

# ED MCBAIN'S *mystery book • no. 3*

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SEIUVICÉ

BRUNO FISCHER

GAIT



## Friday is my day off—so I was home when the cops pulled up across the street...

I TAKE FRIDAYS OFF, BUT YOU KNOW how it is with a dentist. That morning I had to go downtown to my office to attend to a patient who had spent a bad night. I made the necessary extraction.

When I returned home at noon, I found Margaret on the porch indulging in her favorite hobby, which was minding other people's business. Time hung heavily on her hands since our daughter had gone off to college.

"Now that hussy is carrying on with the television repairman," she told me.

I didn't have to ask her which hussy she meant this time. She was staring at the Hamilton house directly across the street, and in front of it at the curb stood a small truck on which was lettered RIVERSIDE TV SERVICE.

"He's been in there for quite a while. And it's not the first time."

"So they have trouble with their set," I said. "Don't we all?"

"Every few days?" Margaret sounded pretty grim about it, a sure indication that she was enjoying herself. "In recent weeks, practically every time I looked I saw that truck parked there."

I took off my jacket. Now at noon the day was becoming quite warm. "All it could mean is that the Hamiltons got stuck with a lemon of a set. Some need more fixing than others."

"How convenient for her—if

true." She uttered that feminine sniff that proclaimed she knew what she knew beyond argument. "You men," she said. "Always trying to find excuses for women like Norma Hamilton."

"Oh, hell," I said eloquently.

Leaving Margaret on the porch to her fun, I went upstairs to our bedroom to change my clothes.

Two of the bedroom windows were at the front of the house, and as I pulled on a cool polo shirt, I could look down at the placid, tree-lined street and across it at the Hamiltons' red-brick house sitting behind a lawn and a rock garden and shrubbery. The truck remained at the curb. We also used Riverside Service, and I remembered the repairman from the time he had been in to change a tube in our set a couple of months ago. I supposed he was the same one—a youngish man who rolled his shirt sleeves up to his shoulders to display his muscles. A virile blond animal, that one was, and it could be that Margaret was right. Because Norma Hamilton was very much a man's woman.

She was about thirty, the prime age, and rather pretty, but what set her off from other women was an aura of sexuality that enveloped any man in her presence. It affected even me, who had a middle-aged paunch and whose feet always hurt from standing at a dentist chair. Often, of

an evening, I would watch Norma Hamilton standing at her rock garden, charmed by her ripe figure in shorts and a snug blouse, and maybe I would dream a little. The scuttle butt in the neighborhood, especially among the women, was that there were men other than her husband who did considerably more than dream. Now including, perhaps, the television repairman.

Suddenly a familiar gray sedan rolled up the street.

I moved closer to the window. The sedan stopped some hundred feet away, in the middle of the street, and I could feel Arnold Hamilton staring at that truck in front of his house. He owned a haberdashery store downtown a block from my office; usually he had lunch in the same restaurant I did, and sometimes, since we were neighbors if not exactly friends, we ate at the same table. Had he come home in the middle of the day because he suspected something or merely because he had decided to have lunch at home for a change?

Margaret burst into the bedroom. "Erwin, Arnold's come home."

"So I see," I said.

She joined me at the window. He was getting out of his car, which he had pulled into his driveway.

"I ought to phone Norma," she said.

"Why?"

"To warn her." She was still panting from her run up the stairs. "Something terrible might happen if he catches them together."

"You'll only make yourself ridiculous," I pointed out. "Besides, it's too late."

Arnold Hamilton was at the front door of his house. He was a gaunt man with sad eyes and thinning hair. It seemed to me that there was something stealthy in the way he let himself into the house, though probably I was simply being affected by Margaret's overactive imagination. The door closed behind him.

We waited at our upstairs window. I found myself listening for loud voices; they would surely have carried across the quiet street. No sound came from the house, and after a minute or two, the repairman appeared carrying his kit. He got into his truck and turned around at the end of the street and drove off.

I chuckled. "Disappointed, Margaret?" I said.

She actually seemed to be. It occurred to me that nothing much was happening in her life since Betty had left for college. She wasn't the club-woman type and made few friends and usually I was too tired to take her places after work. The result was that she lived a lot of her life vicariously through books and television and the more dramatic doings of our neighbors.

I slipped my arm about her waist. "Tell you what, sweetheart. Let's go swimming after lunch."

"I'd like that," she said, leaning against me.

