

## THE HIGH-TENSION MAGAZINE

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WHO-DUN-IT

*You*



*He'd faced better weapons than this one,*

*but in this affair Cupid used a knife*

PHILIP WECK

# *can't* RUN AWAY

*Crime stories are in the habit of being blunt, tough, hard, rough, humorous, amusing—but rarely sensitive, nostalgic, as this encounter between homicide and G.I. Joe. Weck has the documentary technique down pat. The story broods well. The denouement, while reminiscent of lawyer Abe Lincoln's "almanac case," has this merit of its own: boy not only meets girl, but also her kid sister. The tale also poses a piquing question: If murder comes, can love be far behind?*

**S**o you go home again. So you go back, after eight long years and two different wars on opposite sides of the world. After ducking a lot of lead and catching some of it. And what have you got?

Where is home? The filling-station they built when they tore down the tenement you used to live in? The cemetery where they buried your mother while you were in a far fox-hole? The church on the boulevard, where the girl married a bankroll?

Or that babe on the corner, waiting for the bus?

It looks like her. The same thick

brown hair. The same straight, graceful carriage; the same luscious, lovely figure. It couldn't be anybody else.

So you go up to her and say, "Hello." Then you remember—eight years have gone by. She's eight years heavier now, eight years older. She wouldn't have these young lines, that young smile. And she would have a ring on her finger, another man's ring.

You were just kidding yourself. All along you've been kidding yourself. When the babe on the corner says, "Hello, big boy; got a ciga-

rette?" you know how much you've kidded yourself. There isn't any home.

So you say, "Never use 'em," and you turn your back on her and head for Smoky's gin mill down the street. The same grubby-looking, dark, dirty gin mill.

Maybe Smoky's gin mill is home.

My feet were back on the ground soon as I walked into Smoky's.

It might have been eight years ago, before Pearl Harbor.

There was Smoky, sitting half asleep at the end of the bar. There was the milk bottle filled with pennies on the back-bar. The torn linoleum on the floor, the spittoons, the same big cockroaches crawling around.

And there, on the same wire-backed chairs, around the same rickety table, sat the same three. George, Maury and Brad.

Brad was the first to see me, and he jumped out of his chair like he'd just picked a winner out of the Racing Form. Fat-happy, slap-happy Brad, a little fatter, a little balder.

"Joey!" he cried. "Joey! Well, Joey, Joey! Good to see you, Joey! Have a drink, Joey! Look who's here, boys—it's Joey! Shake hands, Joey! Sit down, Joey!"

That left George and Maury.

George, with a pretzel in one hand, a glass of beer in the other; he put the pretzel in his mouth and got to his feet and shook hands and sprayed pretzel crumbs as he said, "Hello, Joe. How are you, kid?"

And Maury.

Maury, adding up the bets they'd

taken in. Maury heavier and older, not so fine-looking, not so rakish and smooth. Drinking whiskey now.

Maury, who looked at me from under his eyebrows and said, "So the hero's back."

Maury, just as nasty as ever.

Brad sat me down and bought me a drink and gave me a cigar and slapped me on the back and George went on eating pretzels and grinning at me and Maury went on counting his money.

Brad said, "Joey, you sure gave it to them gooks in Korea! Joey, it's good to see you! Back in the same old ball park, eh, Joey? Like the old days. The good old days, Joey!"

"Yeah," said George through another pretzel.

"Tell you what, Joey! We'll get the gang together! We'll have a blowout, Joey! Right here, like in the old days. The same guys and the same babes. Sally and Mike and Mildred and Ed and Joyce and me, and you and—"

Then he stopped. Then he sat there with his slap-happy fish-mouth wide open.

And Maury said, "Tell me when it's going to be so I can stay home."

For a minute nobody spoke. Brad with his mouth still open and George with his little eyes darting from me to Maury.

Maury said, "Maybe I ought to stay home every night with my shotgun, now the hero's back."

I could feel my cheeks burning and my fists were clenched and the white hot anger was climbing into my brain and blinding it.

Not because he was talking about me. Because he meant Lucy.

Lucy, the keenest little bundle in the block. The sharpest, neatest, trimmest babe in the bunch. And decent. Clean and decent, if the world was ever decent. Like the white sheets in a base hospital after they'd found you bloody and grimy in the dirty, muddy rice paddies of Taegu.

