

SNAKEBIT AND SUNBURNED

The RV with a “Caution, Free Range Old People” bumper sticker meandered into my lane and took my mind off the whole Redneck Rattlesnake Roundup fiasco. I was white-knuckling my '97 Chrysler Sebring down I-95 to Pompano Beach, Florida, away from what I had believed would be the crowning achievement of my twenty-five year career as an ad salesman. But my brilliant rattlesnake campaign had gone south, and now so was I, as fast as four cylinders could take me.

My publisher at The Mountain Advocate, a West Virginia weekly newspaper, had wanted me, Archie Andrews, to come up with something that might bring in a few more advertising dollars. (Yes, my mother named me after her favorite fictional character, which, fortunately, wasn't Jughead.)

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“We need something outside the box, Arch” my boss said. “Connect the dots and see if you can come up with a plan.” If I downed a shot every time the man uttered a cliché, I’d be dead drunk before 9:30 a. m.

I’d read about a snake hunting contest they had in some state far enough away for said publisher not to have heard about it, and thought maybe I could steal the idea. We had plenty of timber rattlers and enough people willing to wrangle them to make for some lively entertainment. Especially if we offered a Winchester 30-30 and a Harley Davidson pewter belt buckle as first prize. I convinced a bunch of local merchants to buy some halfway decent ads to tie into the whole deal. Things had looked promising.

But I hadn’t counted on Little Clyde Hovatter.

The Mountain Advocate downplayed the unfortunate chain of events Little Clyde set into motion. But the fine folks at our competitor, The Weekly Journal, which I always called The Weekly Urinal, felt no need for restraint. They devoted an entire edition to the story. According to their biased and overblown account, on the day of the competition Little Clyde first stopped at the Eighty-Nine-Cent Emporium’s two-for-one sale. The store had featured foam coolers in its Rodeo Roundup advertisements. Along with the coolers, our hero also picked up a couple of six packs of Iron City beer. Not on sale, but apparently something he figured well worth full price. After purchasing his necessities, he headed to a previously reconnoitered reptile hunting spot on Cheat Mountain

Around 3 p. m., Little Clyde felt the need for a little more fortification and decided to dip into his diminishing supply of cold ones. Instead of an aluminum can he pulled up a thoroughly pissed off seven foot rattler that immediately sank its fangs into the back of his right hand. Our

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genius had stored the beer in one cooler, corralled his snakes in its identical twin, and had forgotten which one was which.

“About ninety percent of snakebite victims are young men full of testosterone and alcohol,” the surgeon, who amputated the snake bitten hand, was quoted as saying.

Little Clyde sued The Mountain Advocate. The legal process with its continuances and appeals dragged on for months. It included poster-size photos of the victim’s struggle to adapt to life with a metal hook instead of a flesh and blood fist attached to his forearm. Tears welled as jurors saw him try to hold his rifle steady during deer season, struggle to guide a Big Mac into his mouth and attempt to cuddle a recoiling companion on the Ferris wheel at the county fair. The clincher showed Little Clyde in the county jail. His hand and his hook poking through the bars of his pitiful little cell. His career ruined. Never mind that Little Clyde was in the slammer because he no longer had the deft touch needed to pick pockets and jimmy locks. A skill essential to the only line of work he had ever known.

The settlement demanded both money and an apology. My publisher needed a sacrifice, and I got picked as the lamb that got the boot.

So I headed to Florida. Me, my convertible and very few marketable skills. I’d never been one of the cool kids, although I probably rated in the top twenty-five percent of the unpopular ones. A geek who couldn’t do math. Since being a brain surgeon or rocket scientist was out, I had gone into journalism, and eventually landed a job at my hometown newspaper. There I had stayed for a quarter of a century, getting older and grayer. Not exactly a resume that seemed likely to get me a penthouse on Miracle Mile in Fort Lauderdale. But I had a life. Now I had none.

