

Advance Praise for *The Whole She-Bang*

"Go ahead, admit it. When you think of Canada, you think: polite, earnest, clean. Well the Canadian Sisters of Crime are here to set the record straight, with *THE WHOLE SHE-BANG*, a winning collection of crime stories. Some will make you smile. Others will make you gasp. And some will stay with you long after you turn the last page."

-Sean Chercover, author of *THE TRINITY GAME*

"Good news: murder is alive and well in this entertaining new Canadian mystery anthology. In *The Whole She-Bang*, several bright new voices join established and award-winning crime writers to serve up a variety of stories full of suspense, surprise and satisfaction. Enjoy!"

-Mary Jane Maffini, 2010 Agatha Best Short story winner for **SO MUCH IN COMMON**

"The women (and one man) of the Canadian Sisters in Crime have assembled a delightfully diverse collection of stories in *The Whole She-Bang*. Every one of these enticingly dark tales, whether by established authors or new names, showcases the talented storytelling and the keen voices of Canadian crime writers. The stories show female characters not so much as victims, but as players in the game of justice."

-Steve Steinbock, reviewer

The Whole She-Bang

A collection of Canadian crime stories

by Sisters in Crime: Canada

Edited by Janet Costello

Published by Toronto Sisters in Crime

Smashwords Edition

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For my son Anthony, for your independence, love and support.

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prior experience who provide us with the motivation to do the same.

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Thank you to Antonia Gorton who created a cover that captured our concept beyond our sultriest visions.

Janet Costello

*For six years, **Janet Costello** has been the editor of Crime Scene, the Toronto Chapter Sisters in Crime newsletter. There she has also published interviews, articles and puzzles. She enjoys attending mystery conventions, especially when she can volunteer. Janet works as a commercial insurance underwriter to support her reading habit (and to ensure that habit includes a glass of red wine nearby).*

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Introduction

by Helen Nelson
Chapter President, Sisters in Crime Toronto

Here we are—celebrating our twentieth anniversary as the Toronto Chapter of Sisters in Crime. In this, our Chapter's first anthology, we have one short story for each of those twenty years to present to you as part of the celebration.

We didn't plan it that way. We didn't really set a number. We didn't want to tell our judges that they must pick a certain number. Although we certainly hoped they would be able to choose between 18 and 25. What we wanted was a collection of stories that would represent the depth of talent among members of Sisters in Crime who are resident in Canada.

And we have succeeded! The stories are cozy and noir, humorous and poignant, historical and current. We have amateur sleuths and professionals – cops, private detectives and even—oh but I don't want to include any spoilers. Our protagonists are women, men and children. Our settings are varied too, within Canada, the U.S., the United Kingdom, Vietnam and an unnamed exotic locale. Our authors are young and young at heart—established authors and those who are being published for the first time. And while we are mostly female, there is also one male author in this collection.

Congratulations to the authors of all the stories selected for this anthology. We're convinced that there are many more great story tellers out there. We hope you are all busy honing your craft.

From the idea's inception, somewhat over a year ago until publication, this anthology has been produced by a team of volunteers who have put in hundreds of hours, collecting, judging, editing, proof-reading, fact checking, formatting and planning a marketing strategy. Who knew when we started this just how much work it would be! What a wonderful thing we have such a dedicated group in our chapter who have lent a hand in the endeavour. Sisters in Crime is an organization of volunteers and that spirit has shone through in this project.

We have tried our best to follow the rules for anthology publication set out by the international organization of Sisters in Crime. They are rules we agree with. The most crucial ones for us are around the blind nature of the judging process. That is harder to follow than one might think—especially in the age of instant publishing on the internet. But we have done our best and all stories selected were selected as part of that blind judging process.

Would we do it again? Absolutely! And we won't wait another twenty years. Who knows, maybe *your* story will be in our next collection. In the meantime let's celebrate twenty years of the Toronto Chapter of Sisters in Crime with these twenty stories. Happy Reading.

Baby, the Rain Must Fall

by Vicki Delany

*“It’s a crime not to read Delany,” says the London Free Press. **Vicki Delany** is one of Canada’s most varied and prolific crime writers. Her popular Constable Molly Smith series (including *In the Shadow of the Glacier* and *Among the Departed*) has been optioned for TV by Brightlight Pictures. She writes stand-alone novels of modern gothic suspense such as *Burden of Memory* and *More than Sorrow*, as well as a light-hearted historical series, (*Gold Digger*, *Gold Mountain*), set in the raucous heyday of the Klondike Gold Rush. She is also the author of *A Winter Kill*, a novel for reluctant readers.*

After early retirement from a systems analyst job in the high-pressure financial world, Vicki is settling down to the rural life in bucolic, Prince Edward County, Ontario, where she rarely wears a watch.

*Visit Vicki at www.vickidelany.com or her blog about the writing life *One Woman Crime Wave* (<http://klondikeandtrafalgar.blogspot.com>)*

* * * * *

The moment I got home from work, before even stripping off my clinging panty hose and unseasonably warm suit, I poured a glass of Ontario Chardonnay. I was swirling the cool, crisp wine around the inside of my mouth when the phone rang. I peeked at the call display. A local number; not one I recognised.

“Hello?”

“Debbie. It’s Maureen Kildare.”

“Maureen Kildare! Good heavens, after all these years! How are you?” I could barely get the words out. This was a voice I had never expected to hear again. And never wanted to.

“Okay.”

“Where are you calling from?” I didn’t want to know, but I had been raised with a sometimes-inconvenient, full complement of manners.

“My mom’s.”

“Is she still living in Oakville?” I swallowed most of the wine in one gulp.

“Yes.”

“How long are you staying?”

“Until I get a few things sorted out.”

The silence between sentences grew. Maureen was never the most vociferous of our tightly-knit high school group. I suppose thirty years spent in and out of prison hadn't turned her into a social butterfly. Not a lot of Canadian women – at least middle-class white women from the affluent Toronto suburb of Oakville – spend that amount of time in jail. But once she went in, Maureen didn't seem to be able to stay out. Or so I had heard - I hadn't spoken to her since the day she was sentenced to her first stretch. I don't think any of the others had either. If there was one social skill our mothers hadn't taught us, it was how to conduct oneself on a prison visit.