Her waist was remarkably slim for a woman her age. Not that she was old—only partway in her forties. In

my arms she didn't feel much different than she used to. I kissed her on the cheek and we went down to the kitchen.

It must have been an hour later that I heard the siren.

I ran out to the porch. A black-and-white police car stopped with a jerk where the truck had been. We had finished our lunch and Margaret was upstairs getting our swimming things together. In almost no time, she joined me on the porch. We stood together watching two uniformed policemen hurry into the Hamilton house.

"Something must have happened," she said.

"I hope it's nothing serious," I said.

Cars continued to arrive. They contained policemen both in uniform and in plain clothes, and the entire neighborhood was pouring into the street. A word spread among the people gathered in groups, a word we could hear all the way to our porch. The word was murder.

"We ought to tell the police what we saw," Margaret said to me in a hoarse whisper.

"We didn't see anything much."

"Still, it's our duty to tell them."

"All right, I'll do it," I said. "You stay here."

I crossed the street. A uniformed cop stopped me on the opposite sidewalk.

"If what I hear is true, I think I have some information," I said. "Was somebody really killed?"

"It was Mrs. Hamilton. Who are you, sir?"

"I'm Dr. Erwin McKay. I live in that house across the street."

He led me up the walk to the front door and said to wait there and went inside. Pretty soon he reappeared with a burly man in a slouch hat. "This is Dr. McKay," the cop said and returned to his post on the sidewalk.

The other man said, "I'm Detective Breen," and put out his hand. After I had shaken it, I told him about the television repairman and how Arnold Hamilton had suddenly come home.

"Yes, we know," Detective Breen said. He was sucking a curved pipe the way a child would a lollipop. "Mr. Hamilton told us about him. But he doesn't know his name and can't think of the name of the company he works for."

"It's the Riverside TV Service."

"Thanks a lot, Dr. McKay. This will save lot of trouble locating him."

"Glad I could help," I said. But I didn't leave. Putting a match to his pipe, the detective studied me lazily. The entire street was watching us. I began to feel self-conscious. I drew in my breath and asked, "Has he confessed?"

"Mr. Hamilton? No. He insists it was the TV man."

"At least an hour passed after he'd driven away before the police came," I said. "Did you know that?"

"No, we didn't. Interesting." He nodded to himself. "Would you mind coming in with me, Dr. McKay?"

I had no idea why he wanted me in there, but of course I went.

The house had a center hall. Through an open door on the left, I could look into a kind of study. The television set stood against a wall, and on a sofa at the opposite wall Arnold Hamilton sat. His face was in his hands. The way his sparse hair was plastered sideways on his scalp to cover as much area as possible struck me as particularly pathetic. He didn't look up. A motionless, silent detective stood near him.

We went up the hall a little way and turned through an arched doorway into the bedroom. Three men in plain clothes and one in uniform were in there. And Norma Hamilton.

She was grotesque in death. In falling, one of her arms had hooked over the post at the front of the bed. She hung there, just her toes touching the floor. Blood covered her head and face and splattered the beige carpet. Not far from her right hand was what must have done it, since some blood was on it—a slender, off-white earthenware flower vase. The only aura emanating from her now was that of death. I was quite shaken.

"The coroner is on the way here," Breen was saying to me. "But he's not a doctor. We've sent for Dr. Morganstern, who usually comes in a homicide, but he happens to be out on a call. I'd appreciate it, Dr. McKay, if you'd make a preliminary examination to determine how long she's been dead. Time is important, as you—"

"But I'm not a physician," I broke in.

"You're not?"

"I'm a dentist."

Somebody in the room laughed softly.

"I see." Breen managed to keep himself from looking foolish. "Sorry to have troubled you."

He conducted me out of the house. As we passed the television room, I had another look at Arnold Hamilton on the sofa. He had raised his head, but he wasn't looking at anything. Breen opened the front door and said, "I'd like to speak to you and your wife later, Dr. McKay," and closed the door behind me.

Neighbors converged on me when I reached the street. I told them what I had seen; then I moved on to my house, where Margaret was waiting on the porch rocker, and I told her.

"We should have done something," she said.

"Such as what?"

"I don't know, but I feel we could have saved her." Margaret was very pale; at times like this she was beginning to show her age. "I felt in my bones something would happen. But you scoffed at me."

"You sound as if you think it's my fault."

