

A Polite Murder

By Graham Masterton

You could see by the ripped-up turf and the broken fencing where the Daimler had skidded off the winding road and nose-dived into the field. It lay there on its side, its bodywork crumpled and its windshield starred, while cabbage-white butterflies flickered around it, and two cows gazed moodily at the police who had invaded their field.

A young policeman with sandy hair and meaty forearms was making copious notes about the incident in his notebook. He didn't turn around when I vaulted awkwardly over the fence and rustled my way through the long tufty grass. I stood beside him while he finished his grade-school handwriting, and lit myself a Chesterfield.

The policeman sniffed. He tucked his notebook into his pocket and looked around at me with an incredible air of suffering courtesy that British police-men are so good at affecting. They make you feel like something between an aristocrat and a lump of dogshit that they've just discovered on their shoe.

'Did you want something, sir?' he asked me. I coughed. 'Well, yes. I heard about the accident and came right away.'

'Oh,' said the constable. 'You did, did you?'

I took out my card. 'I'd better introduce myself. My name's Heublein. I'm a private investigator, from the United States. This gentleman was my client.'

The constable squinted carefully at my card. Then he looked over at the twisted wreckage of the Daimler.

'You mean—'

I nodded. I didn't have to pretend to look glum. 'Exactly. I was supposed to be taking care of him. His minder. That's what he paid me for. I did some work for him a couple of years ago, in New York. We kind of took a liking to each other, and that was that.'

The policeman sniffed again. 'That was *what*, sir?'

'That was why I came over. This is my first time in England. I've always wanted to visit England, and when he said come over and take care of me - well, that's the kind of offer you can't refuse.'

Another young police constable appeared from the road. This one was dark and blue-chinned, and looked about as old as my own son in high school. But he was just as officious as the sandy-haired one.

'They just called me from the hospital,' he said to his colleague. 'Dead on arrival.'

The South Downs suddenly seemed very hot and claustrophobic. I felt sweaty and aging, and a little more than out of my depth. Suddenly, here I was in a strange country with polite policemen who were telling me my only friend in England - and what was worse, the man I was being paid to look out for - had gone to claim his cloud.

'Who s this?' said the swarthy constable, pointing at me.

The sandy one handed him my card. 'Private what s-his-name. Says he was looking after this bloke or something. Looking after, wasn t it, sir?'

I took out a gray handkerchief and mopped my forehead. 'That s right. Kind of unofficial bodyguard. I didn t stay with him all the time. Today, he was off to see his sister. I was driving up to see if everything was okay. Then some guy told me there was an accident up here. I couldn t believe it was him.'

The policemen stood with their hands on their hips, regarding me with bovine solemnity.

'Very nasty one,' said the swarthy policeman. 'Must ve come straight off the road just like that. Out of control. Very nasty.'

A light sea breeze wafted over the Downs from the direction of Brighton. Except for the wreck in the field, it was a perfect July day.

'Can I look at the car?' I asked.

'Don t see why not,' said the sandy one, 'Help yourself.'

I tromped through the grass and the long-stemmed daisies up to the car. It had obviously rolled over two or three times before coming to rest. The driver s door was facing upwards, and had been torn back off its hinges. There was a lot of blood splashed around inside. When I saw the steering column wedged right into the front seat, I knew that death must have come crushingly and quickly.

I swallowed and peered past the dashboard into the crumpled motor. There were a few bloodstained papers and pair of broken horn-rims. The last time I had seen those hom-rims they were perched on the nose of my elderly client, Walter Pike. I sighed - one of those real deep what-the-hell-do-I-do-now sighs. Walter Pike had been a building developer, and a very wealthy gentleman indeed. Now he was nothing more than ground beef, and it was my fault. Worse than that, there was a haughty and influential English family waiting at Pike s sister s home for their dearly beloved elder member to arrive, and I was the one who was going to have to tell them what had happened.

One of the policemen came up and stood next to me.

'Satisfied?' he said. 'Bit of a bloody mess, ain t it? Don t know how fast the old coot was driving, but he must ve come down here at a bit of a lick.'

I nodded. 'Yeah.'

I took one last look inside, and then I noticed something. The walnut dashboard was completely intact, except that the radio was missing. There was just an oblong hole where it should have been. I craned my neck to see if I could spot it inside the car, but there was no sign of it.

The policemen were growing impatient. 'Come on, sir. We ve got to get on with it. Can you give us a number where we can reach you?'

'Sure,' I said and told them. They noted it down in their round jumbo handwriting, and neatly closed their books. My book was only just opening.

I had only been here in England for two weeks, and apart from the fact that gasoline was \$1.70 a gallon and Chesterfields were \$1.10 a pack, I didn't know much about English culture or English anything. At school they told us about George III and Charles Dickens and policemen in pointy hats, but nothing could've gotten me ready for the strange courteous society of hard nuts that the English actually are. They're full of etiquette and warm beer, and they're all sensitive to the slightest innuendo or suggestion of bad manners. If you don't play the game, baby, you're definitely no place at all.