I finished the wine and topped the glass up, unable to think of anything more to say. Maureen wasn't trying terribly hard to keep up her end of the conversation. “We must get together one day soon,” I suggested, grasping at a conversational convention. “For dinner maybe. Yes, dinner, that would be nice.”

“Okay.” Maureen's voice was rougher than I remembered. It used to be so soft; she'd always sounded like someone's breathless little sister. But again, I suppose a stretch in the infamous Kingston Prison for Women, known as P4W, would harden anyone's softer edges.

“Well, I've gotta run. Jerry's parents are coming for dinner. Let's keep in touch.”

“Next weekend would be nice. Friday?”

“What?”

“Next Friday. That dinner?”

My mind raced. If Maureen wanted to see me, I should take the time to meet her. I owed her that, at least, and what harm could it do, other than to cause us both a few awkward moments? We had been close – once. “Next week's no good. I'm...”

“Yes?” The single word purred into the phone sounding just like the Maureen I remembered.

“I'm...” I could feel my heart beating in my chest. I finished another glass of wine. We'd been great friends once, Maureen and I, best friends in a group of best friends. And we'd abandoned her pretty quickly—me as fast as the others.

I spoke before thinking things through. “I'm going up to Diane's cottage next weekend. We still go every year. Janet, Sue, Cathy, the whole bunch. For a long weekend. Why don't you come with us? It's always great fun. Diane's place is wonderful—you remember. I'm sure everyone would love to see you.” I wanted to stuff the words back in my mouth. Everyone would love nothing of the sort. We'd gone on with our lives leaving Maureen to drift in and out of jail and between jail stints to wander the streets of East Vancouver doing God-knows-what.

“I don't have a car. I'll drive up with you. Pick me up at my mom's—she still lives in the same house. You remember where that is, don't you, Debbie?”

“I remember. Have you talked to any of the others...uh...lately?”

“No. But I did see Sue's brother Rob in Vancouver a few months ago. He

told me the old gang's still pretty tight.”
The phone clicked softly as she hung up.

The old gang, as Maureen so unflatteringly called us, consisted of the five, six including Maureen, who had been best friends throughout high school. We were the brainy ones, the unpopular, unathletic, ungainly bunch who clung together against the contempt or, worse, the indifference of the ‘in’ crowd at Thomas A. Blakelock High School during the rebellious (for everyone except us) sixties. Our lives had diverged a great deal since, but once a year we gathered at Diane’s family cottage on Lake Muskoka for our annual girls’ weekend. Every summer since 1972, the second weekend in August saw most of us, and more often than not all of us, heading north. And so our lives were revealed to each other one year at a time as husbands came and left, children were born and grew up, parents died, homes moved, jobs attained and abandoned and careers grew. It had always been a girls’ weekend - husbands and children were banned, with a reluctant exception made for breastfeeding infants. Some years we came from all over the country, from around the world even, for our weekend. Every year the ghost of the still-living Maureen, scarcely mentioned, rarely acknowledged, hovered in the midst of our circle of friends like a large dog’s particularly smelly indiscretion.

I pulled up in front of the Kildare house. The trees were taller but otherwise it was as I remembered: green lawn as perfect as a golf course, neat rows of red and pink geraniums and petunias strictly confined to the well-tilled flowerbeds. I’d avoided this street for thirty years. I had no desire whatsoever to set foot in that house again, for who knew what bad memories it might still contain. Fortunately I didn’t have to. Before I was even out of the car Maureen rushed out of the house, the door slamming behind her. I thought I heard her mother cry, “Maureen, must you always make such a racket?” But that might have only been a wisp of memory. I opened the trunk and she threw her backpack on top of my suitcase.

For a moment I found myself genuinely delighted to see her, and I squealed as I gave my former best friend a hearty hug. She had been quite plump in high school, but today I could feel the sharp bones beneath her sweater. The hug was not returned, and Maureen pulled herself out of my grasp.

“Nice car,” she said, settling into the leather seat of the Lexus as we began the three-hour drive to Muskoka.

“When the last of my girls finally left home I realised I didn’t have to drive a minivan any longer, so I treated myself to this little beauty.”

“Girls?” she raised one eyebrow. “How many?”

“Four,” I laughed, pulling into traffic. I rattled off names, ages and present locations and occupations. Then I babbled a bit about my job—vice president of a bank, thank you very much—but Maureen didn’t seem impressed. She said nothing more and I finally got tired of the sound of my own voice. The rest of journey passed in silence.

As I did every year, I’d taken the day off to drive up early Friday morning, so the traffic heading into Cottage Country wasn’t too bad. Once we passed Canada’s Wonderland north of Toronto the congestion of urban sprawl faded into gentle farmland and rolling green hills, and I stopped thinking about traffic and began to worry about what I’d done. I hadn’t told anyone, not even Diane, I was bringing Maureen. If they’d told me to uninvite her I simply wouldn’t have been able to find the courage to do so.

My mind wandered. Maureen had always been different from the rest of us. We mostly came from affluent families in what was then the most affluent town in Canada. No one in Oakville had been poor, but Maureen’s family was about as close as one could come and still be living in that town. Diane’s family, on the other hand, was rich. Today she’d go to a private school, but somehow things seemed more egalitarian back then. For reasons not fully understood by any of us, Maureen managed to fit herself into our group. Maybe because she was so terribly smart, even though she sometimes tried to hide it, and maybe because in the first days of grade nine she chased off a group of boys who were laughing at my budding bosom. But Maureen was always one of our group, although sometimes she stood slightly to one side. No sleepovers or birthday parties at Maureen’s house. Although I was her best friend, I never saw the inside of her immaculate home more than a handful of times.

High school ended as it must and we went our separate ways. In the fall of 1972, Janet and I were at the University of Toronto; Cathy was at Carleton University in Ottawa taking the journalism program that would get her a job as Middle East correspondent for one of the major U.S. newspapers; Diane was planning her wedding to a junior partner in her father’s law firm; and Sue was backpacking through Europe. Maureen, the cleverest of us all, worked a cash register at Kmart.

