

SQUADROOM

RICHARD S. PRATHER (*Film Strip*) is one of the world's best-selling mystery novelists. Like his carefree private investigator, Shell Scott, Prather lives in southern California; unlike Scott, Prather is married, and refuses to make a habit of being shot at by assorted gunmen. The latest Shell Scott novel, *Dance with the Dead*, has brought Prather's total sales well over the 30,000,000-copy mark in the United States alone.



ROSS MACDONALD (*Midnight Blue*), another Californian, has written an even dozen novels about Lew Archer. His latest novel is *The Ferguson Affair*. Often compared to the late, great Raymond Chandler, Macdonald owes his enormous popularity to the depth, compassion, and insight of his writing. Macdonald's profession is very much a family affair: his wife is the mystery novelist Margaret Millar.

ANTHONY BOUCHER'S appraisal of fictional crime, as mystery editor of *The New York Times*, has made him the reigning expert in the genre. His clear and incisive treatment extends to the factual world of crime, too, as in this issue's in-depth study of the Sangret murder case, *On a Day Unknown*.



HELEN NIELSEN (*Confession*) is one of the very few feminine authors capable of turning out lean, un-sentimental crime fiction in the realistic tradition. Her appearance on the mystery scene was greeted with cheers, one critic calling her "the first major addition to the mystery field in the past decade." Miss Nielsen has since enhanced that reputation with a long list of fine books like her latest, *Sing Me a Murder*. The critic whose accolade launched Miss Nielsen's career, incidentally, was Anthony Boucher.

Hard Sell is one of the last John J. Malone stories by the late **CRAIG RICE**. Miss Rice was the author of such classic mystery novels as *Trial by Fury* and *Home Sweet Home-icide*. **FLETCHER FLORA** (*Assassin*) is the winner of the 1960 Macmillan Award for his new mystery novel, *Killing Cousins*. **RICHARD MATHESON** (*The Faces*), foremost exponent of the modern tale of terror, leads off the *Graveyard Shift* department. **REX LARDNER** (*Reasonable Fearsome*), a long-time *New Yorker* magazine staffer, is noted for his probing studies in print. This time, he contributes a detailed and fascinating *Special Report* on counterfeiting.

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THE CROWD WANTED RONNIE TO DIE—AND WHAT
RONNIE SAID JUST DIDN'T MATTER AT ALL...

HELEN NIELSEN

CONFESSSION



THE MOB THAT HAD CROWDED into the sheriff's office closed in ominously on Ronnie Edwards, making him feel cowed and small in the straight-backed chair. He stood six foot two, if they had allowed him to stand; he weighed one hundred and eighty pounds, was a crack shot, expert swimmer, hottest driver on the drag strip, and star tackle at Desert Bend Union High. He had a blond flat top and clear blue eyes that make the chicks tremble. He was Mr. Big until the mob taught him that even a grown man can be filled with such fear that his mind fogs and his mouth goes as dry as flannel. "Tell them, Ronnie!" Lisa cried. "Don't let them kill us! Tell them that you did it! Tell them!"

Ronnie looked up. Lisa's face was above him, briefly, and in that instant Ronnie wondered why she had ever thought that he loved her.

"Nobody's going to kill you," the sheriff said. "Go home, Matt. Take your angry friends and go home."

"And let this punk get away with murder?"

Matt was the one Ronnie feared most. He wasn't as big as the sheriff; he didn't seem to have an official capacity. But he had hate in him. The sheriff didn't.

"He's not getting away with anything," the sheriff said, "and nobody's been murdered."

"My wife!" Matt roared.

The sound of his voice made Ronnie's blood run cold. It was worse than Lisa's.

"Mister," he had yelled, "I didn't kill your wife! I never saw your wife!" But that had been hours ago, before all of the angry people had crowded into Sheriff Thompson's jail with hatred and revenge in their eyes. Now Ronnie couldn't find a voice.

"My wife," Matt choked, "lying on a slab over in Fenton's mortuary—and this punk grinning in your office."

