even notice his name,” Poolings said. “Let me just go take a look. Maybe I know him, as far as that goes.”

Poolings went out, returning moments later with a troubled look on his face. Freitag looked questioningly at him.

“Rudy Ackerman,” he said.

“Nobody I know. Hey.”

“Yeah, right. Another Ackerman.”

“That’s three Ackermans, Ken.”

“It’s six Ackermans if you count the wife and kids.”

“Yeah, but three incidents. I mean it’s no coincidence that this TA cop and his wife and kids all had the same last name, but when you add in the schoolteacher and the faggot, then you got a coincidence.”

“It’s a common name.”

“Is it? How common, Ken?” Freitag leaned forward, stubbed out his cigarette, picked up a Manhattan telephone directory and flipped it open. “Ackerman, Ackerman,” he said, turning pages. “Here we are. Yeah, it’s common. There’s close to two columns of Ackermans in Manhattan alone. And then there’s some that spell it with two n’s. I wonder.”

“You wonder what?”

“If there’s a connection.”

Poolings sat on the edge of Freitag’s desk. “How could there be a connection?”

“Damned if I know.”

“There couldn’t, Jack.”

“An old schoolteacher gets stabbed by a mugger in Washington Heights. A faggot picks up the wrong kind of rough trade and gets tied up and tortured to death. And a TA cop goes berserk and kills his wife and kids and himself. No connection.”

“Except for them all having the same last name.”

“Yeah. And the two of us just happened to notice that because we investigated the one killing and read about the other two.”

“Right.”

“So maybe nobody else even knows that there were three homicides involving Ackermans. Maybe you and me are the only people in the city who happened to notice this little coincidence.”

“So?”

“So maybe there’s something we didn’t notice,” Freitag said. He got to his feet. “Maybe there have been more than three. Maybe if we pull a printout of deaths over the past few weeks we’re going to find Ackermans scattered all over it.”

“Are you serious, Jack?”

“Sounds crazy, don’t it?”

“Yeah, that’s how it sounds, all right.”

“If there’s just the three it don’t prove a thing, right? I mean, it’s a common name and you got lots of people dying violently in New York City. When you have eight million people in a city it’s no big surprise that you average three or four murders a day. The rate’s not even so high compared to other cities. With three or four homicides a day, well, when you got three Ackermans over a couple of weeks, that’s not too crazy all by itself to be pure coincidence, right?”

“Right.”

“Suppose it turns out there’s more than the three.”

“You’ve got a hunch, Jack. Haven’t you?”

Freitag nodded. “That’s what I got, all right. A hunch. Let’s just see if I’m nuts or not. Let’s find out.”

“A fifth of Courvoisier, V.S.O.P.” Mel Ackerman used a stepladder to reach the bottle. “Here we are, sir. Now will there be anything else?”

“All the money in the register,” the man said.

Ackerman’s heart turned over. He saw the gun in the man’s hand and his own hands trembled so violently that he almost dropped the bottle of cognac. “Jesus,” he said. “Could you point that somewhere else? I get very nervous.”

“The money,” the man said.

“Yeah, right. I wish you guys would pick on somebody else once in a while. This makes the fourth time I been held up in the past two years. You’d think I’d be used to it by now, wouldn’t you? Listen, I’m insured, I don’t care about the money, just be careful with the gun, huh? There’s not much money in the register but you’re welcome to every penny I got.” He punched the No Sale key and scooped up bills, emptying all of the compartments. Beneath the removable tray he had several hundred dollars in large bills, but he didn’t intend to call them to the robber’s attention. Sometimes a gunman made you take out the tray and hand over everything. Other times the man would take what you gave him and be anxious to get the hell out. Mel Ackerman didn’t much care either way. Just so he got out of this alive, just so the maniac would take the money and leave without firing his gun.

“Four times in two years,” Ackerman said, talking as he emptied the register, taking note of the holdup man’s physical appearance as he did so. Tall but not too tall, young, probably still in his twenties. White. Good build. No beard, no mustache. Big mirrored sunglasses that hid a lot of his face.

“Here we go,” Ackerman said, handing over the bills. “No muss, no fuss. You want me to lie down behind the counter while you go on your way?”

“What for?”

“Beats me. The last guy that held me up, he told me so I did it. Maybe he got the idea from a television program or something. Don’t forget the brandy.”

“I don’t drink.”

“You just come to liquor stores to rob ’em, huh?” Mel was beginning to relax now. “This is the only way we get your business, is that right?”