Lucy, the kid who'd lived next door. Who'd held my hand in high school. Who'd worn my graduation pin and who'd pressed her growing body into mine and kissed me full and warm and loose on the lips when I'd enlisted three days after Pearl Harbor. Who'd written every day until we had hit North Africa, and then every week, and then after a whole month. And then not at all, because she'd gone up those church steps with Maury, the boy with the gold in his pockets.

Yeah, that was the set-up.

I might have known. Home? You can't go home. There isn't any home. There isn't any tenement where you climbed three flights of stairs every night after school. There isn't any vacant lot where you learned how to hit a baseball, because they're building in that lot now. There isn't any gang in Smoky's, any get-together with George and Maury and Brad, because Maury had dangled his gambler's gold in front of a lonesome girl.

So I got up from that table and I finished my whiskey—after eight years you don't waste whiskey—and I turned to leave.

And Maury said, "Maybe you're

another one thinks I was kidding about that shotgun, hero."

I faced him square. The anger was flashing across my eyes and I said, "A shotgun is a lousy weapon, Maury. A lot better boys than you have aimed a lot better guns at me, and I'm still walking around."

And I left. Alone, the way I'd gone in.

All alone. Looking for a home that wasn't there. A home that had existed only in my mind for eight long years.

A stranger, I walked down strange streets, past strange buildings and strange people. And I was glad I didn't want to know this city any more. I didn't want to know these people.

There was Lucy, a fine girl, a fine woman now, sitting alone, all alone, night after night. And there was Maury, a fine boy once, sitting in a cheap, dingy tavern, counting race bets and drinking whiskey and talking about a shotgun.

It was messy, nasty. It wasn't home. Home was a foxhole or a base hospital or a prison camp. Or a dream. It wasn't this.

So I went back to the cheap hotel where I'd registered, and I packed my bag and I signed out and I hiked over to the bus station; it wasn't far. I bought a ticket, a ticket to anywhere, and then, because I had more than an hour to wait, I went out and walked some more.

I just picked my feet up and let them fall. I followed my feet. Right back where I'd come from.

Without realizing it, I was only a

hundred yards from Smoky's when I saw them. Two of them this time. Standing on the corner. One of them young, with thick, brown hair, a straight, graceful carriage, a luscious, lovely figure. And the other one younger, with thicker, browner hair, a straighter, more graceful carriage, a figure even lovelier.

Sure. Lucy. And when I saw her, I knew why I'd made that mistake before. The other one, the younger one, the cuter one, was Tess, the kid sister. Pigtails and a skipping-rope and jacks when I went off to war, but a long skirt and a tight sweater and a warm, flashing smile now.

I didn't want to see Lucy. I didn't want to talk to her. But what can you do? You can't run away from them; you can't turn your back and run. So I waited on the corner and they came up to me, right up to me.

"Got a cigarette, big boy?" Tess asked, and she was smiling.

I said, "Sure. I got a cigarette." I gave her one. But I wasn't smiling, and Lucy wasn't smiling either.

"You know," Tess said, "I think Joe tried to pick me up a while ago."

I don't think Lucy heard her. She was just a noise, a wind, a background. Lucy was looking at me and I was looking at Lucy.

"All right," Tess said. "I'll go in that drug store over there and I'll have a coke. I'll give you just that much time—as long as it takes to drink a coke."

She went off and Lucy moved in, like I'd pulled a string. She stepped up close to me and she pressed against me and put her arms around

my neck and kissed me. A long kiss, warm and long and fierce. She was heavier, maybe stockier than she used to be, but she was still Lucy.

With both hands, I pushed her away.

"I was wrong, Joe," she said. "I was so wrong."

I said, "Yeah."

"It's too late now, isn't it, Joe?"

I said, "Yeah."

But this was Lucy. The old Lucy. Never-give-up Lucy. "Does it have to be too late, Joe?"

I said, "Yeah, it has to be."

"It's all my fault, isn't it, Joe?" she said.

Cokes are six cents now and they're short, and here was Tess again.

"Look," she said, "Maury's going to be in pretty soon. You'd better get along."

Lucy slipped her hand under my arm. "Walk me home again, Joe, like you used to. Please."