Not grinning. Ronnie's mind protested. *Gritting my teeth to keep from screaming!*

". . . seventeen years old by his driver's license! You know what that means, Tommy? He's a minor. He's got a pa—a rich pa by the looks of the car he was driving. He'll be here soon with an expensive lawyer

and the kid will get off with a lecture from a judge and maybe six months with an understanding psychiatrist. No, sir! I'm not leaving here—none of us are leaving here—until we see this boy sign a confession that he ran down and killed my wife. I'm not going to let him get away with it. No drunken, punk kid—"

Ronnie couldn't stand any more of it. "I wasn't drunk!" he yelled. "I wasn't drunk!"

It had started a couple of hours ago out on the highway. It was only beer—a six-pack stuffed in a picnic bag and cooled by a can of frozen water. Champagne would have been more appropriate. Champagne was what usually went with a wedding.

"Ronnie," Lisa scolded, "don't drive so fast while you're drinking!"

Ronnie drained the can and careened it off the side of the Jaguar.

"Woman," he said. He curled his right arm about her waist and pulled her close to him. "Don't you ever give me orders, understand? I want a wife, not a commanding officer."

"Yes, sir," she said meekly.

The road ahead was like a silver arrow across the desert. Ronnie ducked his head and gave her a quick kiss.

"I like that," he said. "I like that, 'Yes, sir.' Give me that and we'll have no trouble."

Lisa sighed and fitted herself into the hollow of his arm. It was sweet. She smelled of perfume and powder. Her hair was as soft as kitten fur,

and her body was warm against his body.

"That's why I flipped for you," Ronnie told her. "You're not like other girls—always trying to tell a guy what to do. You make a guy feel like he can do things for himself."

He ducked his head and inhaled deeply of her hair. Even with the top down, and the speedometer needling seventy, he could go half-crazy from the smell of her hair. Lisa was the girl he was going to marry as soon as they reached Las Vegas. She was right for him. She would never rob him of his manhood. When she leaned over and switched on the radio, it was at just the right time. When she tuned in the music, it was just the right beat. Before he could ask her, she found the picnic basket and opened another can. But it was only beer . . .

"I wasn't drunk!" Ronnie yelled. "I had two cans of beer. You can't get drunk on two cans of beer!"

His words had a remarkable effect. The sound of his voice split open the fear and left him quivering in the broken shell of it, surrounded by wretched faces that now remembered him, a human being, instead of just their hatred.

The man named Matt recovered first.

"If you weren't drunk," he challenged. "why didn't you see my wife?"

"I don't know," Ronnie answered.

"Well, I know. You *were* drunk.

You were driving like a bat out of you know where. I saw that myself—" Matt turned to the sheriff. "My eyes are good, Sheriff," he said. "Ask Clemson down the street. He fitted my glasses a couple of weeks ago. With them on my eyes are as good as yours, and I saw this boy's car speeding down the highway just before your deputy there stopped him. I say he's a killer, and I want him to confess."

"Confess . . . confess!"

Ronnie raised his hands to close out the words. They were pulled away, roughly, by a young man in sun-tans with "Deputy" embroidered on his sleeve. Ronnie looked up and saw a face twisted with contempt—not for Ronnie, who was just a pair of arms to pinion, but for everything that was happening in the sheriff's office. Most of all, for the sheriff himself. Ronnie's eyes dropped to the gun on the sheriff's hip and he knew quite clearly how much the deputy would like for him to make a break, giving him the chance to unload a slug in his back. Come election time he would snow under Sheriff Thompson, who was soft on that drunken killer. In the approximate time it took to blink his eye, Ronnie saw all of that; because the scales of adolescence had been washed away.

"Did you see the accident?" Sheriff Thompson challenged.

Ronnie waited for the answer along with the sheriff.

"Nobody saw the accident," Matt said. "You know that. But I did see

this boy's car speeding away from the Route 6 intersection. He'd slowed down—I was maybe two hundred feet away—but I could see that he'd slowed down, and then, suddenly, he drove on—fast. I wondered why anyone would head into town so fast. Then I walked on to the intersection and found"—Matt's face worked terribly. His voice broke—"and found Gertrude lying on the highway."

