

SHOCK

Magazine

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Why did the snooping police officers suspect that he had murdered his wife? He hated her, to be sure. He was glad she was gone. But how could there have been a murder when there was no body?



COLD CASE

by *ED RITTER*

THE FRONT DOORBELL RANG. ED Caine laid down his book, carefully adjusted his tie, and answered it.

The plain-clothes man was familiar. Lieutenant Donleavy, and two policemen in uniform.

The lieutenant touched his hat,

and smiled a genial smile that seemed to say he knew Mr. Caine was innocent, innocent as a bird, but they were just passing through the neighborhood, and thought to drop in to chat.

What he actually said was, "Good afternoon, Mr. Caine, mind if we come in?"

"Again?" said Mr. Caine peevishly, "and what good would it do me if I did?"

The lieutenant remained amiable. "Just one of these routine things you know." He seemed as big as the doorframe as he stepped through it, and the two men in dark blue who followed were scarcely any smaller. They filled Mr. Caine's tiny living room to overflowing, leaving hardly any room for the furniture or for air to breathe.

Donleavy pulled up a straight backed chair and straddled it, pushed back his hat, and smiled. "Mr. Caine, I understand how you must feel . . ."

"You don't at all," Ed Caine replied. "The only thing that worries me is that she might come back. I don't care where she's gone, or who with, or if she's murdered or alive or dead. I just don't give a damn!"

"Pretty harsh words," said Donleavy softly.

"It's my business how I feel

about my wife. I've had nothing but a living hell with her for fifteen years." He glared at the lieutenant. "Do I have to love my wife? Tell me, do you love yours?"

Lieutenant Donleavy's face reddened. He looked hard at Ed Caine. Finally, he said, "We're here on business. We don't have a warrant, but we want to search the place. Do we have your permission?"

"Wait a minute," said Caine. "What's going on; what's the idea anyhow?"

"Your wife's folks are raising quite a stink down at headquarters, Mr. Caine. Mr. Mason says his daughter just isn't the kind of girl to run off like this!"

"Girl!" snorted Ed Caine.

"He says she's had her troubles with you, but she's the type that sticks. He says she's an honest, faithful girl who just wouldn't run off like this."

"That's what *he* says, does he?"

"Yes, although he told us he didn't understand why, because if she'd left fifteen years ago she'd have been a lot better off."

"That a fact, huh?"

"No, Mr. Caine, that's just what Mr. Mason says. He also says that he suspects foul play on your part."

"Well, he'd just better watch where he shoots his mouth off like

that," said Ed Caine, glowering darkly. "I don't give a damn for his dear daughter, but I didn't have nothing to do with her disappearance!"

"It's been about ten days now, hasn't it, Mr. Caine?"

"Ten best days I've had in years."

"And you didn't, uh...harm her in any way?"

"Huh!" said Mr. Caine.

"Now tell me again. The last time you saw her?"

"It was Thursday evening, a week. She was going to shop because the stores were open. So she went out the door, oh about seven o'clock. Just after dark."

"You give her a ride down to the shopping center?"

"I did not. She could walk. She spent enough without my helping her."

Donleavy let his gaze wander about the room, seeing the cheap lace curtains, the worn brown rug, the faded, fly-specked lampshade. Even he, on his salary, with all his kids, had better things than these. It didn't look like Mrs. Caine had been squandering money, not on the house anyhow.

"So she walked out of the house with seven dollars in her pocket, and hasn't been back since."

Caine didn't bother to answer.

Donleavy scratched his head,

watching this short, dark-haired, middle-aged man standing awkwardly before him, anxious for him to go.

"I tell you what, you mind if we search this place?"

"No, I don't care. Search all you like. What do you hope to find?"

"Nothing," said Donleavy. "I hope to find nothing. Then we can go back and tell Mr. Mason we didn't find his daughter all hacked to pieces, and she probably just took off, and it's a wise man who understands his own daughter."

"Do you think if I uh-hacked her up as you say, I'd keep the pieces here on permanent display, waiting for the police to come and observe them?"

"Well," said Donleavy, "people have been known to do very strange things. Mind if we look then?"

"Hell, no," said Ed Caine. "Have a ball. I don't care. Just don't mess up the house. I got to clean it."

Patrolman O'Brien took the dusty and unfinished second floor. Blum did the first floor, the living quarters. That left the dreary basement to Donleavy.

Caine sat in the living room, smoking one cigarette after another. He heard footsteps upstairs, someone opening trunks. In the

kitchen the oven door was pried open and slammed shut, then the cabinets, the flour bin. In the basement he heard the eerie creak of the furnace door, the scratch-scratch of ashes being scraped into a can, the faint swish of the opening of the deep freeze lid, the soft squish as it was closed again.

He was perspiring, and mashing out half-lit cigarettes, and half-lighting fresh ones.

After what seemed like hours, but was only ten minutes by the desk clock, he got up and stamped through the kitchen and down into the basement, just in time to see the lieutenant pull his head out of the washer.

"Look," he said, "this silliness has gone far enough. What do you say you and your men pack up and get out?"

"Sure," said Donleavy, "I guess we're just about through. Just one more thing though." He opened the cracked wooden door to the coal bin, reached in, and flipped the light switch. The glare revealed an almost empty bin, just a few chunks left over from last year, hardly enough to conceal the body of a tom cat, let alone that of a full-grown woman.

"Okay," Donleavy said, picking up the rusty can of ashes, "sorry we disturbed you. Just part of the job. You know, we like to clear the innocent, too."

"I'll bet," said Mr. Caine.

They talked it over in the squad car, during the slow drive back to headquarters.

"I couldn't find anything," said Blum. "The knives were clean. Plastic handles. Don't think the lab would find much."

"Nothing in the attic either. Old books, dust, junk. Closest thing to a body I found was the dress-maker's dummy. Pretty cold case."

"J' ever see such a cold-blooded character?" asked Blum.

"Lots of 'em," said Donleavy wearily, as they pulled into the lot back of City Hall.

Caine sat quietly for a long time, to make sure they were really gone. He was shaking just a little. Slight tremors played around his face, danced through his stomach. He managed to get up and peer out the side and front windows. They hadn't come back.

He looked at the clock on the desk. Six p.m. the hands said. Dinner time.

He went down into the basement and opened the deep freeze. He looked at the stacked cartons of frozen corn and beans and squash. At the neatly wrapped packages of meat and bone, gristle and skin and hair. He picked out one of vegetables and one of meat. He closed the lid and slowly

walked back up the steps, into the kitchen. He sat down on a kitchen chair and stared dully at the frozen packages he held in

his big hands.

He'd *have* to eat. Everyday, until it was all gone. There was no other way. ■ ■