By the summer of 1973, Maureen was on trial for the murder of her mother’s brother. We, except for Diane whose father forbade it, went to court a few times dressed in our most sombre clothes, and sat stoically in the front row trying to offer some feeble degree of moral support.

Maureen’s defence was that her uncle had been molesting her for years, and one day she’d had enough and brained him with a fireplace poker. The case was a cause celebre, a nine-day wonder, and everyone predicted she would get off with a suspended sentence. But the defence was lacklustre and the prosecution fiery. They’d successfully argued that there was no evidence of any ongoing abuse or of any attempted rape on the day in question—Maureen had never told anyone her uncle was molesting her, so why should she be believed now? Maureen’s mother hadn’t helped by telling the court that her daughter sometimes acted ‘mature for her age.’ The whole town was shocked

when Maureen was sentenced to ten years in federal prison.

In the summer of 1974 Diane was the smug, proud mother of a bouncing baby boy; Cathy was first in her class; Sue was at community college studying fashion; I had switched my major to the new field of computer science; Janet had quit university to 'find herself'; and Maureen was incarcerated at P4W.

I glanced out of the corner of my eye at my former best friend. She looked at least ten years older than she was: Her face was deeply lined, sallow skin hanging on chipped cheekbones. The bags under her eyes carried the full memory of thirty years of rough living. Her thick black hair was heavily streaked with grey and as badly cut as if she'd lopped the ends off with a nail file smuggled into jail in a birthday cake. The tips of her fingers were yellow, and she picked constantly at a loose thread in her cheap sweater or at the frayed end of the belt holding up her shorts.

And I knew that by inviting her I had made a terrible mistake.

We were the first to arrive. I didn't have a key to the main building, but it was a warm, sunny day so we piled our bags by the door and walked around to the lake-facing side of the sprawling old cottage. The shed was unlocked and I dragged cushions out to dress the lounge chairs on the deck. From the depths of my cooler I pulled out a bottle of wine, a corkscrew and two acrylic wineglasses. I always travel prepared.

Maureen leaned on the blond wood rail of the deck, gazing out over the sparkling blue expanse of Lake Muskoka. Tiny waves danced in the sunshine. A seaplane cut a path through the clear sky overhead. She held her face to the sun. Either I'd forgotten the shape of her nose or it had been broken in the years since I'd seen it last. She closed her eyes and almost smiled. "This is a nice place," she murmured. "Diane's a lucky lady."

I poured the drinks and held out a glass. Maureen took a long look at my hand before shaking her head. "I don't drink."

I debated pouring her share back into the bottle. But it might spill. I added it to my own glass.

We were stranded in that horrible limbo where we had too much and nothing at all to say to each other; in the end we chose to say nothing. I'd half finished the bottle of wine when we heard a car pulling up the gravel driveway.

I got to my feet, lifted my wineglass jauntily, and stuck a smile on my face like a painter might slap a bit of Polyfilla over a crack in the ceiling. Diane and Janet rushed through the cottage and threw open the wide French doors leading to the deck.

"I knew you'd be here first. You always are." Diane ran towards me with a huge smile on her face and arms outstretched. Janet came behind, talking at nothing. Janet was always talking.

They saw my guest at the same moment. Diane's smile disappeared and Janet stopped mid-sentence.

I stepped towards Maureen. “Look who I found! Maureen Kildare, can you believe it? After all these years, I knew you’d be delighted to see her.”

Maureen stepped forward. Not a flicker of emotion touched her worn-out eyes. She did not smile or offer her hand. “Diane. Janet.”

Diane sank into an uncushioned lawn chair. Her face had turned white under her rich tan, and she touched her chest with one palm. For a moment I feared she was either about to have a heart attack or throw Maureen and me out of the place.

Perhaps both.

Janet recovered first. “Maureen. It’s been an age. Must be five years at least since we graduated high school.” Her laugh was as irritating as a jet ski buzzing around a canoe. But at least she laughed. And then she stepped forward and enveloped Maureen in her arms. Maureen stood stiffly under the hug, her arms straight at her sides, her body not bending a single degree. But Janet, dear Janet, who had never quite stopped being the hippie of her youth, appeared not to notice. “Why don’t you come and help me carry in the groceries, Maureen. I’ve brought such a lot. Diane drove, so she gets to rest for a bit.” Maureen was dragged along by the sheer force of Janet’s personality.

I looked at Diane. “I’d better go and bring my stuff in as well.”

“How could you?” Diane hissed. The corner of her left eye fluttered in a nervous twitch.

“Diane, I’m sorry. I didn’t know what to do. I thought...”

“You thought...”

She was prevented from finishing the sentence when Janet stuck her head onto the deck. “These burgers are still frozen. Do we want them for tonight or should I put them in the fridge? Oh, good – Sue and Cathy are here. That was quick. Sue picked Cathy up at the airport. Time for some music, Diane. Why don’t you put on the album you played for me in the car?” She held the door open. Diane glared at me once more and walked into the cottage as if she were going to her execution. Always the prima donna, Diane was.

Suck it back, Diane, I thought. It’s only a weekend. If I can bear it, you can.

Sue and Cathy were also less than thrilled to see Maureen, but they recovered quickly and managed to be civil and even a touch enthusiastic. Maureen didn’t seem to care what any of us thought, and she passed the afternoon sitting on the deck gazing out over the water.

Diane had three older sisters, so when we were growing up she had been well ahead of the rest of us in terms of music. She still adored the ‘Bobbies’ that her sisters had loved—Darin, Vernon, Sherman, Vee—along with Elvis and the girl singers such as Leslie Gore. The rest of us had been more into the likes of the Beatles, the Dave Clark Five, and the Monkees, but we always enjoyed travelling into the past with Diane. She put on her iPod, selecting all her old favourites, and as we sliced and peeled vegetables for salads and prepared burgers and kebabs for the barbecue, we sang and danced to well-remembered music and the mood lifted. Even Maureen came inside and stood at the sink shucking corn and humming under her breath, although she spoke only when

asked a (rare) direct question.

We ate dinner on the deck as powerboats rushed by taking weekenders to their cottages or into the nearby town of Bala for a night out. A family of ducks drifted past, and to my surprise Maureen grabbed a hamburger bun and hurried down to the dock to feed them. For a moment I was happy that I had brought her.