“I’ve never held up a liquor store before.”

“So you had to start with me? To what do I owe the honor?”

“Your name.”

“My name?”

“You’re Melvin Ackerman, aren’t you?”

“So?”

“So this is what you get,” the man said, and shot Mel Ackerman three times in the chest.

“It’s crazy,” Freitag said. “What it is is crazy. Twenty-two people named Ackerman died in the past month. Listen to this. Arnold Ackerman, fifty-six years of age, lived in Flushing. Jumped or fell in front of the E train.”

“Or was pushed.”

“Or was pushed,” Freitag agreed. “Wilma Ackerman, sixty-two years old, lived in Flatbush. Heart attack. Mildred Ackerman, thirty-six, East Eighty-seventh Street, fell from an eighteenth-story window. Rudolph Ackerman, that’s the Transit



Authority cop, killed his wife and kids and shot himself. Florence Ackerman was stabbed, Samuel Ackerman fell down a flight of stairs, Lucy Ackerman took an overdose of sleeping pills, Walter P. Ackerman was electrocuted when a radio fell in the bathtub with him, Melvin Ackerman's the one who just got shot in a holdup—"Freitag spread his hands. "It's unbelievable. And it's completely crazy."

"Some of the deaths must be natural," Poolings said. "Here's one. Sarah Ackerman, seventy-eight years old, spent two months as a terminal cancer patient at St. Vincent's and finally died last week. Now that has to be coincidental."

"Uh-huh. Unless somebody slipped onto the ward and held a pillow over her face because he didn't happen to like her last name."

"That seems pretty far-fetched, Jack."

"Far-fetched? Is it any more far-fetched than the rest of it? Is it any crazier than the way all these other Ackermans got it? Some nut case is running around killing people who have nothing in common but their last names. There's no way they're related, you know. Some of these Ackermans are Jewish and some are gentiles. It's one of those names that can be either. Hell, this guy Wilson Ackerman was black. So it's not somebody with a grudge against a particular family. It's somebody who has a thing about the name, but why?"

"Maybe somebody's collecting Ambroses," Poolings suggested.

"Huh? Where'd you get Ambrose?"

"Oh, it's something I read once," Poolings said. "This writer Charles Fort used to write about freaky things that happen, and one thing he wrote was that a guy named Ambrose had walked around the corner and disappeared, and the writer Ambrose Bierce had disappeared in Mexico, and he said maybe somebody was collecting Ambroses."

"That's ridiculous."

"Yeah. But what I meant—"

"Maybe somebody's collecting Ackermans."

"Right."

"Killing them. Killing everybody with that last name and doing it differently each time. Every mass murderer I ever heard of had a murder method he was nuts about and used it over and over, but this guy never does it the same way twice. We got—what is it, twenty-two deaths here? Even if some of them just happened, there's no question that at least fifteen out of twenty-two have to be the work of this nut, whoever he is. He's going to a lot of trouble to keep this operation of his from looking like what it is. Most of these killings look like suicide or accidental death, and the others were set up to look like isolated homicides in the course of a robbery or whatever. That's how he managed to knock off this many Ackermans before anybody suspected anything. Ken, what gets me is the question of why. Why is he doing this?"

"He must be crazy."

"Of course he's crazy, but being crazy don't mean you don't have reasons for what you do. It's just that they're crazy reasons. What kind of reasons could he have?"

"Revenge."

"Against all the Ackermans in the world?"

Poolings shrugged. "What else? Maybe somebody named Ackerman did him dirty once upon a time and he wants to get even with all the Ackermans in the world. I don't see what difference it makes as far as catching him is concerned, and once we catch him the easiest way to find out the reason is to ask him."

"If we catch him."

"Sooner or later we'll catch him, Jack."

"Either that or the city'll run out of Ackermans. Maybe his name is Ackerman."

"How do you figure that?"

"Getting even with his father, hating himself, I don't know. You want to start looking somewhere, it's gotta be easier to start with people named Ackerman than with people not named Ackerman."

"Even so there's a hell of a lot of Ackermans. It's going to be some job checking them all out. There's got to be a few hundred in the five boroughs, plus God knows how many who don't have telephones. And if the guy we're looking for is a drifter living in a dump of a hotel somewhere, there's no way to find him, and that's if he's even using his name in the first place, which he probably isn't, considering the way he feels about the name."

Freitag lit a cigarette. "Maybe he *likes* the name," he said. "Maybe he wants to be the only one left with it."

"You really think we should check all the Ackermans?"

