

A Deadly First

[This short story about Private Eye SJ Rook's first murder case, was originally published in the holiday crime anthology, Festive Mayhem, published in October 2020.]

It was late but the walk across campus took less time than I'd feared. The slim envelope in my coat pocket tapped against my hip as I bent into the cold gusts. A demure swirl of snowflakes, winter's first, brushed my eyelashes.

The bare twigs of November cast dappled shadows on the icy paths that split the quadrangle. The university felt hollowed out, as though a wind-driven plague had emptied the place. Squalls swirled around my ankles, raking paper scraps and leaves over the dark lawns. Beyond the stone wall bordering the campus, light from Harlem's apartments glittered like shards of broken glass.

A clutch of four white girls passed me, giggling behind their coffee cups. One turned to take a second look, then pulled her purple beanie around her ears. Blonde hair spilled like a sheet of water below the hem of her knit cap. She grinned at me as if I was the only man on campus. On this Wednesday before Thanksgiving, I certainly was the only Black man in sight. From the opposite direction, a lone girl in a red puffer jacket darted around the group, her eyes drilling a hole in my chest as she sped by. When I reached the massive gray stone arch that marked the center of campus, I paused to unbutton my overcoat. Heated from the walk, I removed my blue scarf and stuffed it next to the envelope.

I arrived at the gothic building at nine-thirty. Under the grinning snout of a gargoyle, I slipped through glass double doors and into the lobby. I took the stone stairs two at a time. The wife had given me her husband's office number: turn left at the third-floor landing, she said, then left again past the bathrooms at the end of the hall. Three fourteen, on the right. The professor's office door was open; the light was off. I hesitated, spooked by the dank air wafting from the room. But the job was to deliver this package. She'd paid me in advance and asked that I call her after I'd handed the envelope to her husband. A private investigator wore many masks: a tarnished knight yesterday, tonight a delivery boy. The wife's four hundred dollars bought my compliance, but not an easy heart. I stepped through the open door.

Her husband was a big Black man, long arms draped over a barrel stomach. His scalp was covered in black wool and his face, behind its black whiskers, suggested he could have been a bear in another life. In this one, he was dead. I walked around the desk to get a better look. It was littered with gold objects: writing pens, a pyramid paperweight, bookends in the shape of winged lions. Gold cufflinks and a pair of large disk earrings twinkled on a gold ashtray. He slouched in the chair; his legs spread wide like he was sitting on the A train. I bent close to his head. I could see the amber slits of his pupils. His eyes were downcast, as if he was embarrassed to have a gold letter opener stuck in his chest. A red splotch soaked his blue-and-gray argyle sweater. I was near enough to smell the blood's cloying butcher-shop warmth. The pong of sex and shit floated over his unzipped fly. I touched a fold below his left ear; the blubber wobbled when I removed my finger. I called 911, gave the details, and waited on a stone bench in the hall outside the professor's office.

The cops kept at me for an hour. I told them everything I knew. That recital took three minutes, but I had to repeat it seven times: my name and address; the wife's name and address; her whispered assignment, my walk to the university. I handed my business card and the envelope to the lead cop, a muscular Black detective whose corn-rowed hair made her cloth driving cap tilt to one side.

"I never heard of you, Rook." She narrowed her eyes as she measured me. "But I heard of the Ross Agency. Everybody in Harlem has. Worked a few cases with Old Man Ross, back in the day. How long you been with the agency?"

"Five months."

"That so? Well, I never heard of you." She unzipped her tan leather jacket and leaned for a closer look. Her brown face was shiny, as if furniture polish had been dabbed across its contours. Furrows on either side of her mouth deepened as she studied me.

I shrugged. "I don't get around much."

She tilted her head toward a dumpy white man in a gray suit who was rifling through a pile of composition books on a table. "You hear that, Peters? Rook here says he don't get around much. Maybe Rook is short for 'rookie,' hunh? Whaddya think?"

Peters grunted, raising a poof of dust from the pages under his fingers.

The detective kept at me. "Five months on the job, hunh? This the first dead body you come across, Rook?"

"Two tours in Iraq. I saw plenty." I relaxed my shoulders to ease the bitter tone, but I couldn't work up a smile.

"But not on *this* side, right? I'm betting this is your first homicide." She'd hit on the truth, but I didn't answer. The cop studied my card. Her blue plastic gloves made a nice frame for the black cardboard. "S.J. So, you got a real name to go with those initials?"

"Yes. Shelba Julio."

"What kinda name is that?"