“You should have asked me, Debbie,” Diane snapped once Maureen was safely out of hearing.

“Oh, give it a rest, Diane,” Janet said. “Look at the poor girl. When was the last time you got such pleasure out of the ducks? We can’t begin to imagine what the years have been like for her.”

Maureen ripped the bun into crumbs, which she scattered over the water. The ducks rushed to the feast and the sound of Maureen’s light laugh rose up the hill. It was the first time she’d laughed all day. I wondered when she’d last had a good hearty belly laugh.

Accompanied by a clatter of dishes and cutlery, Cathy volunteered to wash up, and Sue quickly followed her into the kitchen.

“It still wasn’t right, Debbie.” Diane scooped the last of the Caesar salad out of the bowl with her fingers. “But we can’t do anything about it now.” She jammed a piece of romaine into her mouth.

I watched the setting sun draw streaks of orange across the darkening water.

Sue had brought a pile of videos. Tonight we would have a choice of *The Magnificent Seven*, *The Great Escape* or *Baby, the Rain Must Fall*. How we had loved Steve McQueen when we were girls.

We decided to watch *The Magnificent Seven* tonight and save *The Great Escape* for Saturday. (Did I mention that I also loved Robert Vaughn—who can forget the *Man From Uncle*—and Charles Bronson in their prime?) *Baby, the Rain Must Fall* we agreed to take a pass on. Steve McQueen struggling to make it straight while out on parole—too depressing and much too close to home for this weekend.

The memorable theme music started up, but the mood in the room had turned raw, edgy. Maureen watched Diane through narrow eyes, Diane kept her focus on the screen, drinking a good deal more than was her habit, and Janet watched them both. I opened another bottle of wine and wished I hadn’t quit smoking. Only Sue and Cathy seemed to be enjoying the movie.

Finally the grand climax came and our noble heroes were dispatched to their various rewards. We made going-to-bed noises and trundled off to brush teeth, put on pyjamas, and slather on night cream.

Maureen and I were sharing a room. She was sitting on top of her bed, fully dressed, gazing at the dark forest outside the window.

I pulled down the duvet on the single bed and climbed in. “If you’re not

happy being here, I can take you to Gravenhurst tomorrow to catch the bus for Toronto.”

I was trying to be helpful, but my former best friend turned to me and the venom in her eyes took my breath away.

“I’m not going to leave by the back door, Debbie. Sneak away like the unwanted guest I am so the rest of you can finish your lovely weekend.”

“I didn’t mean...”

“I’m sure you didn’t.” She closed the bedroom door on her way out.

The day had been a long one, and despite the turmoil I was feeling I fell asleep quickly. I’m not sure what woke me, but I knew someone was up. Maureen’s bed was under the window and by the white moonlight flooding in I could see that the covers had not been disturbed.

It was time, long past time, I talked to Maureen. Really talked. I clutched what shreds of courage I could dredge up, climbed out of bed and crept into the hall. All was quiet, except for the chirp of crickets in the woods and the soft murmur of women’s voices on the deck.

The blinds had been left open and I could see two figures standing outlined against the dark of the forest and the lake beyond. Diane was dressed in a semi-sheer nightgown, an expensive, fluffy concoction of white lace and peach satin. Maureen still wore her khaki shorts and tattered polyester sweater.

The warm night air had a close, almost liquid feel, so the windows had been left open to catch a breeze. I edged closer, staying out of sight behind the gathered blinds.

“I want to see him,” Maureen said.

“No. It’s too late. Too much time’s passed. I won’t allow it.”

“I don’t need your permission, Diane.”

I couldn’t imagine whom they were talking about. Had Maureen had an affair with Diane’s ex-husband? They were divorced so long ago, hard to believe Diane would care.

“He doesn’t live at home. I won’t tell you where he is. You can’t find him.”

They must be talking about Eddie, Diane’s son. Why would Maureen have the least bit of interest in meeting Diane’s son?

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course I can. Are you going to spirit him out of the country? I’d rather you spoke to him first. It would be easier on him that way, don’t you think? But with your help or not, I will see my son.”

I sucked in my breath and slapped my hand over my mouth.

“My son. He’s my son. Not yours.” Diane’s voice was low, angry and full of pain. “You gave up that right the day he was born. You agreed to.”

“I agreed to nothing. They’d take my child away whether I agreed or not, I was going down for ten years. What say did I have? When your mother and father came to talk to me, I was happy to let you have him. I didn’t agree to lose him forever; your father told me I could visit when I was released. Any time I wanted, your father said. Even though he was the offspring of that bastard uncle of mine I wanted my son to grow up knowing who his real mother was, and your father agreed. But when I arrived at your parents’ house your father

shut the door in my face while your mother called the police. Did you know that, Diane? Did you know what they promised me? Did you know they lied and had the police drag me off their property and put out a restraining order on me?"

"My father only wanted..."

A cigar boat came by, in the dead of night much too close to the shoreline for safety. The roar of its engines drowned out the rest of Diane's sentence.

"...out of here tomorrow. I'll call my father; he'll make sure you never see Edward. Never."

"Oh, Diane," Maureen said, her words almost whisked away by the light night wind. "I don't mean you or the boy any harm."

"Be gone tomorrow before breakfast." Diane stalked down the steps towards the lake, leaving Maureen standing alone in the beam of the single light shining above the French doors. I ducked into the bathroom, not wanting to be seen.

Maureen didn't come to bed, and I lay awake most of the night. Poor Maureen. How she must have suffered all these years. She would have been pregnant when she was on trial; she had certainly packed the pounds onto her already chunky frame—jail food and stress, we all assumed. Diane and her husband went to Vancouver for a few months shortly after Maureen's trial ended. When they returned to Oakville, they were the proud parents of a baby boy—the only child Diane would ever have. I never thought anything of it—we all knew girls who'd 'gone to stay with an aunt', but none of them were married or came home with a baby!

I must have dozed a bit, for just as the rising sun touched the edges of the blinds, I was jolted into wakefulness by a full-throated scream. I grunted, grabbed at my blankets and rolled over, but the scream was repeated and then a second voice joined in.