Suddenly the angry face swung toward Lisa.

"You"—he charged—"a woman! A woman on her way to be married, you tell us. What kind of woman would let a boy drive on and leave a victim he'd struck down lying in her own blood on the highway?"

"I didn't tell him to drive on!" Lisa cried. "I told him to stop!"

When Ronnie heard that, Matt's words had a kind of wisdom in them. *What kind of woman are you? he wondered. What kind of woman would tell such a lie? You didn't tell me anything at all!*

He could remember it more clearly now. The music had dug deep and flowed sweet. Lisa hummed to it, cradled in the hollow of his shoulder, and happiness was a sharp wrench that tingled all through his body. It might have been like that all the way to Vegas, except for the kid with the stripped Caddy.

The first time he cut past, Ronnie hardly noticed. He had other things on his mind. A few miles farther along he passed the Caddy, still only

vaguely aware that it was filled with teenagers bent on thrills. Minutes later the big sedan passed again, cutting close.

"Okay," Ronnie said, pulling his arm away from Lisa, "if that's what you want—"

He grabbed the steering wheel with both hands and began to pressure the accelerator. The distance between the two cars was sucked under the wheels of the Jag until he could see the faces grinning at him out of the back window of the Caddy. Seconds later he was pulling alongside—and that's when the trouble began. When he tried to pass, the Caddy cut over, crowding him toward the opposite shoulder. When he fell back, the kids in the Caddy yelled taunts and jeers. One of them hurled a bottle that narrowly missed the windshield. A second bottle smashed against the front grille.

"Ronnie," Lisa cried, "be careful! They're all high!"

Ronnie barely heard her. His foot was hard on the accelerator again. This time he cut sharply around the Caddy, giving the driver no time to slide over. For a few seconds they raced hood to hood. The shower of jeers grew to a howling shriek that faded and died as the Jag left the Caddy behind. A mile down the highway Ronnie began to ease off the accelerator. He glanced at Lisa. She was wiping her face with a handkerchief.

"They hurt you!" he cried.

She shook her head. "It's only beer—" She paused and sniffed of

the handkerchief she'd been using to sponge her face. "—No, it's whisky. Can you imagine—kids like that? I'll bet the driver waan't over fifteen."

"I should have run him off the road," Ronnie said.

"Oh, Ronnie, what if the police—?"

Ronnie pulled his foot off the pedal and watched the needle dip to a legal speed. Lisa was right. They were eloping to Vegas, and they were minors. A scrape with the police would mean a call back to Desert Bend and two irate families messing up everything. Nothing was worth that risk. When the Caddy roared down on them again, Ronnie slowed and let it pass. A second invitation to race was ignored until the kids gave up in disgust and roared on. Only then did Ronnie resume speed.

It was several miles farther along that Lisa cried out. Ronnie had glimpsed a sign "Gila Fork" off to his right. Small towns could be speed traps. He began to slow, and then, suddenly, something was happening up ahead. He wasn't sure what it was—a dog on the pavement, perhaps. He yanked the wheel of the Jag to the left.

"Ronnie—"

Lisa didn't scream. Her cry was strange—almost frightened. Ronnie looked at her. Her face had gone white. He glanced at the rear-view mirror, and then two things occurred simultaneously. The first was the way time stopped for an instant—the instant required to see the woman ly-

ing on the highway; the second was the way his foot turned to lead on the accelerator.

That was the way it had happened—not the way Lisa said. But she was screaming now. The sound of her voice pulled Ronnie back to the present.

"Ronnie, don't let them take us out of here! Don't let that mob take us anywhere!"

And the man named Matt was leering in his face like something out of a nightmare.

"I say take them over to the mortuary to see what they've done!"

A murmur of assent rose up behind him until Ronnie understood why Lisa was so afraid. Maddened people did mad things. The sheriff's office had become a sanctuary he had to protect.