Margaret said nothing more for a while. She rocked gently and I paced the porch, both of us watching what went on across the street, along with the rest of the neighborhood.

There was a lot of coming and going of cars, and then from a police car that had pulled up at the curb stepped the television repairman. He now wore a tan poplin jacket over his

muscles. On the sidewalk, he paused to look at the crowd with an expression of bewilderment. Then one of the two detectives who had brought him touched his arm and they moved up the walk to the house.

Margaret said, "It's his fault Arnold killed Norma. And nothing will be done to him." She sniffed—a habit of hers I detested. "But of course the really guilty person has already been punished."

"How easy for you to make moral judgments."

"You're still trying to find excuses for her," she said like an accusation.

"I don't know enough about it to excuse or not to excuse anybody," I said. "But I saw what had been done to her with that vase. Try a little pity, Margaret."

She looked up at me from the chair, and then in the same instant, we looked away from each other.

The afternoon dribbled on. The repairman came out with one of the detectives who had brought him and they drove away. Shortly afterward, Arnold Hamilton appeared, flanked by two detectives. The street became very quiet; a funeral hush hung in the hot air. Arnold Hamilton walked between the detectives as if unaware of them and his gawking neighbors. The three got into one of the police sedans, and when it was gone, the voices in the street resumed like a collective sigh.

Then Detective Breen was crossing the street. He came up on our porch and I introduced him to Margaret. She did not pause in her rocking as

she nodded, moving in that chair with a kind of relentless rhythm. Breen, taking his time, put his broad rear on the porch railing and set about loading his pipe.

"Well, did either of them confess?" I burst out.

His quiet eyes looked up at me over the flaring match. "No." He drew the flame into the bowl and then said, "Mrs. McKay, your husband told me you often saw the TV truck parked at the Hamilton house."

"I don't know how often. Every few days, it seemed. There may have been other times when I wasn't home to see it." Margaret rocked and rocked. "Didn't he admit he was carrying on with her?"

"He denies it. But then he would. It gives him a motive."

"Motive?" I said. "Isn't it obvious that her husband killed her?"

"Not obvious. Let's say probable at this point." He smiled a little. "We policemen have to make these nice distinctions. We are holding Hamilton for further questioning. We are also holding Forrest."

Margaret said, "Did he, Forrest—that's the repairman, isn't it?"

"Larry Forrest, ma'am. What were you going to ask me?"

"Didn't he admit anything at all?" Margaret said.

"About what, ma'am?"

"About their affair."

"I said he didn't. Mrs. McKay, how long would you say his truck was in front of the house before Hamilton came home?"

"Quite a while. I don't remember

exactly. But longer than it ordinarily takes to repair a set."

Breen nodded. "In this case, there was nothing wrong with the set."

"You see!" Margaret cried triumphantly. I didn't like the almost gloating expression on her face. "It's proof of what I've been saying."

"It could be." Perched on the railing like a small boy, Breen rubbed the hot pipe bowl against his cheek. "Mrs. Hamilton called up Riverside Service and said that her set was out of order. According to Forrest, there was no answer when he rang the doorbell. But the door was unlocked, so he let himself in."

"Because he was right at home there," Margaret said.

"So it seems. He said he'd been there before and knew where the set was in that room off the hall. He turned it on and the picture was all right. But the fact was that Mrs. Hamilton had called in saying it wasn't. He said he thought maybe the trouble would show up after the tubes had warmed up, so he sat down to wait. He said after ten minutes, maybe a little longer, the set was still working properly, and he decided to leave. Just then, he saw Hamilton get out of his car in the driveway. Anyway, that's his story."

"And what's Arnold Hamilton's story?" I asked.

"He agrees that Forrest was in the hall, apparently about to leave, when he entered the house. Forrest explained about the service call and Mrs. Hamilton not being home and the set being all right. Then he left.

As for Hamilton, he claims he spent a few minutes in the bathroom, then he passed the bedroom and looked in and saw his wife lying there dead in her own blood. He insists that Forrest must have done it."

"The hour that passed," I murmured.

"Yes, the hour between the time you two saw Hamilton come home and the time he called the police. Hamilton admits it. He says he went into shock—that he was so numb, it was a long time before he could rouse himself to call the police. And that's his story." Breen struck a match; like most pipe-smokers, he smoked more matches than tobacco. "I'm not supposed to discuss a case with outsiders. But you've both been of help, and I'm hoping you can both be of still more."