"Well, the job gets easier every day, Ken. 'Cause every day there's fewer Ackermans to check on."

"God."

"Yeah."

"Do we just do this ourselves, Jack?"

"I don't see how we can. We better take it upstairs and let the brass figure out what to do with it. You know what's gonna happen."

"What?"

"It's gonna get in the papers."

"Oh, God."

"Yeah." Freitag drew on his cigarette, coughed, cursed, and took another drag anyway. "The newspapers. At which point all the Ackermans left in the city start panicking, and so does everybody else, and don't ask me what our crazy does because I don't have any idea. Well, it'll be somebody else's worry." He got to his feet. "And that's what we need—for it to be somebody else's worry. Let's take this to the lieutenant right now and let him figure out what to do with it."

The pink rubber ball came bouncing crazily down the driveway toward the street. The street was a quiet suburban cul-de-sac in a recently developed neighborhood on Staten Island. The house was a three-bedroom expandable colonial ranchette. The driveway was concrete, with the footprints of a largish dog evident in two of its squares. The small boy who came bouncing crazily after the rubber ball was towheaded and azure-eyed and, when a rangy young man emerged from behind the barberry hedge and speared the ball one-handed, seemed suitably amazed.

"Gotcha," the man said, and flipped the ball underhand to the small boy, who missed it, but picked it up on the second bounce.

“Hi,” the boy said.

“Hi yourself.”

“Thanks,” the boy said, and looked at the pink rubber ball in his hand. “It was gonna go in the street.”

“Sure looked that way.”

“I’m not supposed to go in the street. On account of the cars.”

“Makes sense.”

“But sometimes the dumb ball goes in the street anyhow, and then what am I supposed to do?”

“It’s a problem,” the man agreed, reaching over to rumple the boy’s straw-colored hair. “How old are you, my good young man?”

“Five and a half.”

“That’s a good age.”

“Goin’ on six.”

“A logical assumption.”

“Those are funny glasses you got on.”

“These?” The man took them off, looked at them for a moment, then put them on. “Mirrors,” he said.

“Yeah, I know. They’re funny.”

“They are indeed. What’s your name?”

“Mark.”

“I bet I know your last name.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“I bet it’s Ackerman.”

“How’d you know?” The boy wrinkled up his face in a frown. “Aw, I bet you know my daddy.”

“We’re old friends. Is he home?”

“You silly. He’s workin’.”

“I should have guessed as much. What else would Hale Ackerman be doing on such a beautiful sunshiny day, hmmm? How about your mommy? She home?”

“Yeah. She’s watchin’ the teevee.”

“And you’re playing in the driveway.”

“Yeah.”

The man rumped the boy’s hair again. Pitching his voice theatrically low, he said, “It’s a tough business, son, but that doesn’t mean it’s a *heartless* business. Keep that in mind.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing. A pleasure meeting you, Mark, me lad. Tell your parents they’re lucky to have you. Luckier than they’ll ever have to know.”

“Whatcha mean?”

“Nothing,” the man said agreeably. “Now I have to walk all the way back to the ferry slip and take the dumb old boat all the way back to Manhattan and then I have to go to...” he consulted a slip of paper from his pocket “...to Seaman Avenue way the hell up in Washington Heights. Pardon me. Way the *heck* up in Washington Heights. Let’s just hope *they* don’t turn out to have a charming kid.”

“You’re funny.”

“You bet,” the man said.

“Police protection,” the lieutenant was saying. He was a beefy man with an abundance of jaw. He had not been born looking particularly happy, and years of police work had drawn deep lines of disappointment around his eyes and mouth. “That’s the first step, but how do you even go about offering it? There’s a couple of hundred people named Ackerman in the five boroughs and one’s as likely to be a target as the next one. And we don’t know who the hell we’re protecting ’em *from*. We don’t know if this is one maniac or a platoon of them. Meaning we have to take every dead Ackerman on this list and backtrack, looking for some common element, which since we haven’t been looking for it all along we’re about as likely to find it as a virgin on Eighth Avenue. Twenty-two years ago I coulda gone with the police or the fire department and I couldn’t make up my mind. You know what I did? I tossed a goddam coin. It hadda come up heads.”

“As far as protecting these people—”

“As far as protecting ’em, how do you do that without you let out the story? And when the story gets out it’s all over the papers, and suppose you’re a guy named Ackerman and you find out some moron just declared war on your last name?”

“I suppose you get out of town.”