"I didn't do anything!" he yelled. "All you have to go on is this old man's word, and I say he's a liar. He can't prove anything!"

For an instant his shout pulled back the anger. He looked at Lisa. He was beginning to feel like a man again. And then Matt finished everything.

"Is that so?" he said, against the quiet. "What about that broken glass on the highway?"

Ronnie's head swung back to Matt.

"And what about the broken lens in your right headlamp?"

"What?"

"Yes, what? What about it, murderer? Tommy, I say we take these kids over to the mortuary and see if

we can shock some truth out of them."

"No!" Lisa cried.

"Right now!" Matt shouted.

"No! Ronnie, don't just sit there! Tell them. Tell them the truth! Tell them that you killed that woman!"

Ronnie heard her. She was a total stranger now, but he heard her. She was a girl with a face twisted with fear, thinking of only one thing—her safety. Her own precious safety. Behind her was Matt's ugly face, and beside him was the deputy with his greedy hand itching for the gun that hung inches from his fingers. There it was, all laid out for him with Lisa's voice, no longer sweet and promising, still screaming in his ears.

"Tell them, Ronnie! Tell them!"

Suddenly Ronnie was on his feet.

"All right!" he yelled. "I killed her. I ran over that woman on the highway and killed her! Now leave us alone . . . leave us alone!"

After he signed the confession, Ronnie was left alone for about two hours. He was exhausted, and so he slept. When the deputy awakened him, the sky had turned black outside the windows. He was taken to the front office where Sheriff Thompson was talking earnestly to two state troopers and an officious-looking man who was scanning the confession. Seated beside the sheriff's desk was Lisa. She looked pale and sick.

"Ronnie," Sheriff Thompson said, "this is Mr. Winters from the District Attorney's office."

Winters peered at Ronnie through thick-lensed glasses.

"Were you coerced into signing this confession?" he asked.

Ronnie hesitated. He looked at the sheriff, then at the deputy.

"Were you abused—maltreated? Were you subjected to physical violence?"

"No, sir," Ronnie said.

"You were panicked, is that it?"

Ronnie glanced at Lisa. She stared at her hands in her lap.

"Yes, sir," he said.

"All right, Thompson. Let him go."

Ronnie turned toward the sheriff, bewildered.

"What happened?" he asked.

Sheriff Thompson unlocked his desk and took out Ronnie's personal belongings.

"A car full of half-drunken kids were picked up about an hour ago," he said. "They were driving an old Caddy. The right front fender was dented with particles of blood and hair ground into the dent. The right front lens was broken, and the glass fragments matched those found on the highway near Mrs. Cooley's body. The fragments from your headlamp don't."

Ronnie's mind was suddenly racing. The wild kids in the Caddy—they must have smashed his headlamp with one of those bottles. But that still left one thing unexplained.

"Matt Cooley—" he said.

The sheriff handed him his car keys.

"Yes," he said bitterly, "Matt

Cooley. A man suffering from grief and shock can make an awful fool of himself. He wanted to hurt you because he had been hurt. He wanted the comfort of thinking he was somehow avenging his wife's death. Try to think of it that way, son. It's always easy to make ourselves believe what it's comfortable to believe."

Driving home, Ronnie had plenty of time to think about that. He didn't mention going on to Vegas. Lisa didn't mention it either—or anything else, until he was depositing her at her father's driveway.

"Ronnie," she said, "I only begged you to confess because I was afraid for you. I didn't want you hurt."

That was what she wanted to be-

lieve. If he hadn't loathed her so much, Ronnie might have felt sorry for her.

"You might have stood by me," he said.

"But, Ronnie—"

"You might have said, 'No, we didn't hit that woman!' and if I started to break down and say that we did, you could have said, 'No, no, no!' until I couldn't break!"

And then it hit Ronnie, suddenly, that a woman who really loved a man would fight for him—even if fighting for him meant fighting the weakness in him, instead of just saying meekly: "Yes, sir."

He couldn't explain that to Lisa. He gunned the Jaguar and headed for home.