I stumbled to my feet and ran onto the deck. Sue and Janet were scrambling down the stairs towards the lake. Janet moved so fast she tripped and took the last couple of steps headfirst. Sue didn't even look over her shoulder to see if her friend was all right.

Something was in the water. Something diaphanous and white with a touch of peach. Diane's night-gown. Floating serenely on the glass-like surface.

Sue hit the water in a perfect dive. Janet struggled to her feet and, ignoring the blood flowing freely from a wide gash across her knee, ran to the water's edge.

"Christ, it's Diane." Cathy stood beside me.

"Call 911," Janet shouted up at us. "Quickly."

Cathy did as she was asked, and I hurried down to the water to see if I could help. Sue had hooked one arm around the limp form and was swimming towards shore pulling the burden behind her. Janet and I dragged it onto the rocks. Sue clambered out of the lake and crouched, hands on knees, gasping for breath, while water streamed off her Mickey Mouse shortie pyjamas. Janet immediately started performing CPR, but anyone could see we were too late.

“Oh, my God. What happened?” Maureen touched my shoulder. She was dressed in the clothes she had been wearing the day before. They were rumpled and dirty; her short, badly cut hair stood on end, and her hands and knees were caked with mud.

“You!” Sue faced Maureen, her hands placed firmly on sodden hips. Janet continued the steady rhythm of trying to bring the dead back to life. “What do you know about this?”

“Hey,” I said, stepping between them. “Maureen had nothing to do with this. Diane must have slipped on the dock in the dark and fallen in. Easy to do. Maybe she hit her head.”

“Ambulance is on the way,” Cathy shouted down. “I’ll meet them at the road.”

Maureen said nothing.

Janet sat back on her heels. “We’re too late,” she said with a sob. Forgetting Maureen, Sue crouched beside her and took her in her arms.

“I’m going up to get dressed,” I said. I could think of nothing else to do.

Maureen shut the door of our bedroom behind her. “They’ll be able to tell, Debbie. The police. You wouldn’t believe what investigators can read in a footprint or a small bruise. They can tell if someone was alone and hit their head when they fell. Or if they had company and were hit by something before going down.”

“I didn’t mean to,” I said, pulling on a clean yellow T-shirt dotted with blue flowers, “but I was so angry at the way Diane spoke to you. I tried to tell her you deserved better. She said her father wanted a grandson so much and they’d always known she wouldn’t be able to have children. She said it was your fault you lost your son. I hadn’t known you had a baby. Why didn’t you tell me?” I collapsed onto the bed and started to cry. “I’m so sorry. I tried to make it right. Now she’s gone you’ll be able to see your boy.”

“Oh, Deb. Don’t you understand? The police will blame me straight away—me, an ex-con, a convicted killer; they won’t even bother looking at anyone else. They’re smart. But blinkered.”

“I’ll tell them what happened. If I have to. You didn’t do it.”

“No. I didn’t. I hated Diane for the way her family treated me, but I didn’t wish her dead. You can’t go to jail, Debbie. You have a great job, a caring family. I can. I’ve been there often enough. Tell you the truth, I don’t like it much on the outside. There’s nothing for me here. Diane showed me that. My mother told me I have to be out of her house when I get back.”

“But...” I blubbered.

“No ‘buts’, Debbie.” Maureen sat on the bed beside me. “I’ll take the fall for you.” She stroked my hair. “Like I did that night when Uncle Fred dragged you into the rec room and you killed him.”

“I didn’t mean...”

“I know you didn’t. Who would have thought the jury wouldn’t believe what he’d been doing to me all those years?”

In the living room someone switched on music. Diane’s mixes of old favourites: The title song from Baby, the Rain Must Fall was first up.

Steve McQueen couldn't make it out of prison either.

The Troublemaker

by Lynne Murphy

Lynne Murphy describes herself: I am a retired journalist. Founding member of the Toronto Chapter of SinC. Prepublished novelist. Have been reading mysteries for almost 70 years.

* * * * *

Roger Trombley loved his job as concierge of the Cottonwoods Condo, “one of Toronto’s finest residences.” He liked wearing the navy blazer with its brass buttons, which he felt made him look rather nautical. He liked opening the door for the elderly residents and helping them with their parcels. He loved dealing with the tradesmen, making them wipe their feet and clean up after themselves. He was a very happy man.

Bessie Bottomly loved her position as head of the volunteer garden committee at the Cottonwoods Condo. She was never happier than when she was presiding at a meeting of the committee, which she ran according to Robert’s Rules of Order, in spite of the fact that it was a volunteer committee. She liked telling the landscapers what flowers to plant and where to plant them, but the meetings were the best part of the position.

Peter Kruger loved his role as troublemaker at the Cottonwoods Condo. In the six months since he had moved in, he had received numerous warnings and three letters from Management, asking him to cease and desist in his various activities.

One of these activities was turning off lights in the public areas to save electricity.

He did this with great regularity. Another was crawling into the dumpsters to see if people were recycling properly. Much to his delight, some days he found newspapers or plastic containers in with the garbage. Sometimes he even found corrugated cardboard. Those were the times he drew a red circle around the date on his calendar.

He had become an irritant in Roger Trombley’s pleasant life. At first, Bessie Bottomly listened to Roger’s complaints with sympathy but they didn’t really rouse her to action. That was before Peter Kruger decided to interfere with the gardens.

He hadn’t bothered to come to any meetings of the garden committee, just appeared one day with his own shears and started trimming the shrubs. Maisie McClain saw him from her balcony and phoned Bessie right away.

“I don’t think it’s the landscape company,” she said, though her sight was not all that good. “It looks like that odd little man who lives on Olive’s

floor. And I think he's trimming the saskatoon bushes. Surely that can't be right in June?"

Bessie's balcony faced the back of the building so she couldn't check on this from her own apartment. She threw on her sweat suit, took the elevator to the ground floor and rushed out the front door. Sure enough, there was Mr. Kruger, hacking away at a saskatoon bush. Evidence of his violence lay on the ground around him.

"What do you think you're doing?" Bessie shouted.

Mr. Kruger stopped in his depredations.

"These have bloomed," he said. "I'm cutting off the dead flowers. They look untidy."

"Those are saskatoon bushes not lilacs," Bessie said. She could barely speak, she was so angry. "The flowers turn into fruit. Surely any idiot knows that."