“Maybe you get out of town, and maybe you have a heart attack, and maybe you call the mayor’s office and yell a lot, and maybe you sit in your apartment with a loaded gun and shoot the mailman when he does something you figure is suspicious. And maybe if you’re some *other* lunatic you read the story and it’s like tellin’ a kid don’t put beans up your nose, so you go out and join in the Ackerman hunt yourself. Or if you’re another kind of lunatic which we’re all of us familiar with you call up the police and confess. Just to give the nice cops something to do.”

A cop groaned.

“Yeah,” the lieutenant said. “That about sums it up. So the one thing you don’t want is for this to get in the papers, but—”

“But it’s too late for that,” said a voice from the doorway. And a uniformed patrolman entered the office holding a fresh copy of the *New York Post*. “Either somebody told them or they went and put two and two together.”

“I coulda been a fireman,” the lieutenant said. “I woulda got to slide down the pole and wear one of those hats and everything, but instead the goddam coin had to come up heads.”

The young man paid the cashier and carried his tray of food across the lunchroom to a long table at the rear. A half dozen people were already sitting there. The young man joined them, ate his macaroni and cheese, sipped his coffee, and listened as they discussed the Ackerman murders.

“I think it’s a cult thing,” one girl was saying. “They have this sort of thing all the time out in California, like surfing and est and all those West Coast trips. In order to be a member you have to kill somebody named Ackerman.”

“That’s a theory,” a bearded young man said. “Personally, I’d guess the whole business is more logically motivated than that. It looks to me like a chain murder.”

Someone wanted to know what that was.

“A chain murder,” the bearded man said. “Our murderer has a strong motive to kill a certain individual whose name happens to be Ackerman. Only problem is his motive is so strong that he’d be suspected immediately. So instead he kills a whole slew of Ackermans and the one particular victim he has a reason to kill is no more than one face in a crowd. So his motive gets lost in the shuffle.” The speaker smiled. “Happens all the time in mystery stories. Now it’s happening in real life. Not the first time life imitates art.”

“Too logical,” a young woman objected. “Besides, all these murders had different methods and a lot of them were disguised so as not to look like murders at all. A chain murderer wouldn’t want to operate that way, would he?”

“He might. If he was very, very clever—”

“But he’d be too clever for his own good, don’t you think? No, I think he had a grudge against one Ackerman and decided to exterminate the whole tribe. Like Hitler and the Jews.”

The conversation went on in this fashion, with the young man who was eating macaroni and cheese contributing nothing at all to it. Gradually the talk trailed off and so indeed did the people at the table, until only the young man and the girl next to whom he’d seated himself remained. She took a sip of coffee, drew on her cigarette, and smiled at him. “You didn’t say anything,” she said. “About the Ackerman murders.”

“No,” he agreed. “People certainly had some interesting ideas.”

“And what did you think?”

“I think I’m happy my name isn’t Ackerman.”

“What is it?”

“Bill. Bill Trenholme.”

“I’m Emily Kuystendahl.”

“Emily,” he said. “Pretty name.”

“Thank you. What *do* you think? Really?”

“Really?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well,” he said, “I don’t think much of the theories everybody was coming up with. Chain murders and cult homicide and all the rest of it. I have a theory of my own, but of course that’s all it is. Just a theory.”

“I’d really like to hear it.”

“You would?”

“Definitely.”

Their eyes met and wordless messages were exchanged. He smiled and she smiled in reply. “Well,” he said, after a moment. “First of all, I think it was just one guy. Not a group of killers. From the way it was timed. And because he keeps changing the murder method I think he wanted to keep what he was doing undiscovered as long as possible.”

“That makes sense. But why?”

“I think it was a source of fun for him.”

“A source of fun?”

The man nodded. “This is just hypothesis,” he said, “but let’s suppose he just killed a person once for the sheer hell of it. To find out what it felt like, say. To enlarge his area of personal experience.”

“God.”

“Can you accept that hypothetically?”

“I guess so. Sure.”

“Okay. Now we can suppose further that he liked it, got some kind of a kick out of it. Otherwise he wouldn’t have wanted to continue. There’s certainly precedent for it. Not all the homicidal maniacs down through history have been driven men. Some of them have just gotten a kick out of it so they kept right on doing it.”

“That gives me the shivers.”

“It’s a frightening concept,” he agreed. “But let’s suppose that the first person this clown killed was named Ackerman, and that he wanted to go on killing people and he wanted to make a game out of it. So he—”

“A game!”