I said, "Arnold seldom came home for lunch."

"I see," Breen said. "That's the kind of thing I'm trying to learn. Possibly Hamilton suspected Forrest and set a trap for him. He didn't catch them together, but he caught Forrest there and nothing wrong with the set. Let's say Mrs. Hamilton had gone out for a few minutes and Forrest was waiting for her and Hamilton guessed why. She came home after Forrest left and—" Breen paused. "You folks didn't see Mrs. Hamilton come home, did you?"

"We were eating lunch in the kitchen," I told him. "You can't see the street from there."

"Well, it could be that she came home after Forrest left and she and



her husband had a fight because of him and in a fit of jealous rage, he grabbed hold of that vase and struck her with it."

Margaret, still rocking, had a kind word to say for somebody. "I can't believe it. Arnold is such a nice, mild person."

"You think so, ma'am?"

"Oh, yes. Arnold couldn't hurt a fly. It must have been the other one—that Larry Forrest. He was here once to repair our set. He looked so—well, I wouldn't put it past him having an affair with a married woman and then murdering her."

"We're considering that," Breen said, and suddenly he looked around.

The hush had again descended on the street. A stretcher covered by a sheet was being brought out of that red-brick house. I could imagine Norma Hamilton under there—not as I had seen her a short time ago but vibrantly alive. The stretcher was shoved into a police ambulance, which then rolled to the corner and made a U-turn and passed the house.

"Let's see," Breen said. "Isn't that where the new Green Acres development is?" He had got off the porch rail; facing the street, he waved his left hand.

"That's right," I said.

"Mostly dead-end streets and loops, as I remember. Hard to get through. So I guess most cars come to this street from that direction and go the same way." This time he waved his right hand, toward where nearly all of the city lay.

Again I told him he was right. I

had no idea why that should interest him, and I brought him back to what we had been discussing by saying, "Isn't it possible to tell which one killed her by determining the exact time of her death?"

"If we could," Breen said. "It's never simple, and circumstances make it even tougher than usual in this case. First of all, it's a hot day, which delayed the onset of *rigor mortis*. Secondly, quite a lot of time passed before the body was finally examined. That was why I was anxious to have you do it, Dr. McKay, when I thought you were an M.D. No, I'm afraid we won't be able to pin the time of death down close enough to mean much."

Suddenly Margaret stood up. The chair continued to rock for a moment after she was on her feet. "Would you like a cool drink, Mr. Breen?"

"Very much, ma'am. But something soft, please. I'm on duty."

I noticed that as she moved to the door, he looked after her figure the way men hanging around on street corners look after almost any passing woman. Detectives, I supposed, were as human as anybody.

He drank the lemonade Margaret brought out and then left the porch. But he didn't leave the street. He mingled with the people lingering on the sidewalk and talked to them. Later, after practically all of our neighbors had gone back to their houses, I saw him move down the street like a door-to-door salesman.

Needless to say, we didn't go

swimming that afternoon. Much of the day was gone; anyway, we weren't in the mood. Margaret went into the house to work on a skirt she was sewing for our daughter, Betty, and I got out the lawn mower.

I was mowing the front lawn when Detective Breen, having been in about every house on the block, passed by and stopped. I said, "You seem to be the only detective working on this case."

"There are plenty more," he said. "This particular angle happens to be mine."

"Which angle?"

"What the neighbors know about the Hamiltons. They agree with your opinion that Norma Hamilton was rather free and easy with the men."

"That was my wife's opinion, not mine."

Breen pushed back his slouch hat and ran a handkerchief over his brow. Going from door to door must have been hot work. "Were you, Dr. McKay?" he said.

"Was I what?"

"A man Mrs. Hamilton was free and easy with?"

"Look at me," I said, patting my pot belly. "Am I the kind of man who would appeal to an attractive young woman?"

"Let's turn it around. Did she appeal to you?"

"I'm a normal man," I said. "Every now and then I see a woman who appeals to me. So what? That doesn't mean I do anything about it. Or could even if I wanted to. You'll have to concentrate on a handsome

young man or on a jealous husband."

"My job is to concentrate on everybody." He looked across the street. "Your wife wasn't the only one who noticed Forrest's truck parked often in front of that house."

"Then there's your proof she had an affair with him."

"Not exactly proof, but something." Breen clicked his pipe against his teeth. "Well, it's been a long afternoon."