I scored a job as property manager/handy-man at the Sandy Isles Shores Retirement Community, where people called me kid. I also decided to get serious about the novel I’d been work-

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ing on in my spare time. I joined the Florida Chapter of the Mystery Writers of America and with sweat-stained manuscript in hand, I attended Sleuthfest 2010. I didn't know what to expect.

I remembered the time I went with the newspaper crowd to their yearly convention at the Greenbrier Resort. A get-together that met at the same time as the bankers' convention. You didn't have any trouble telling who was who. The money guys wore ties and suits and people called them "Mr." and "Sir" and on a rare occasion "Ma'am", instead of "YOU MORON", as in "YOU MORON, I paid good money for a half page ad and you left the "r" out of the "BIG SHIRT SALE". Yeah, and that word had been in 60 point type too.

But the Sleuthfest people proved to be good writers and like-minded sorts--funny, friendly and helpful. Except for the agent who gave a cold eye to my cross genre years-in-gestation baby about a mystery solving, sexy extraterrestrial vampire who has a steamy relationship with an ex-hooker Mississippi virgin in 22nd century New China City.

"It's been done to death," she said. She salted the wound by adding that I needed to improve my voice and point of view skills and to for God's sake cut back on the verb to be.

So I went back to the retirement community and shoved the novel under my bed.

Then real life got strange. Real strange. A series of unexplained deaths hit Sandy Isles Shores.

The first to go was Oscar Levant. Oscar told me the woman in the apartment upstairs wasn't giving the garbage in her disposal sufficient grinding time and the residue was making its way into his own plumbing and clogging his drains. He suspected the woman of trying to lure him into her apartment. He planned to thwart her advances and his own problems by pouring copious amounts of drain cleaner down his sink. As a result, he often called me to give first aid to his seared pipes.

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One morning in August I got a not unexpected call.

“Archie, I need you to come up here. There’s something wrong with my sink,” Oscar said.

I grabbed my tool belt and ambled over to his apartment. When he didn’t answer my ring, I let myself in. I found him sprawled on the kitchen floor, a bottle of Drano clutched in his hand. Deader than the housing market.

I dialed 911. When the paramedics arrived, I filled them in.

“I think his death is suspicious,” I said. “He was fine this morning. People just don’t keel over like that.”

They looked at the vial of personal information all the Sandy Isles Shores residents keep stored in their refrigerators in case of such an unfortunate event.

“Says here he’s ninety-eight,” one of the policemen, who followed the EMTs, said. “I don’t think this is any big mystery.”

“Look,” I said, determined not to let it go. “He has a fresh puncture wound. Aren’t you at least going to do a tox screen, dust for fingerprints?”

“There’s a bunch of puncture wounds,” the medic, who to my bi-focaled eyes didn’t look more than fourteen years old, sneered. “He’s a diabetic.”

I decided to make this Chapter One in my next manuscript, a novel based on real life facts. When I got famous, people would take notice. Oscar’s death would not go unavenged.

Chapter One was followed by Chapter Two.

Myrtle Sinclair had nothing but solid blue and a “no signal” warning on her TV screen.

“Archie, I’m going to miss “Days of Our Lives,” she wailed when she called for help. “It’s Friday. Something terrible always happens to one of the really important characters on Fridays.”

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I figured she had hit the wrong button on her remote again, and tuned to satellite instead of cable. I headed to her apartment, found the door open and Myrtle flat on her back.

Her dead eyes stared at the VCR she must have turned on in her frantic effort to find out how Sammi and company planned to get out of their current fine mess. Twelve o'clock blinked ominously and the counter had stopped on the number **31773**.

The call to 911 brought the same paramedics and police. No more impressed than the last time.

"Looks like a homicide," I told them.

"She's ninety-seven," they said. "These things happen."

"I think those numbers on the VCR are significant," I argued. "Maybe she stopped the tape there to leave a clue."

The barely post pubescent policeman adjusted the TV, punched the VCR's play button and a washed out, polyester-clad Bobby began swinging Barbara and her crinolines through the boopity boopity boopity boo of Lawrence Welk's champagne-infused version of the Pennsylvania Polka.

Even I had to admit this wasn't convincing. But I figured the message had to mean something.