You can't run away from them. You can't turn down a reasonable request. I walked her home again. To a different home, with a man waiting in it, maybe, and a shotgun under his arm, maybe, peering out the window and watching for you.

Don't get me wrong. I wasn't afraid of Maury. I was afraid of Lucy. Afraid of what had happened to her and what hadn't happened to her. How she'd changed and how she hadn't changed at all.

Walking along, with Tess maybe ten yards in front, I said, "What is it? A prison? Maury gets home, you got to be there? Maury goes out,

maybe you can sneak out a little? A prison, Lucy?"

"It's worse than a prison, Joe. He knows I made a mistake. He knows it worse than I do. He yells and hollers when a magazine salesman comes to the door. When the milkman stops, he's going to shoot, he says. Maybe he will, Joe. He's like a crazy man. Maybe some day he'll kill the milkman, or maybe some day he'll kill me."

We walked down the street, Tess in front, then Lucy and me.

"What am I going to do, Joe?" she said. "Wait for him to kill me?"

We turned a corner and walked some more.

"Why does it have to be too late, Joe?" she asked.

It's about a hundred yards between street lights. We walked past the first one from the corner. Past the building they were putting up in the lot where we used to play baseball.

"Maybe we could fix it, Joe," she said.

We passed the second street light and the little candy store where I used to spend my pennies on the way to school.

"Don't you care for me any more, Joe?"

We kept right on walking. Walking, silent, with the only sound a truck rumbling somewhere in the distance. We passed the third street light and there was Tess, waiting in the shadows in front of a big, gloomy, dark house.

"You can take me home as soon as Lucy gets inside," she said. "Can't you, Joe?"

Sure. Walk 'em all home. Listen to their sad stories. But stay outside. Stay there on the sidewalk and let them go in alone. Don't ever forget that, brother.

Lucy said, "Goodnight, Joe. It is too late, isn't it?"

I said, "So long, Lucy."

She went up on the front porch and took her key out of a handbag and Tess and I stood on the sidewalk, watching and waiting.

Tess said, "Is that a bus ticket sticking out of your pocket, Joe?"

Yeah, it was a bus ticket.

She said, "I like you, Joe. I always liked you, even when you tied my pigtails in a knot. It's good to see you again. But maybe you'd better use that bus ticket."

"Sure, Tess," I said. "Sure. Have a cigarette?"

But she didn't get to take this one. Because Lucy called out from the front porch, "Joe!"

I turned around.

"The door's stuck, Joe. I can't get it open."

So I went up there on that porch, Maury's porch, beside the woman, Maury's woman, and I tried to open the door.

It wasn't stuck, exactly. Something was blocking the way, something inside. Not wood or metal or even heavy furniture. That would have been hard and unyielding. This was softer; it moved a little each time I pushed. It was down near the bottom of the door, some of it catching under the door, giving and then holding fast.

But even a body, Maury's body,

won't hold a door shut when you put your weight against it.

I'd shoved it way back against the wall when we finally got in, shoved the body and half-rolled it over and smeared the blood along the floor and made a nice mess out of everything.

You could smell that warm blood—a sickening, sweet, stifling smell. You could see it there on your shoe where you'd stepped in it. You could almost feel it gushing out, hot and heavy, splashing over your hands and dripping onto the floor.

I touched his forehead and slapped his cheeks and fumbled around for his pulse. But it wasn't any use. Somebody had done Maury in. Somebody had done for him with a knife.

Maury. The man Lucy had married. She was standing against the opposite wall, close to it, peering over her shoulder, her eyes big and wide and her face pale.

I got to my feet again, up off the floor beside the body, and I said, "Is this what you meant, Lucy? Is this what you wanted to arrange?"

She didn't answer me with her voice. She didn't answer me at all, because I couldn't read what her eyes were saying when they moved from that cold, dead body on the floor to my face and then back to the body.

So I stepped over beside her and I said, "Maybe it was all arranged before you met me. Is that it, Lucy?"

"Oh, Joe!" she said. She grabbed the lapels of my coat and she stuck her face in between them and she shuddered. She didn't cry or sob; she

shuddered, shaking and trembling.

"Joe," she whispered, "I didn't do it! Oh, Joe, I didn't! I couldn't!"

I believed her, of course. Or did I?