"Just a minute," I said as he started to move on. "I'm curious about one thing. Weren't there fingerprints on the vase?"

"Somehow, they're seldom where you want them. The vase had been handled too much before the murderer did to leave anything but smudges."

And his lazy eyes studied me—as if to see, I thought, if I was relieved by that information. Then he said good-by and crossed the street to where he had left his car.

I went into the house and told Margaret my conversation with the detective—except for the part where he had asked me if Norma Hamilton had been attractive to me.

"You see, I was right about the hussy and the TV truck out there so often," Margaret said. "And you refused to believe me."

As usual she had the last word.

After dinner, we did what we always did after dinner—we settled down in the living room to watch television. We started at eight o'clock, when a movie we hadn't seen in years came on. It ran an hour and a half.

After that there was a half-hour Western and then a comedy show that would last a full hour and bring us to our bedtime, at eleven o'clock. We never saw it all. At about a quarter to eleven, the doorbell rang.

"Who can that be at this hour?" Margaret said in a tight voice.

She knew as well as I who it was. I went to the door and admitted Detective Breen.

He took off his hat. For the first time, I saw him without it on and he was quite bald on top. He said hello to Margaret and stood in the middle of the living room, watching the television screen as if that was what he had come here to do.

"This is a good set you have," he said presently. "Have much trouble with it?"

"Hardly any," I said.

"Then why has Larry Forrest been here so often to fix it?"

There was an uproar of laughter from the set at something the comedian had said. I turned it off. Margaret was sitting deep in the wing chair with her hands folded on her lap.

"I don't know what you mean," I said to Breen. "The only trouble we had with it was a couple months ago, when a tube had to be replaced."

"So I was led to believe." Breen took from his pocket a number of yellow cards. "These are from the Riverside Service files. They are made out by the repairman after each call so the company will have a record of what work was done on each set and how much time was

spent on the job." He shuffled the cards as if about to deal them. "There are nine here in the name of McKay at this address. Nine in seven weeks. There were only three under Hamilton."

I said, "There must be a mistake."

But looking at Margaret, I knew there wasn't. She had put her head against the back of the chair and closed her eyes.

"Like almost all cars that come to this street, Forrest's truck came from the right," Breen was saying. "That's why he always parked across the street, on the right side of the street, in front of the Hamilton house, because it's directly opposite this house. He made his calls here. Anyway, most of them. The last one here was eight days ago. Then two at the Hamilton house."

He had been speaking to me, and only to me, from the first. As Margaret remained silent, I had to say something. I said, "But if it was anything but a service call, would he have made out a service card?"

"The only time the coast was clear was when you were at your office," Breen said. "Those were also his working hours. He had to report each call he made to explain to his office the time spent. These are the cards. Probably he paid for the charges written on each of these out of his own pocket."

Margaret started to laugh. That was the most awful sound I had ever heard.

"I paid for each call," she said. "I paid the charge each time." She

laughed some more and said, "For services rendered."

"Margaret!" I cried.

She looked at me, and for some reason, I was the one who cringed.

"Twenty years of dullness," she said. "Twenty years of living with you. And it was unbearable this last year with Betty away and the house always so empty. Then there was Larry Forrest and it was like being reborn. Like being young again." Her hands writhed on her lap. "Then he saw Norma. He made a call there, and he was no different than the others. Because she was younger and prettier and threw herself at him, he—he . . ."

There was a silence. She had become a stranger to me. It was odd that a man could live with a woman for so long and not know her.

The detective stood shuffling those cards, and after a long moment, he said, "So this morning you killed her."

"I didn't go there to kill her," Margaret said. "I went to plead with her. I told her she had other men. I

had only Larry. I begged her to let him come back to me. Norma sneered at me. She said I was too old for him. We were in the bedroom. I snatched up the vase."

Her voice faded. She slumped in the chair.

"And then you had to bring Forrest into it," Breen said. "You called Riverside Service and told the girl in the office that you were Mrs. Hamilton. You said your set was out of order and please send a man at once because there was a program on soon you were anxious to see. You knew that Forrest phoned his office every hour or so to find out if there were calls for emergency service in his area. From your porch, you watched him arrive and go into that house across the street. Once again he was serving you, this time in a different way. He was set up by you to take the rap for you."

"No. That wasn't it. I didn't care so much about myself." Margaret's head lifted, and her face was stern. "He had to be punished, too," she said.