I dropped to the floor beside Myrtle. When I stared up at the VCR, I found the proof I needed.

"Myrtle named her killer," I said. "From this angle **31773** spells out **ELLIE**. Myrtle and Ellie Snyder were in a cut-throat casserole bake-off competition for the affections of Charlie McNair. I'd say Ellie decided to improve her odds. What more do you need?"

Apparently plenty.

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It didn't end there. I discovered Johnny Singleton, a spry one hundred and two, face down in the complex's swimming pool. The water temperature had been mysteriously lowered from its customary eighty-seven degrees to a frigid seventy-nine. Again, I was too late to help. Johnny's unexpected demise was followed by those of Minnie Barkley and Arizona Bates. I no longer tried to convince the police. Just wrote fictionalized versions in my book, getting it ready for Sleuthfest 2011. Which is this weekend.

While fixing one last typo, I heard a commotion in the parking lot.

A Winnebago came screeching around the road that circles our buildings. It had crashed through our keep-out-the-riff-raff one-armed barrier, breaching our gated community's last line of defense. Probably woke up old Barney in the guard house too.

Tucking my manuscript under my arm, I rushed out to stop the intruder. As I waved my free hand I got hit by a silver streak.

Bouncing off its rear bumper, I landed in the visitors' parking area. I clutched my manuscript, the one I planned to proofread one last time, to my bleeding chest.

When I opened my eyes I saw a pair of cowboy boots walking toward me. Pointed toes, stacked heels, but shafts made of that disgusting synthetic plastic abomination, pleather.

A tall, silver haired man leaned over me. "Archie Andrews?" he inquired. "Heard you planned to come to Florida. Decided to track you down. Make you pay for what you done."

They say your life flashes before your eyes in times like these. If I had to relive all the things I've done that qualify for pay back, I'd be occupying this parking spot for a very long time.

"What have I done?" I croaked through parched lips.

"You organized that disgusting snake roundup. Wiped out all our raw material," he said.

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A motherly-looking woman in a turquoise peasant skirt and blouse and a big cowboy hat with a fake snakeskin headband walked up and stood beside the man. She tapped her toe.

“We had a good thing going,” she said. “A regular internet boutique bonanza. Anti-establishment people willing to pay good money for genuine snakeskin “don’t tread on me” flags. Then you came along and pretty well wiped out our supply. We decided you had to pay. It took a while, but we tracked you here. Hung around till people called you for help. We planned to get you alone, but those old folks kept getting in the way. Hated to have to take care of them. But these things happen.”

“So I was right,” I gloated in spite of my situation. “Oscar and Myrtle and Johnny. All of them were murdered.” I gripped my manuscript tighter to my blood soaked chest.

“Pretty much,” the man said. “All except the guy in the swimming pool. That freezing water would have been too much of a shock for even a much younger Florida resident.”

“We would have forgotten about you,” the woman said. “If we hadn’t been so committed to finishing our job. We’ve pretty well recovered our losses. Now we’re selling faux snakeskin accessories to the anti-anti-establishment crowd. Giving them embellishments they can use to decorate the signs they make to ridicule the anti-establishmenters. That Chardonnay and cheese bunch would never go for real animal hides. They’re even a little squeemish about what bogus animals we have to kill and whether we’re humane about it. Some idiots are trying to get pleathers on the endangered species list.”

The man reached down and ripped my manuscript, my hope for immortality, the proof that I was right, from my weakening fingers.

“Come on,” he said to the woman. They turned from me and got back in their RV.

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As they drove off, I saw the bumper sticker with their internet address, www.opportunisticseniors.com, next to the one announcing they were free range old people. In spite of what they'd done to me, I couldn't help but admire their marketing genius.

My breathing became shallower as they roared into the sunset. My fingers twitched, trying to hold on to the memory of my vanishing manifesto.

Sleuthfest this weekend. An agent reading request for sure. I wasn't going to make it.

"Should have won an Agatha," I breathed, as the light behind my eyes faded. "Could have won a Macavity. Would have won an Edgar...."

END