What was the difference—I put my arms around her anyway and held her close, trying to stop those shakes.

Right there, with her husband hardly cold on the floor, I put my arms around her and held her tight.

That was the way we were when Brad walked in.

Maury on the floor, his eyes open and his throat open, too. And Lucy and I in a clinch, less than ten feet away. Brad, and behind him, taking it all in over his shoulder, Tess, the kid sister.

Brad looking at the body, then looking at us. Then tiptoeing over to the body, carefully, very carefully, so he wouldn't step in the blood. Then tiptoeing back.

"Joey!" he said. "Joey! You poor kid! Joey, what a jam you're in!"

I was in a jam?

Me?

"You better take off, Joey!" he said.

Lucy pushed herself away from me and she said, "What are you talking about, Brad? He didn't do it! Joe didn't kill him!"

Shrugging his shoulders. That was Brad. Shrugging his shoulders. He didn't know. He wouldn't know. Brad, the bystander. Ask him, Mr. Policeman. Doesn't know a thing.

"That George," he said. "And Smoky. Them two. They can't keep their mouths shut, Joey; you know they can't keep shut. Everybody in



town knows you and Maury had a rhubarb. Everybody in town knows you and Lucy were standing on the corner so close you shouldn't be. And you're going to call the cops now, Joey? You're going to tell them you just stumbled over the body, Joey? After what everybody knows?"

You could see what he meant.

Lucy grabbed my lapels again. "Oh, Joe!" The pity was in her eyes, the fright and fear. "What did I do to you, Joe?"

"You better take off, Joey," Brad said. "You better grab yourself some miles. Right now, Joey."

Lucy said, "Don't go, Joe!"

But I pushed her aside. I stepped around her and Tess and Brad, out onto the porch, and I gulped in great big breaths of the night air. The smoke-filled, sooty, dusty night air of the city, that didn't taste or smell like warm blood.

"We'll tell them something, Joey. Don't worry, Joey, we'll give them a story," Brad said. "You just hunt yourself up some distance."

I walked by them, down the steps, with the breeze blowing in my face and the hall light shining on my back.

"Don't you worry, Joey!" Brad called after me.

I went on, down the sidewalk. Past the first street light. Past the scaffolding and the brick wall where home plate used to be. Past the candy store where I'd spent my sweaty pennies. Out of the city. Away from home. Away from the dream I wouldn't dream any more.

Behind me, I heard the tinkle of footsteps, of little feet pushing high heeled shoes along the pavement, and the voice saying, "Joe! Oh, Joe!"

It was Tess, the kid sister.

"Joe," she said, "where are you going?"

I said, "Away."

She caught up to me and walked along at my side, swinging her arms, her little face serious, dead serious. Past the corner where Lucy and I'd stood not so long before. It's a free sidewalk; if they want to walk beside you, can you stop them?

"Where's away, Joe?" she said.

Yeah, where was away? I had a bus ticket in my pocket. But the cops would be after me, and the cops don't quit easy. And then the Army, if I didn't report back from my furlough. The Army doesn't quit easy, either.

I had a bus ticket to nowhere.

Tess said, "You run away, they'll be sure you did it, Joe."

Yeah, they'd be sure. I go away and they're sure. I hang around and they're sure.

"They'll be looking for you, Joe. Every cop in the country. Every cop you ever see. You can't hide all your life, Joe."

No, you can't hide all your life.

So I stopped. I faced Tess. I looked into her eyes; they were all clouded up with worry.

I said, "Okay, kid. I'll go back. All the way back."

It was a long way, too. We didn't say a word; we just walked, side by side, the way we'd come, watching a police car shoot past us with its

siren crying, hearing somebody shout across the street, listening to all the usual noises of the night and the extra noises of that particular evening, the noises of murder.

We walked past two corners, and the candy store, and the building they were putting up, and we came to Maury's home. Not dark, the way it had been before, but blazing with lights now, from every room. Not standing silent and quiet, back from the sidewalk, but with three police cars pulled up in front and an ambulance and men walking up and down and neighbors standing on their porches and rubbering.

Right up on that porch we walked and a cop stopped us and Tess said, "We're relatives," and he stepped aside.