"Mixed. My Mexican American mother blended her name with the name of my African American--"

"Yeah, yeah. Too long. Stick with the initials." The cop held the envelope at arm's length between us. "You look inside?"

"No. It felt like a cell phone. But I didn't look."

"Why not?"

“People pay for privacy. I give it to them.” I rocked forward, rising a bit on my toes. “She asked me to phone her. I need to call her.”

“We’ll reach out. Don’t contact her.” The cop’s voice sharpened on the direct order. “How much did the widow pay for your services?”

“She was a wife at the time. Four hundred. Cash.”

“To deliver an *envelope*?” The cap rose on her forehead.

“Yes.” I showed the detective my wallet, swollen with twenty-dollar bills.

The cop whistled, then her lips crooked into a smile. “Lettuce to stuff your Thanksgiving turkey, hunh?”

She walked away from me, past the desk where a gloved tech bent over the body.

He jerked his arm; the letter opener slipped from the flesh, squelching like a boot pulled from mud. He held the murder blade in the air, red glinting on the gold handle. “I got one good print here, maybe two.”

“Nice, Rivera. You match it to some banger in the system, I’ll buy you lunch for a week.”

“You’re on.” The tech bagged the letter opener and dropped it on the desk. “But enough with the pizza, already. I got tomato sauce dripping out my ears and my tongue’s paved with pepperoni.”

The detective chuffed. “You got an approximate time of death?”

“The prof’s still warm around the gills. I’d say he bought it within the last two hours. Maybe less.”

She cut her eyes to the dead man’s gaping trousers. “Looks like he had a happy ending before the final kiss-off.”

“Yeah, looks that way. I’ll know more once we get him back to the shop.”

“Okay.” The cop moved toward a bookshelf beside the ceiling-high window. Moonlight slanting through the glass panes winked on the plastic case of the cell phone when she pulled it from the envelope I’d handed her.

Her fingers skated over the phone. She inhaled, a soft whoosh through her teeth. “You’d think he’d use a password more complicated than 4-3-2-1. Him being a bighead professor and whatnot. I guess he wasn’t so smart after all.”

The cop studied the phone, whistled again. Then raised her voice at me: “You take a look at these pictures?”

“No. I told you--”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re a private eye. With a capital *P*.” She touched the surface again. The cop held the phone’s face in my direction. Photos of naked women and girls glimmered on the screen. “Any of these the wife?”

She was Black, these were blonde. “No.”

“But the wife must have seen them, right? Why else would she send the phone to him?”

My gut knotted below my lungs. “I don’t know, Detective.”

“Got any guesses?”

“No.”

“So, Mr. Private Eye, how do you figure this went down? Fed up wifey spent four hundred to buy you as an alibi while she did the deed? Or maybe one of these blonde side chicks has a jealous boyfriend? Or could be a trust-fund kid with a bad grade went medieval on the old perfesser? What’s your favorite scenario?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Yeah, that’s what I figured.” The cop pulled a tattered business card from her jeans pocket. “You hatch any ideas, Rook, call me. Got it?” She spun the card through the air.

I caught it against my chest. “Sure.” I wiped sweat from my upper lip. The gesture covered a gulp to contain the bile. “Will do.”

I walked the long way home down a drowsy street, looking for a place where nobody knew me. I’d been invited to a pre-Thanksgiving party at my boss’s apartment. But I was in no mood to join the festivities. Acid cramped my stomach; I was too filthy, too sour for decent company. The snow picked up, plopping in wet clumps against my cheeks.

One block beyond the campus wall, I spotted a bright coat sailing ahead. Maybe the girl in the red puffer jacket. Maybe not, but close enough for the chase. I followed the coat around a corner. It darted between shadows, bobbing in and out of view in the stream of gray pedestrians. Tracking the red coat gave purpose to my hike, a chance to clean this soiled night, so I continued for another block. Tarnished knight, messenger boy, now deluded tramp on a mission. I wanted to question the girl, learn what she knew of the death on campus. Solve my first murder case before it choked me.

When the red coat paused in a rectangle of light, I stopped too. One hundred yards of pavement separated us. Below a trellis of scaffolding, I shrank into the doorway of an empty wig shop. The knot under my lungs twisted. I bent to buffer the ache, then lifted my scarf to block the chill brushing my neck. When I glanced again, the red coat had vanished.

