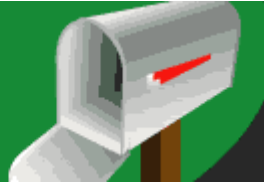


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NIGHTS AND WEEKENDS.COM

January 18, 2006

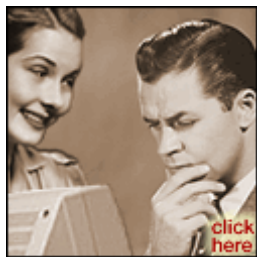
Twiddley Winks

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Twiddley Winks

Timothy Nunes

"Few are the mice that can escape a keen feline eye" (inspired by my mother, Patricia, a lover of both mysteries AND cats).

Twiddle delicately twirled the crimson contents of the glass he held, almost daintily grasping the stem in his gray silk-gloved hands, watching intently for the slightest film on the surface of the liquid. Then he lifted the glass to his nose and gave an almost catlike sniff, immediately wrinkling his nose in distaste at the barest hint of bitter almond. As he'd thought... poison... cyanide, most likely.

He looked up at the soft sound of chuckling, spying the beat cops in the corner of the darkened apartment living room, who were apparently finding some humor in watching his handling of the wine glass, his mannerisms. They most likely thought him gay, as did many of the crude, uninitiated Neanderthals he found himself interacting with in the course of his investigative work. They were, of course, sadly mistaken. For Sylvester Twiddle did not, as some thought, prefer the company of men; nor the company of women, for that matter. No, Twiddle's preferences were less commonplace, less pedestrian, practically regal, in fact... for Twiddle liked cats.

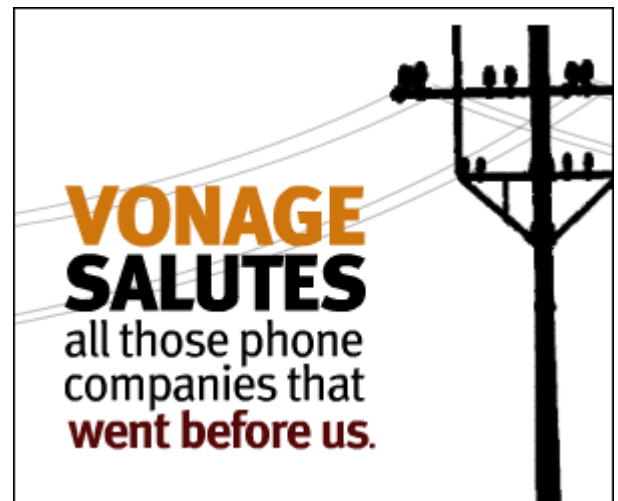
Persians, to be exact: Cynthia and Natasha. Long, soft, silky white hair, with soft, warm purrs; a joy to curl up with on a cold winter's night. And if he did sometimes walk with a somewhat light, feline stalk, or occasionally lick his hand to smooth back his hair, or even...

"Hrrrrmmmp..." His assistant, Detective Miles Standing, softly cleared his throat, interrupting Twiddle's feline reverie. "Perhaps the inspector would like to examine the body before it's taken awa-?"

Miles stopped talking, startled, as always, by the quick jerk of the inspector's head, the tightened gaze, fixated on some point in a dark corner of the room. Slowly, with almost catlike grace, the inspector stalked towards the corner, crouched, and snatched something small off the floor. He then returned to his assistant's side and dangled his prize in front of the detective's eyes... a small rubber cork.



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"Quite lucky, don't you think, Miles? Had this been an older, traditional cork, the chances of lifting off any fingerprints would've been practically nonexistent. No need to examine the body, I think... We merely have to find the tall, graying gentleman in work boots whose fingerprints adorn this rubber cork."

Somewhat nonplused by the inspector's words, the detective couldn't help but ask, "What makes you think we're looking for a tall, graying man in work boots?"

Inspector Twiddle's eyes raised slightly at the corners and his mouth tightened into a thin and somewhat self-satisfied smile, preparing to divulge the particular 'canary' he'd just caught. "Perhaps you noticed the somewhat meticulous nature of the victim? How everything in this apartment is arranged perfectly, not a cushion out of place, every magazine stacked neatly, each picture exactly strait?" He elegantly waved his gloved hand around the room as spoke, emphasizing his observations.

"And yet, look at this coat rack. One loose hook, at the top, left un-symmetrically askew, as if recently used by someone tall, and un-straightened afterwards? And the next hook, slightly less ajar, from the lesser weight of a hat perhaps, and a telltale black and gray hair left hanging on the hook? And finally, on the floor below the rack, the distinctive waffle-shaped footprint of a work boot?"

Detective Standing shook his head in mild bemusement, impressed as always with the sharp eyes of the unconventional Twiddle. "Then I suppose you won't be surprised to hear that the super mentioned an ex-boyfriend matching that same general description? Says they broke up maybe a week or so ago; or so he assumed, as they supposedly had a big, noisy blowout that night and the guy hasn't been seen around since. I'll have the footprint photographed, and I will send the hair and the cork to the lab."

"Yes," the inspector responded, "but let's hold on to that cork until we visit the wine shop I espied next door when I arrived."

* * * * *

Miles waited impatiently for the inspector to exit the rest room located at the back of the store. When he finally did return, the detective was once again disconcerted by the odd way that Twiddle shook off his hands, almost as if he were shaking errant bits of gravel from his, uh, paws?

They approached the shop keeper, displayed their badges, and then proffered the bagged rubber cork.

"Hmmm... yeah, I sell this... a mid-priced Zinfandel, San Joaquin Valley... pretty popular... just sold a case of it yesterday afternoon, as a matter of fact."

"Mind if we ask whom to?" detective Standing asked.

"Yeah, sure... it was to that pharmacist... the one on the corner. Guy buys maybe a case every other week... has for years... hate to guess what HIS liver looks like with how much of the stuff the guy seems to put away," the shop keeper ended with an unkind chuckle.

"Yes, well, can you describe him?"

"Sure.... About six foot three, black hair, turning kinda gray, maybe thirty-eight, forty years old?"

"Thanks for your help, my good man," said the inspector. "We'll be back if we have any other questions..."



* * * * *

The pharmacist was a tall man to be sure, tall and nervous. From the moment they displayed their badges, he seemed to be in almost constant movement; a hand-flutter here, a twitch there, an almost furtive shuffling of feet. The slight flutters and twitches seemed to fascinate the inspector, whose eyes appeared to follow every movement.

"Yeah, well, since when's it against the law to buy wine?"

Inspector Twiddle's eyes locked on the pharmacist's face. "We were just up the street, at 127, Apartment 2C..." The almost painful twitch around the eyes, just at the right moment. The inspector's eyes narrowed, becoming almost feral. He nodded slightly to detective Standing.

"Sir, could you just step around the counter for a moment, please?" the detective asked.

The tall man in the white coat slowly, cautiously stepped out from behind the counter as instructed. Twiddle's eyes immediately dropped to the floor, and the expected pair of work boots...

The inspector's eyes relaxed slightly, one lowering in almost a lazy wink. Miles had seen that look before... the slight relaxation, the almost imperceptible wink, followed by a tightening of the haunches, a baring of teeth, a soft, violent hiss, and then....

"This way, Sir!" The detective quickly grabbed and handcuffed the pharmacist in one quick movement, directing him away from the inspector and attempted to ignore the frustration in the inspector's eyes, or the shudder he felt running down his spine.

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