No woman was going to call Mr. Kruger an idiot. He turned around and took another piece off the branch he had been working on. Bessie was a large woman with a commanding bosom and Mr. Kruger was a small man. But she thought better of trying to stop him herself. Those shears were lethal weapons.

"I'm calling Roger," she said and rushed inside to use the answer phone to the Concierge's desk.

Roger arrived in short order, buttoning up the brass buttons on his navy blazer. By the time he got there, the saskatoon bush was just a stem and a few pitiful leaves. Bessie was almost in tears.

"Mr. Kruger," Roger shouted, "you have been asked not to prune the bushes. The landscapers are responsible for that. Under advice from the garden committee. Mrs. Bottomly is head of the garden committee. Please leave that bush alone."

Mr. Kruger took one more mighty chop at the bush and stepped back to view his handiwork.

"Very well," he said. "But since the garden committee is just volunteers, I think I have as much right as anyone to work in the gardens."

He headed off toward the back of the building in the direction of the dumpsters.

"This is awful," Bessie said. "What can we do, Roger?"

"I'll make sure he gets a letter from Management," Roger said. "This will make four since he came here."

At exercise group the next morning, Bessie told the ladies about Mr. Kruger's vandalism.

"He was like a plague of locusts attacking that poor little tree," she said. "He doesn't seem to pay any attention to the letters from Management. What are we going to do?"

"I think he's been planting orange marigolds around the trees out front," Olive said. "At least they keep showing up. And I know how you hate orange marigolds, Bessie."

"I'm almost sure he's the person who keeps turning off the lights in the recreation centre," said Isobel. "You know I always go down to swim at seven

and he gets there at six. You can tell by the sign-in book. And the light in the ladies' change room has been off every morning these past few weeks."

Bessie pondered that. Then she stood up and marched down the hall to the ladies' change room.

"It's just as I thought," she said when she came back. "He has to step inside the ladies' change room to turn off the light. Suppose one of us was in there naked?"

"Oh, Bessie!" they all said. They went on to talk about other things: Shirley, who had gone into hospital and likely wouldn't be coming back to the condo to live, even if by some miracle she was able to walk again; Evelyn, who had moved into a retirement residence and met some old goat there who was probably after her money. They forgot about Mr. Kruger for the moment.

But Mr. Kruger had not been swayed from his path of recycling, energy saving and garden improvement. Lights were turned off. Cardboard was pulled from the garbage dumpsters. And orange marigolds continued to show up wherever there was a tiny space in a flowerbed. No matter that the garden colour scheme was a carefully planned pink and blue and mauve. Bessie began her own guerilla campaign. She couldn't bring herself to kill a flower but she moved all the orange marigolds to a neglected bed at the back of the condo where no one ever went. The next day the marigolds were back in their original places, looking somewhat the worse for wear. Bessie moved them again.

"Mr. Kruger will wear out before I do," she told Roger. But Isobel was the one who brought things to a crisis point. The lights continued to be off in the ladies' change room when she went for her seven o'clock swim. One day she tripped over a pool noodle someone had left on the floor, fell, and hurt her wrist. She complained to Roger.

He took care to watch the security camera trained on the ladies' change room door the next morning. Sure enough, at six a.m. Mr. Kruger could be seen, stepping inside and apparently, flicking a light switch. Then he reappeared.

"We've got him on film," Roger said to Isobel and Bessie. "Management will have to write him another letter."

"Leave it for a few days," Bessie said. "I want to talk to the girls."

She was developing a plan to deal with this irritant in the smooth flowing life of Cottonwoods. That morning at coffee after exercise class she, Isobel, Olive, Maisie and Charlotte talked over the plan.

"He doesn't pay any attention to the letters from Management," Bessie said, "so we need to give him a good shock. Here's what I think we should do. We get down there before he does and take off all our clothes..."

The ladies listened to her plan, wide-eyed. Then they looked at each other with a mixture of horror and delight.

"I'm game if the rest of you girls are," Maisie said. "Luckily, I can't see a thing without my glasses, so he won't recognize me."

No one pointed out the lack of logic in this statement. But Charlotte was worried.

"He will recognize some of us," she said. "Think how embarrassing that

will be if he tells everyone.”

The ladies thought. Then Olive said, “I have an idea. You know those masks we have left over from the Halloween party? We can wear those. Then he won’t know who we are. I’ll get them from the cupboard.”

Everyone wanted the Snow White mask except for Bessie, who felt that with her height, she was better suited to Chewbacca from Star Wars. The ladies finally agreed that Charlotte should be Snow White, since she had been beautiful, and indeed, she still was. The others settled on Mickey Mouse, Ronald Reagan and a generic cat.

Bessie looked at her little group of masked ladies and smiled to herself. Peter Kruger wouldn’t know one of them.

“Well, that solves that,” she said. “Is everybody in?”

“All for one and one for all,” Charlotte said gamely. She was fond of reading historical romances.

The ladies met the next morning at ten to six in the ladies’ change room. They all stripped to the skin, wrapped themselves in towels for warmth and donned their masks. They lurked around the corner, out of sight of the change room door, trying hard not to giggle.

“It’s just like a surprise party,” Isobel whispered. “That one we had for Dolly’s ninetieth birthday where we all hid and then jumped out at her.”

There was a moment of silence and then Bessie said, “Dolly should have told someone she had a weak heart.”

Promptly at six, the door to the change room opened and Mr. Kruger stepped in with his hand outstretched toward the light switch. The ladies threw off their towels and leapt forward, screaming, “Pervert.” Mr. Kruger shrieked, took a step backward, tripped over his plastic flip-flops and fell heavily to the floor. His head made a clunk like a baseball bat connecting with the ball when it hit the ceramic tiles. He twitched a few times and then lay still.

“My God,” Olive whispered, “I think we’ve killed him.”

“You were a nurse, Charlotte,” Bessie said. “See if you can find a pulse.”

All the bare naked ladies took off their masks and knelt on the floor around Mr. Kruger except for Maisie who had arthritic knees. It looked like some ancient witches’ coven. Charlotte felt his neck.