The café which had enticed the red coat was sleek and well-lighted. Its picture window framed a single word in green letters, "Mallard." Owner's name or favorite bird, no telling. Maybe the place was a refuge for old-guard Harlem gentry or a watering hole for the new monied invaders. Either way, it was clean, bright, and deserted. Inside, no TV, mirror, or jukebox was visible; the place rejected rowdy fun. The dozen square tables covered in white cloths were empty. Bentwood chairs bustled around each table. The menu posted beside the door included a complicated drinks list, so I went in.

I waded through clammy air draped like a blanket over the bar. At the back of the long room, I saw a woman dragging a mop across the speckled terrazzo floor. She wore baggy trousers, sneakers, and a sweatshirt, all blue. No one else was in sight, so I nodded to her. I dropped my overcoat on a chair halfway down the room. When I sat, the fussy bentwood legs trembled but held. I studied the menu until a tall Black man in a green apron approached my table.

"Sorry, mister. We're closed. The kitchen shuts down at ten."

"The door was open."

"Yeah, but the chef's already gone home for the night. Tomorrow's Thanksgiving, ya know."

"I don't want dinner. Just a drink."

"We're closed, mister. Like I said."

A younger Black waiter approached and touched the first waiter on the forearm. "Let him get a drink if he wants, Walt."

Walt huffed and went to the front door, slamming the bolt to lock us in. The younger waiter rubbed his hands over his stained green apron. "Don't mind him. He's always in a hurry to get home."

"What's the rush?"

"His old lady gives him a hard time if he's late."

"That's a problem." I looked at Walt, who had taken a seat on a stool near the cash register. He scratched a circle in the gray frizz above his right ear.

The young waiter ruffled his lip. "Yeah. But it's his, not yours. What'll you have?"

"Bourbon on the rocks." He nodded and turned away. I stopped him. "Make it one rock in a short glass with a shot of Jim Beam on the side. I'll do the pouring myself."

The young waiter nodded again and walked toward the back of the room. Before he reached a footed cabinet, whose glass doors showed glittering bottles of booze, he spoke with the woman mopping the floor. She smiled at him and patted his shoulder. Her dark hair matched his, but her brown face was divided by a hatchet nose and sharp cheekbones. Middle Eastern, South Asian, maybe something in between, with a touch of the Caribbean. In contrast, the young man's round face was the color and texture of biscuit dough.

The waiter brought me the bourbon as instructed. I laid four twenty-dollar bills on the tablecloth. Wrinkled souvenirs of my first murder case. I smoothed the bent corners of the bills with my fingernail. "Keep 'em coming until I finish that."

His eyes bulged. "Sure thing, mister."

He rolled toward Walt at the front desk and pulled a chair next to the cash register counter. The young waiter leaned his elbows into his pudgy knees. Walt looked down at him from his high stool. After a minute of silence, the two men spoke. Their voices were soft, but in the hush of the empty restaurant, I could hear them without strain. Walt's scratched like loose gravel in a pothole, the young waiter sounded breathy, but sullen. I figured they didn't care if I overheard.

"You think he's drunk already?" The younger waiter tipped his curly head toward me. "Or hoping to get drunk here?"

"I guess he's drunk already."

"But he don't move drunk, do he?"

"A man don't have to stumble and stagger to be drunk. He could be drunk from the inside out. Maybe his soul's drunk, waiting for his body to catch up. I figure he had one too many in the place before. Got kicked out and went looking for another place to finish the night."

"Why don't he land at Kelly's instead?"

"Maybe that's where he started. Before us."

"Don't seem fair, do it? Kelly's kicks him out and he lands here."

"You don't know that for sure."

The two men slid their eyes toward me. I raised an index finger to signal for a refill. The younger waiter brought me a new ice cube and another shot of bourbon. He removed the used glasses. As I dribbled the brown liquor into my glass, the younger waiter moved through the room. He snatched the soiled cloths from the tables, folding the linen into squares. He skipped my table. Then he carried the stack into the kitchen. He returned to flip the chairs and hoist them onto the tables. When he'd done, I was surrounded by a forest of upturned chair legs. The

old woman dragged her mop under each table. I could see the gleaming stripes left on the floor by the mop's soapy cords. Her bucket sent plumes of antiseptic pine through the restaurant.

When the young waiter brought my third round, he offered a proposal. "Why don't you buy the whole bottle, mister. Take it home with you. Finish the night in the comfort of your own place."

"I'm comfortable here." I swept my eyes from one end of the bright room to the other. At the rear, the old woman leaned on her mop, surveying the place too.

"But it's late."

"Now *you're* in a hurry? I thought it was Walt in the big rush."

