

The case seemed cut and dried. Big Ed Fustner, the meat King, had been caught in an after-hours dive masturbating Ann Lowenfeld, a socially prominent bowling ball heiress, With his 'trademark'—a rubber wiener—when a swizzle Stick turned up in the back of Maurice X., the one-armed Bathroom attendant who owed Fustner some gambling money.

Mason didn't like Fustner, but there was a lot of money To be made here. He had to keep Della and Paul in meat And potatoes. The few grand would be a shot in the arm— Even if the defense did seem as complex as masturbating. Mason didn't care if Fustner went to the joint to sizzle And fry, but then it was Mason the creditors would harass.

Ann Lowenfeld took the stand. She crossed her hairless Legs, smoothed her bowling shirt. She recked of money. Mason fished. "Isn't it true that Fustner just whistles, And you trot to his table—hotly, spreading your meat? Didn't it turn you on—the possibility of masturbating In a public place? Showing it off, defying the long arm

Of the Law?" "So big deal. So he didn't twist my arm!" She pouted. But Burger was up, his face purple, airless. "Obviously," he ranted, "Mr. Mason is a master at baiting A witness! But, Your Honor, it's apparent, for my money, That for once Mr. Mason's *hectoring* won't get to the meat Of the issue: the defendant, enraged at Maurice's weasel-

Like attitude, grabbed the nearest weapon, this swizzle—
Uh, 'Exhibit A'—uh, where did I?—uh, by your arm—"
Mason scowled, ignoring him. "Where did you first meet
Ed Fustner?" She flinched. "Are you really an 'heiress'?"
He sneered. "Didn't the dream of Big Ed Fustner's money
Turn you on to another, a lifelong, kind of masturbating?"

Furthermore, under that table, just who was masturbating
Whom? Hadn't poor Maurice begged you earlier to 'swizzle
His stick' for him whenever he could get up enough money?
Didn't you stab him when he tried to reveal his lost arm
Was now battery-powered—a plaything for an 'heiress'—
For her cold, lonely future, as her body sagged like meat?"

† † †

"*Masturbating!*" Della gagged. Paul cracked, "*I sing of arm
And a man!*" "Or *heiress*," Burger joked, stabbing a swizzle
Stick in his meat. Mason needled him, "But for *my* money..."

His view blocked by Paul Drake's broad shoulders,
The man on the barstool tried to hold back a sob.
He felt like a stallion trapped in a blind canyon—
The other sheer cliff jailing him was Perry Mason.
"What is this, Mt. Rushmore?"—trying to be funny.
But he saw the game was up, and went along quietly.

The wipers knocked away rain as he confessed quietly.
"I couldn't take it if she gave me the cold shoulder.
Something just... *snapped*." Her neck looked so funny.
After I'd killed her—" He hesitated, began to sob.
As usual, for his cue Drake looked over toward Mason,
Then told him about the blonde's house in the canyon,

The wide panes of glass looking over the canyon,
Like those innocent eyes that gaze on life quietly...
Drake flipped over a page in his notebook, but Mason
Had had it with this guy blubbering on his shoulder.
The thought really burned him. What kind of S.O.B.
Strangles a girl with her own nylons? He felt funny,

Like the time, as a boy, reading the Sunday funnies,
He saw an episode of exotic torture in Steve Canyon—
A woman garrotted, the balloon over the killer: SOB!
He'd heard his blood then, a creek flowing quietly,
Throwing in relief the dim thunder in his shoulders,
As he twisted the comic like a neck... "—Mason..."

The lunchmeat had collected himself. "Look, Mason,
I know this scrape I got myself in ain't so funny—
Help me." The car lights swept the road's shoulder.
Mason wanted to force him out, down into the canyon,
Break his neck like a bird's, fiercely and quietly,
Bury him with the memory of the sound of that sob—

That weakness a man admits to in one, strangled sob,
Towering over the beauty he has killed. "Mr. Mason,
To you—!" Perry hissed, moving his hands quietly
To that neck . . . The look on Drake's face was funny,
As he fought the car from careening into the canyon,
Adrenalin pumping through his forearms, shoulders . . .

† † †

Paul Drake flexed his shoulders. "Boy, it's funny,"
He said quietly. "Tonight, on the rim of the canyon—"
But Mason had rolled up the window of his yellow Saab.

— 3

Hamilton Burger cleared his throat. "You see, style
Is just the greater, or lesser, handling of Chance—
The stopping, or delaying, of Time. It's the ability
To manipulate objects by presenting them in a new light.
Say I stand across the courtroom. As I tell the story
Of the crime, the properties of Exhibit A will alter. . . ."

Droning on, he seemed to Della a high priest at his altar,
Deciphering an unknown religion's precepts from a stele
Carved in ancient times, and revealing a sacred story
In its lucid figures. "Della," he asked, "what is Chance.
Anyway? The representation of the inconstant light—
From which order occurs? The unknowable center? The ability

To posit that which cannot be explained? The probability
All government is but man's need to 'worship,' to alter
His perceptions, to forget . . . ?" Della felt spears of light
Mangle her brain like the shredder in the office. A steel
Ball swung slowly back and forth, leaving nothing to chance:
A real headache. Gazing out her window on the third storey,

She watched a man on the observation deck above. A story
Took hold of her. She saw a man—wife gone, no ability
To pay his debts—cross himself once, then jump. No chance
He'd survive the fall: a twisted bag of garbage on the altar
Of the city, wedding ring, dog tags, wristwatch in the style
Of jewels Mayan virgins wore, diving deep ponds for the Light. . .

Della blinked. The man turned, rose, blotting out the light,
Leaped. She froze, as before her eyes flashed *his* story—
As if *she* were dying, flesh falling through iron and steel:
Bodies banging bone on bone like shutters, the culpability
Of two in marriage—cowards, worshipping an empty altar,
Sacrificing the present to the future, calling it chance . . .

When Della came to, Burger was sucking her toes. "A chance
Encounter?" she murmured. He leaped, red-faced, to the light
Switch. "Fall in me from a great height," she moaned. "Alter
Me . . ." He heard the clank of his zipper. "Tell me a story,
Daddy, the one about the old king's sceptre, its dependability
Unquestioned, rising in the darkest room like shining steel . . ."

† † †

Della exhaled smoke. "Light reading, *that* story. Any chance
Of another?" Burger cursed his disability. "If—if I alter
My approach—" It was no longer just an exercise in style.

"Perry—" Furious, Mason looked up from the chess
Game he played with himself every night. His mother
Loomed in the doorway, leaning grimly on her walker.
"Perry, turn the heat up? Please? Your father—"
"—Is dead!" Perry raged, his bitter voice rammed
Into the old crone's face. "If you were ambulatory—"

Mason bit it off. He was lucky she was ambulatory
At all, considering the wheezes and grunts her chest
Made, fixing her milk, or peeing: sounds that rammed
Into his skull with all the force of a mother's—!
Forget it! But did she have to bring up his father,
How he'd go prowling at night for a streetwalker—

Somebody who can work her legs without a walker!—
How little Perry would watch another barely ambulatory
Schizophrenic climb the stairway, while his father
Made growling noises at her shoes, or rubbed her chest.
He couldn't distinguish: father, stairs, whore, mother . . .
Next day at the shopping mall, pushing her up one ramp,

Then alongside the windows, and down another ramp,
Mason thought of the Hitchcock film with Robert Walker:
The pact made to exchange murders . . . Until his mother
Interrupted his thoughts. "I remember being ambulatory.
Before your father—" But her throat caught, her chest
Heaving around that old heart, broken by his father . . .