“There isn’t any pulse,” she said, after a long moment. “And I can’t stand to give him the kiss of life. What on earth are we going to do?”

Bessie rose to the occasion.

“Isobel, you can move the fastest. Go get Roger. He has CPR training.” And as Isobel opened the door to rush out, she snapped, “For pity’s sake, put your robe on.”

The ladies busied themselves getting decently covered while they waited for Isobel to return with Roger. They also put the “Pool Closed for Cleaning” sign outside the door. When Roger arrived, he tried for a pulse and put his ear to Mr. Kruger’s chest. Then he shrugged.

“I’m afraid he’s beyond helping,” he said. “I suppose I should call 911.”

“We’ll look like such fools,” Bessie said. “Olive, your husband was in politics. You know what the Press will make of this. Couldn’t we drag him into

the men's change room and pretend he hit his head there?"

"What if his family sues the building?" asked Olive. "They could say there was water on the floor or something and he slipped."

Roger sat back on his heels and thought about it.

"I think I have an idea," he said. "First of all, I'll go down and turn off the security camera for this area. There's a full dumpster right beside the emergency exit from the pool. Cover him with towels. I'll get the dolly and move him out there. It will look like an accident. He's been warned about going into the dumpsters so the building shouldn't be held responsible."

Olive said, "You realize that we're breaking the law if we do this?"

"But no one's going to squeal," Bessie said, "Olive, you know what happens to squealers?"

"What? What happens to squealers?"

"They don't—they don't get invited to the pot luck suppers."

"Nobody's going to squeal," Charlotte said.

"Then that's all right," Roger said. And as he left, Bessie heard him murmur, "I'll say he must have been poking around in the dumpster again. He fell backwards and banged his head on the concrete."

And that is how Mr. Peter Kruger was found dead beside a dumpster at Cottonwoods Condo by the driver of the recycling pickup truck. Everyone accepted Roger's explanation. The garden committee from the condo sent an enormous wreath of orange marigolds to the funeral home.

On The Way To Hue

by Sue Pike

Sue Pike has stories in all seven of the Ladies' Killing Circle anthologies and was co-editor of Fit to Die, Bone Dance and When Boomers Go Bad (RendezVous Press). Her stories have appeared in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Storyteller, Cold Blood V as well as Murder in Vegas (Forge), The Deadly Bride (Carroll & Graf) and The Best American Mystery Stories, 2006 (Houghton Mifflin). She won the Crime Writers of Canada Arthur Ellis award for Best Short Crime Story of 1997. In 2007 Sue started her own publishing house, Deadlock Press, and put her anthology skills to the test by collecting and editing stories for Locked Up, tales of mystery and mischance along Canada's Rideau Canal Waterway.

* * * * *

Le Duan Street was teeming with motor scooters, cars, old trucks and battered cycles. But the main obstacle between me and the Hanoi train station just across the road was a flood of bicycles tearing down the incline. I paused and my companion bumped into me again.

"Damn it all, Maureen," I shouted over my shoulder. "Back off!"

My heels were sore from the pummeling of her black boots. The woman had no sense of personal space and no idea of proper attire. It must have been ninety degrees and here she was, decked out in heavy canvas pants, some kind of secondhand flak jacket and a pair of so-called Viet Cong boots she'd found for sale on the sidewalk outside our hotel yesterday.

I looked down at my own feet. A purple lump was forming on my left ankle and this time she'd managed to rip the strap on my sandal.

"Sorry, Liz." Maureen crept up beside me. Her pale, powdery skin was pleated with wrinkles.

I caught her wrist. "How old are you, Maureen?"

"Seventy."

"Right." I interrupted her. "Me too, and I sure didn't sign onto this trip to take care of someone else. We're just fellow-travelers. Okay?"

She cringed. "Sorry. Sorry, Liz. It's just...everything's so frightening."

"Well, why in heaven's name did you come on this tour?"

She mumbled something but I couldn't hear.

"Look," I sighed. "We're nearly at the station. Get ready to dash across as soon as there's a break." I wished I had a rope for her to hang onto. That was how I'd corralled my kindergarten kids in Sacramento years ago.

A group of pedestrians gathered beside us and as soon as they moved forward I lunged too, darting and weaving with them.

"Oh...oh...oh." I heard the cry coming from behind me and felt a tug on my backpack. I grabbed the straps with both hands and managed to drag Maureen to the other sidewalk and up the steps to the station.

I paused to let my eyes adjust to the gloom and then made my way to the information desk, trying to keep my broken sandal on my foot and at the same time stay out of range of her boots. The din inside the station was deafening and I had to shout the word "Hue" to the stone-faced official behind the desk, pronouncing it "way" as the guide book instructed. The uniformed man stared at me and I pulled my ticket from my pocket and pushed it across the desk. He examined it and then looked over at Maureen, who was gazing up at the ceiling.

"For God's sake," I hissed. "Give him your ticket."

"What?" She tilted her head to one side like an anxious spaniel.

"Your ticket. He won't let you go without your ticket." I took a deep breath. The air tasted of singed metal.

Maureen dropped her pack to the floor and began to rummage inside. I could feel the impatience of the crowd behind us but I didn't have either the nerve or the language skills to try to explain. I glanced at my watch. Seven o'clock. We'd be lucky if we made our train. Finally Maureen produced a much-folded piece of paper and the clerk, holding three fingers aloft pointed towards the tracks. I turned away and felt the familiar blow, this time on my right instep.

"Sorry!" squeaked the voice behind me. I gritted my teeth and tried to run but after a few yards I kicked my shoes off and sprinted barefoot toward Track 3. A woman in uniform glowered at us from her position in front of the first door we came to, made a big show of tapping her watch and then began to shout at us in Vietnamese, pointing down the train. We scrambled over to the first open door and hauled our packs aboard just as a whistle sounded and the train lurched into motion.

I limped down the corridor until I found our cabin. It was a tiny room designed to sleep four with double berths against each side wall and a single window between. I threw my pack onto one of the lower bunks, extracted a wet wipe from my pocket and sank down on the thin mattress to scrub the grit off my feet. Maureen dithered in the doorway.

"Um. Which one is mine?"

"Take your pick," I said, examining my bruises. "We have the room to ourselves." Another couple from the tour was supposed to share with us but a malfunctioning pacemaker had sent them back to Chicago early.