"I got a wife and new baby at home."

"Congratulations."

"Yeah, a baby boy. Five weeks old tomorrow, Thanksgiving." He smiled and looked at his watch. "But Rosie goes nuts cooped up in the apartment all day. I get home later than ten-thirty, she'll kill me."

"Don't want that." I looked at my watch. "Ooops, it's already past eleven. You're dead, pal."

His smile thinned between the doughy cheeks. "Okay, mister. Anything you want. You're the customer."

"That I am. I'm *always* right."

A hinge moaned, then sighed. The kitchen's swinging doors opened, revealing a slender woman with long black hair. She was wearing a red puffer jacket, slim black pants, and shiny boots. She was in her early twenties, her sharp nose and high cheekbones a lovely echo of the features of the woman with the mop, her mother. This was the girl I'd passed as I walked across campus on my errand. The girl I'd followed to this place. I could ask her what she'd seen; I could unravel the knot boxing my gut. As she'd done before, the girl looked through me, her dark eyes drilling holes into my chest.

After thirty seconds conversation with her daughter, the woman disappeared through the swinging doors. The girl leaned against the wall next to the kitchen door, hip canted forward, hands clasped in front of her body. I signaled to the younger waiter for a refill. He bobbed his eyebrows, then started toward my table with a fresh glass in each hand. The girl intercepted him. She reached into the liquor cabinet for a metal tray. Then, still wearing her red puffer coat, she paced to me, balancing the glasses on the serving tray. Each step was exact, as though she feared spilling my precious order.

"This is how you do it, Kareem. Nice and easy." Her voice was low, sweet but playful. The tide of golden liquor swelled and sank in the glass as she moved. She smelled clean, like droplets seeping from fresh-cut tulips.

Beside me, the girl balanced the tray on her left arm. With her right hand, she set first the shot of bourbon, then the faceted glass with its shimmering ice cube on the table. As she slid the shot glass to me, heavy links of a gold chain bracelet danced across her wrist. I saw red grime smeared on the whorls of her finger tips. Ruby flakes of blood speckled the cuticles. The undersides of her bare nails were lined with more rusty blood.

I swallowed my questions. When she turned, I drained the whiskey in a gulp. Without ice, the booze scorched the slope of my tongue and hurt all the way down.

Done with me, the girl vanished past the swinging doors of the kitchen in search of her mother. They emerged three minutes later, the mother wearing a frayed tweed overcoat. The two women left the café through the front door, turning north, their arms hooked together. The older waiter thumped the lock shut after their departure.

A few minutes later, Kareem the young waiter hurried from the café, rushing to his wife and baby. As if freed from the burden of teaching by example, Walt pulled out a chair opposite me and tucked his long legs under the tablecloth. An acrid cloud of nicotine and menthol eddied around his gray head. Dull yellow stained his fingernails. I wondered where Walt hid the cigarettes and if he only smoked after hours. He'd brought the Jim Beam bottle and a smudged glass. No ice. I dropped another crumpled twenty; he filled both glasses to the brim and helped himself to a solid hit.

"That Yolanda is the apple of her mother's eye." After the second swallow, his clichés poured out. "Mira dotes on that girl. You ask her, the sun rises and sets in that child's eyes."

"I can see why. Yolanda is quite a looker." I was drunk enough to resort to clichés too. "They work here long?"

Walt poured himself another hefty dose, then placed a pack of Newports on the table. "No, Yolanda don't work here in the café. She was just showing off for you. Playing up, you might say. Getting her flirt on." He winked at our shared male confidence. His hickory brown skin folded into creases beside his mouth. "Now, the mother, Mira, she used to work at the university. She cleaned offices there for fifteen years. Only come to us a few weeks ago."

"Why'd she leave?"

"That's exactly what I want to know. I hear they get pretty good wages over there. And sweet benefits too: health, dental, the whole package. Mira used to have two kids in college there, Yolanda and the younger boy, Derek. All thanks to them good benefits. Tuition paid and everything. Kids bunking at home, free ride at school, living the dream, you could say."

"What happened?"

Walt pulled out a cigarette, broke it in half, stuck it between his lips. He talked around unlit stub. "Can't say for sure. Word was the mother got into a quarrel, some kind of wrangle with a professor. He caught her stealing from his office. Or claimed he did. Said Mira stole a gold

cigarette lighter or gold jewelry from his desk. Mira denied it. Maybe she did it. Maybe she didn't."

"The prof got a name?"