“Sure, why not? He could just keep on with it, having his weird jollies and seeing how long it would take for the police and the press to figure out what was going on. There are a lot of Ackermans. It’s a common name, but not so common that a pattern wouldn’t begin to emerge sooner or later. Think how many Smiths there are in the city, for instance. I don’t suppose police in the different boroughs coordinate their activities so closely, and I guess the Bureau of Vital Statistics doesn’t bother to note if a lot of fatalities have the same last name, so it’s a question of how long it takes for the pattern to emerge in and of itself. Well, it’s done so now, and what does the score stand at now? Twenty-seven?”

“That’s what the paper said, I think.”

“It’s quite a total when you stop and think of it. And there may have been a few Ackermans not accounted for. A body or two in the river, for instance.”

“You make it sound—”

“Yes?”

“I don’t know. It gives me the willies to think about it. Will he just keep on now? Until they catch him?”

“You think they’ll catch him?”

“Well, sooner or later, won’t they? The Ackermans know to be careful now and the police will have stakeouts. Is that what they call it? Stakeouts?”

“That’s what they call it on television.”

“Don’t you think they’ll catch him?”

The young man thought it over. “I’m sure they’ll catch him,” he said, “if he keeps it up.”

“You mean he might stop?”

“I would. If I were him.”

“If you were him. What a thought!”

“Just projecting a little. But to continue with it, if I were this creep, I’d leave the rest of the world’s Ackermans alone from here on in.”

“Because it would be too dangerous?”

“Because it wouldn’t be any fun for me.”

“Fun!”

“Oh, come on,” he said, smiling. “Once you get past the evilness of it, which I grant you is overwhelming, can’t you see how it would be fun for a demented mind? But try not to think of him as fundamentally cruel. Think of him as someone responding to a challenge. Well, now the police and the newspapers and

the Ackermans themselves know what's going on, so at this point it's not a game anymore. The game's over and if he were to go on with it he'd just be conducting a personal war of extermination. And if he doesn't really have any genuine grudge against Ackermans, well, I say he'd let them alone."

She looked at him and her eyes were thoughtful. "Then he might just stop altogether."

"Sure."

"And get away with it?"

"I suppose. Unless they pick him up for killing somebody else." Her eyes widened and he grinned. "Oh, really, Emily, you can't expect him to stop this new hobby of his entirely, can you? Not if he's been having so much fun at it? I don't think killers like that ever stop, not once it gets in their blood. They don't stop until the long arm of the law catches up with them."

"The way you said that."

"Pardon me?"

" 'The long arm of the law.' As if it's sort of a joke."

"Well, when you see how this character operated, he does make the law look like something of a joke, doesn't he?"

"I guess he does."

He smiled, got to his feet. "Getting close in here. Which way are you headed? I'll walk you home."

"Well, I have to go uptown—"

"Then that's the way I'm headed."

"And if I had to go downtown?"

"Then I'd have urgent business in that direction, Emily."

On the street she said, "But what do you suppose he'll do? Assuming you're right that he'll stop killing Ackermans but he'll go on killing. Will he just pick out innocent victims at random?"

"Not if he's a compulsive type, and he certainly looks like one to me. No, I guess he'd just pick out another whole category of people."

"Another last name? Just sifting through the telephone directory and seeing what strikes his fancy? God, that's a terrifying idea. I'll tell you something, I'm glad my name's not such a common one. There aren't enough Kuystendahls in the world to make it very interesting for him."

"Or Trenholmes. But there are plenty of Emilys, aren't there?"

"Huh?"

"Well, he doesn't have to pick his next victims by last name. In fact, he'd probably avoid that because the police would pick up on something like that in a minute after this business with the Ackermans. He could establish some other kind of category. Men with beards, say. Oldsmobile owners."

"Oh, my God."

"People wearing brown shoes. Bourbon drinkers. Or, uh, girls named Emily."

"That's not funny, Bill."

"Well, no reason why it would have to be Emily. Any first name—that's the whole point, the random nature of it. He could pick guys named Bill, as far as that goes. Either way it would probably take the police a while to tip to it, don't you think?"

"I don't know."

"You upset, Emily?"

"Not upset, exactly."

"You certainly don't have anything to worry about," he said, and slipped an arm protectively around her waist. "I'll take good care of you, baby."

"Oh, will you?"

"Count on it."

They walked together in silence for a while and after a few moments she relaxed in his embrace. As they waited for a light to change he said, "Collecting Emilys."

"Pardon?"

"Just talking to myself," he said. "Nothing important."

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