Right past the spot in the hall where Maury had laid all crumpled up and rolled over and bloody and where there was only a chalk outline now. Right into the living room, where we could see Brad and a big, husky man with gray hair and a black suit and sharp, brown eyes and cop all over his face.

Right into that room we went, in time to hear Brad say, "Sure, I seen him, Lieutenant. He come out of the house here and he walked up to the corner and met the dame and he kissed her, right there on the street, Lieutenant. I seen him. She was waiting for him, Lieutenant."

Gray-hair said, "Like it was a put-up job, eh?"

We stood there in the doorway, the two of us, Tess and I, listening, while Brad answered, "I only know what

I seen, Lieutenant. And what I heard when them two was quarrelin' over the dame."

The lights were on in that room, all of them—an overhead light in the center and a couple of lamps on the side. But it was like a spotlight to me, a spot shining on one person, Brad, and him standing out all alone there in the center of the room. I couldn't see anything but him, not the furniture, not Gray-hair, not Tess beside me. Just Brad.

I was tired, bone-tired, waiting for Brad to finish his piece and for Gray-hair to put the cuffs on me. Tired of looking for a home they'd torn down years ago. Tired of running. Tired of trying to get out of the mess they'd fixed up for me.

Beside me, Tess said, "He's lying! He's lying, Lieutenant!"

Like a man who'd been shot in the shoulder, Brad spun around. He stared at us and his mouth hung open, down to his chest. His mouth hung open.

Maybe Gray-hair knew we were there all the time. Maybe he just wasn't the kind to be surprised. He said, "And who are you people?"

"I'm the guy you're looking for, Lieutenant," I said. "It don't matter who she is; I'm the one you're after."

"How do you know who I'm after?"

I said, "I'm the guy who quarreled with Maury tonight. The guy who was kissing his wife on the street-corner, like a high-school kid."

Tess said, "It isn't true, Lieutenant! How could he see all that? He's lying!"

She meant Brad, of course, and Gray-hair said, "Yeah, boy, how come you saw it all? Where were you standing?"

I told him. "Right in front of Smoky's. The tavern. You can see the corner from there and you can see this house through the vacant lot where we used to play ball when we were kids. Remember, Brad?"

"That's right!" Brad said. "That's where I saw you, Joey. You saw me, too, huh, kid?"

"Remember when we used to play baseball there, Brad?" I asked him. "Remember the athletic club we had and how you used to hold out the club's dough for yourself? How much money were you holding out on Maury, Brad?"

He said, "What?"

"How much were you holding out, Brad? How much did he catch you with? How much did you kill him for?"

"Joey, what are you talkin' about? Joey, who killed him, boy?"

"You did, Brad. You didn't see me coming out of this house, Brad. You didn't see anybody through that old ballfield. Because they're putting up a building there now, Brad, and nobody can see through a brick wall."

Then he jumped at me.

The knife was in his hand, where he'd flicked it out of his cuff.

I grabbed his wrist just before it could hit me in the stomach.

I had to put all my strength into holding that wrist, and he clipped me on the jaw with his left elbow.

I brought my knee up and the knife slashed along my pants leg. My

wind was cut off; the lights were dim. I swung my left and caught him under the heart and then, somehow, I wriggled loose and clipped him on the jaw and he sagged back.

Then Gray-hair was on him with the handcuffs. And it was all over.

And when they picked up George, he saw how the cards were and he remembered Maury and Brad quarreling about the money Brad had been holding out.

He remembered Brad being so happy to see me. Brad, who hadn't been my particular friend—who hadn't been anybody's particular friend—falling all over me because it stopped the quarrel.

They let us go, Tess and me, about one o'clock. We took Lucy to Tess's apartment and put her to sleep with some pills the police doctor had given us and then we stood on the porch, Tess and I.

"She'll be all right," Tess said. "She'll get over it. She hated him, really, but she didn't kill him."

I said, "Yeah."

"And you'll be around," Tess said. "I think she still likes you, Joe."

I said, "Yeah."

"And you still—" Then she stopped. She leaned up against a post of the porch and she said, "Got a cigarette for me, Joe?"

"Sure," I said. "I got a cigarette for you. I got a whole pack for you, Tess. I got a whole carton."

But she took only one from the pack I held out. She looked right into my eyes when she took it, and I looked right into her eyes.

And then I knew that I was home.