"Never heard one. He was a brother, I know that much. Supposed to be a champion of the race and all. But you can't fight them people. Black or white, they got money, power, connections. Why bother trying? Cards is stacked against you from the git-go. Their kind always wins. Always." The old man shook his head. "Long and short of it, poor Mira got canned. Lost her job. After putting in fifteen years. *Fifteen* years, can you believe it? And her kids had to quit college, on account of those benefits was cut off."

Walt's mouth turned down. He jerked the cigarette from his lips. Another swallow of booze lifted his spirits again. "Anyway, water under the bridge now. Mira landed here at the café and we're plenty glad to have her. Keeps us spiff-spot. Place is clean as a whistle now we got her." He swept unfocused eyes over the length of the room.

I held up my palm to stop him, but it was too late. The wine escaped: "Why'd you have to tell me that story, Walt? Now I have to do something about it. Don't you see, I have to do something now."

"Do what? She shined that floor brighter than a new penny. Nothing more you need to do, mister."

I scrubbed fingers through my hair and closed my eyes against the light. "Don't you have to go home, Walt?"

"Yeah, sure." He touched his glass against mine. "But I'm keeping you company. I hate to see a man drink alone."

"I don't need company." I sipped until the wet sound jarred the room's quiet. "A man died tonight, Walt. Full of shit. Up to his fucking eyeballs in it. Shit every which way. Touch him, you

get covered in shit too. Just like him. Deep and wide, buried in it. Everybody's shit, Walt. Every damn one of us." Anger and fear flashed hot behind my ears. I wanted to pound the table, but the glass in my hand stopped me.

"You got that right, mister. We every one of us full of shit." He peered into his drink and blew through reddened nostrils. "Still and all, when a man dies, it's a sad thing. A helluva sad thing."

Walt had hit on the truth. I said nothing. But the knot in my gut relaxed at last, easing like an unfurled ribbon when I exhaled. A man died on my watch. Whether he was good or bad, I didn't know. He died and it was a helluva sad thing. Now I'd learned something. Seen a scant thing, a few blood red smears caked on a slim motive. Not much. But enough to make a difference. If I called, I could set things right. I could do my job. I straightened my shoulders, then my neck.

The old waiter pursed his mouth, as if blowing a kiss. Then he opened wide to slurp a wave of bourbon. "You want me to leave you here, mister?"

"Sure, why not? I already bought the bottle, right? Might as well finish it. Safer here than tripping down the street, landing in a gutter. Or in somebody's trash can, right?"

"Mister, if you say so." Walt tipped his glass, running his tongue around the rim. "I do need to hit the road."

He glanced at his watch. Maybe he meant to mention his wife and her urgent vigil. Maybe he wanted to bring up Thanksgiving with some vague note about the feel-good holiday. But he only paused, then sucked the last drop. "It's turned midnight, you know." He licked his lips, erasing a faint smile. "All right, the place is yours. Cut the lights when you finish."

"Turn 'em off now, Walt." I poured until the Beam sloshed the rim of my glass. Upright, the booze settled below the one-third line. I held the bottle in the air, twisting it as the golden liquor flashed red. "I don't need light to see where I'm going."

“Okay then. I’ll set the lock. When you leave, haul the door shut behind you. You’re in charge. Mister...” He stood from the table, pocketing the unused cigarette. “What’d you say your name was?”

“Rook.”

“Mr. Rook. *Humph*. That don’t sound real.” He shrugged, throwing his body off-kilter. “But if you say so, that’s what it is. Okay, Mr. Rook.” He wiped his fingers on the green apron then held out his hand. The palm’s dry ridges scraped when I squeezed.

The old waiter wobbled to the kitchen, thumped through the shutters, and returned clutching a brown wool coat. “I’ma lock the front door behind me. Keep you safe and sound in here.”

“Take care, Walt.”

He twisted into his coat as he rolled to the front door. He doused the overhead lamps. “You do the same, Mr. Rook. Happy Thanksgiving.” The bolt screeched, rattled, then clanked home.

I touched my forehead to the table. The pulsing ache between my eyes forced them open. Moonlight foamed through the place like new snow over a waterfall.

I straightened to reach into my pants pocket for the detective’s card. It was grimy and bent. I pressed it flat, adding a stain to the white tablecloth. Beside the card I set my phone, angling its face until the bright numbers on the pad stopped shimmying.

Then I made the call to clear my first murder case.

TO LEARN MORE about Delia and her books, please visit her website at www.deliapitts.com