"Well," she paused and looked around as though faced with innumerable choices. "I think I'll take this other lower bunk."

I swung my sore feet onto my cot, shoved the pillow behind my back and pulled a book and my reading glasses out of my bag.

I'd only managed to read a paragraph when I sensed her presence hovering over me. "Liz? Where are the washrooms?"

I put my finger between the pages. "You know what, Maureen? I've never been to Vietnam before and I've certainly never been on this train before. I don't

know any more about the layout than you do." I adjusted my reading glasses and opened my book again.

"Well, then. I guess I'll just..." I sensed her hesitating in the doorway, but kept my eyes locked on the page.

When she was out of sight I massaged my neck with one hand and searched through my bag for my slippers and a couple of aspirin with the other. How in the name of heaven had I gotten myself into this situation? But I remembered exactly how it had happened.

Debbie from the tour company had called one evening a month or so ago to say a Canadian woman had just signed up for our seniors' club tour and was hoping to save herself the single supplement. Since I was the only unaccompanied woman on the trip would I consider being her roommate?

I told Debbie I'd get back to her and then spent the next hour cooking up worst-case scenarios. When the most annoying thing I could imagine was an elderly woman who hogged the bathroom and talked too much, my frugal side took over and I called her back in the morning to say sure. I could certainly use the savings, I reasoned.

None of my imaginings had prepared me for this child in a woman's body. It was just bearable while others on the tour were there to share the burden, to take turns sitting beside her on the bus tour through Thailand, to talk her through the currency. I only had to put up with her at night and usually found a way to bury myself in a book and feign deafness.

It was when we were the only two on the tour supplement to Vietnam that I knew I had a problem. She had trailed along behind me in Hanoi, tiptoeing across intersections, peppering me with questions I didn't know the answers to. Where could we buy food? What was the name of that bird? That building? That street? The boots were meant to protect her from the rats that she, and only she, saw in every alleyway.

This overnight train trip and another day and a half in Hue would drive me mad if I didn't take control of the situation. I threw the book aside and swung my legs down. We'd picked up some spring rolls and biscuits at a street stand. I wiped the table with my sleeve and fished the parcel out of my pack. I would establish some ground rules about the next few days while we ate.

I stared out the streaked window while I waited for her to return from the toilet. We'd left Hanoi and its suburbs behind and were moving through a lightly populated area of plain concrete houses, many with an open room the size of a garage showing shelves of vegetables and dry goods for sale. Families hunkered in doorways. Some were watching television while others seemed to simply perch, waiting for customers. Children in shorts and plastic sandals played on the dusty driveways and waved to the train as it passed, like children the world over. In the distance I could see the purple shadows of a mountain range. Before long we were in open country with women working in rice paddies, still wearing the traditional cone-shaped hats although the sun had set and dusk was settling in.

I was starting to wonder what had happened to Maureen when she appeared in the doorway, her pinched little face flushed. "The brochure said

there would be a modern washroom. All I could find was a filthy room with a hole in the flo—"

"Right," I interrupted her as I arranged the food on the table. "Let's eat."

"I can't. I feel sick." She stretched out on her bunk and turned her face to the wall. Her wispy grey hair trembled slightly and I wondered if she was crying.

"Well, I'm going ahead. I'm hungry." I ate my rolls and was just finishing up a second biscuit when Maureen pushed herself up to a sitting position.

"Well, maybe just a little." She picked up a spring roll and gave it a mouse-like nibble.

I put my biscuit down. "Maureen, we need to talk about something." I used my firmest schoolteacher voice. "You are seriously getting on my nerves – following me around, clutching at my sleeve all the time, waiting while I open doors for you. I didn't come on this trip to be your nursemaid."

"Sorry." She ducked her head. "I'll try harder."

I wiped my mouth and reached for my book.

"Um. Liz? There's something I want you to have."

"No, Maureen." I slapped the table hard. "You're not getting it. I don't want presents. I don't want anything at all except the freedom to enjoy myself without having to be responsible for you. Do you understand?"

"Sorry."

"And stop saying you're sorry. What is it about you—?" I almost said 'Canadians' but stopped myself and retreated to the far corner of my bunk with my book.

The train had been slowing for a while and now it stopped at Thanh Hoa Station. Within minutes, swarms of people drifted down the corridor past our open doorway slowing to stare at the two elderly white women. I looked away until a small boy marched into our cabin, pushed ahead by his parents. He held his hand out in the typical begging motion and Maureen dropped some Vietnamese coins into it. The Dong weren't worth much and the little boy continued to stand, his feet planted stubbornly in the middle of our room and his hand still out. "U.S. Dollar," he said in a whiney, singsong.

I lurched to my feet, turned him around by the shoulders and marched him back to his parents, slamming the door shut behind them. "U.S. Dollar, indeed."

Maureen pressed a finger onto some biscuit crumbs on the table. "Oh, I don't know. They have no reason to like Americans. Why shouldn't they try to get as much as they can?"

Maybe if I hadn't been so tired I would have let it go. I would have climbed beneath the covers and gone to sleep. But she was getting under my skin. "Right. Here we go. The anti-American speech."

She stared at me, frightened by my outburst. "I just meant people who look like us."

But I wasn't about to be mollified. "And what do you know about it anyway? Canada wasn't even part of the Vietnam war."

"But we were in a way."

"Oh sure. A few hundred volunteers. That hardly counts. I lost my beautiful kid brother. One day he got his draft notice and the next day he was gone."

A rap on the door made us both jump. A porter brought in a teapot and two tiny cups on a tray. He set them down on the table and stood smiling into space while Maureen fished in her pocket for more coins to hand him. The Dong weren't having much effect tonight so I found a dollar in my bag and shoved it into his open hand.

After he'd left Maureen leaned close to the teapot and sniffed. "Can we drink this?"

"Oh for heaven's sake. It's been boiled." I grabbed my toothbrush and bolted down the corridor and across the gap to the next car where I found a European-style WC with a clean toilet, sink and paper. For one delicious moment I thought about keeping this treasure to myself and then I shook my head. What was the matter with me? Why was I letting this mousy little woman get to me?

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