That's why I was the worst person in the world to do anything about the sudden and horrible death of my client Walter Pike. He was a great old Coot - gray-haired and red in the face, and always wore tweeds. He was as tough as a piece of week-old pizza, but he was class. He had a huge rambling old house just outside the seaside town of Brighton, and his sister Emily, the dear lady he was going to visit when his Daimler took the last dive, had an even more exquisite Queen Anne house just over the Downs.

I left the wreck and went back to my rented Marina. These British cars are something else. They're about two feet long, and if you open the hood, you wonder where the hell the engine has disappeared to. You spot it way down there, hiding behind the oil filter, about the size of a Planter's peanut.

I drove down towards the rich wooded Weald of Sussex. A fox-hunting and horseback-riding and wealthy landowner district. The trees rustled, and there was a rich smell of earth and lush grass in the air. If I wasn't missing Manhatten so badly, I think I could've settled down right then and there.

But - well, English class isn't for me. I'm just plain old Harold Heublein, five feet nine inches of pasty New Yorker, with a beak nose and close-together eyes like those dough people you see on the Pillsbury packs. At school they called me Mustard, for obvious reasons. I was in the navy till I broke my leg, and that left me with a permanent hobble. I've been a janitor, exterminator, hot dog seller, and once I cleaned pools down in Key West. But then I read a book by Mickey Spillane, and I decided to give everything up and become a private detective. I used to have an ad in the *Daily News*, and that was how Walter Pike first got in touch with me. He was a dear old gent, like I said, but you don't make the kind of loot that he made without making yourself a few enemies, and anyhow he kind of reckoned that someone, somewhere, had ideas of squishing him out of existence. Don't ask me why. The old guy just used to sip his Taylor's Vintage Port and look kind of mysterious, and that's all he ever said.

Now he was dead. Lying in the emergency ward of Brighton hospital like a Cheese Whopper that someone dropped on the sidewalk. Yecch.

I overtook a farm cart laden with fresh hay, and the smell of it was real sweet. Then I took a right down a narrow country lane, and after driving for ten minutes or so, the ancient pile of Emily Pike's house came into view. I turned into the driveway and parked. Judging by the cars, the whole family had just arrived, too.

Emily didn't like me. She didn't like America at all, or anything to do with it. You have to realise that old ladies like Emily live in houses that are three hundred years old and don't

think anything of it, and that most of their furniture and pictures were already antique when New York was a collection of three-story sheds.

She looked just like her late brother, which was probably why she d never married. She was standing on the ivy-covered porch when I got out of my car, with a lace wrap around her shoulders, her face as stern as a dusty valise that someone had just pulled out from under the bed.

'Mr Heublein,' she said. She insisted on pronouncing it 'hyoo billine.'

I essayed a smile. It was reasonably difficult under the circumstances.

'Miss Pike,' I responded.

'Have you seen anything of my brother, Mr Heubline? He was due here half an hour ago. An *hour* ago. It s really too bad. Aren t you supposed to be looking after him?'

I walked up and tried to take her arm. I was only trying to be sympathetic. But because her brother paid me to work for him, she regarded me as a *servant*, and in England ladies do not allow servants to take their arms. All a servant is allowed to take is orders.

'Miss Pike,' I said, 'I have some pretty serious news.'

She stared. Her eyes were like a couple of watery oysters.

'Serious? What do you mean? It s not Walter, is it? What happened? You must tell me.'

'I m afraid he died in a car accident about an hour ago. He was on his way here. His car left the road and he s dead.'

The old lady went very pale. Etiquette went by the board, and she slumped heavily against my arm. I helped her in through the porch, and into the cool, elegant hallway. A grandfather clock ticked away in one corner of the hall, and there was a Jacobean chest that Jacob s Secondhand Furniture on Eighth Avenue would ve given their gold teeth for. As I bought Emily Pike through to the living room, a tall young man in a lightweight cream-colored suit came out, and almost collided with us.

'Aunt Emily,' he said, in his clipped British accent. 'Are you all right? What is it?'

'Give me a hand,' I said. 'She s not feeling too good.'

The young man took Emily s other arm, and together we helped her on to the brocade settee, and put her feet up.

'There s been an accident,' I said. 'I had to tell her. Mr Pike just died in a car crash.'

The young man stared. He was tall, but he wasn t what you d ever call handsome. He reminded me of Jack Nicholson with protruding teeth and a grape in each cheek. His name was Charles Pike, and he was old Walter Pike s younger son. Just like his old man and his elder brother, young Charles worked in the property-development business, and I guessed that between them they were all worth between nine and ten million pounds. That s twenty million dollars for anyone who can t multiply by two.

'Father? But what happened? Where is he now?'

'The police took him to Brighton hospital. His car left the road. They don't know what happened. He was alone, and that was all. Nobody knows. I've just been up there myself. It was on the Downs, just past Devil's Dyke.'

Young Charles knelt down beside his wilting aunt. 'Oh, my God,' he said. 'What a ghastly thing to happen. Oh, God, I can't believe it. I'll have to tell the others.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. There wasn't much else I could say. I looked around the living room, and there were coffee cups and cookies laid out, so I guessed the rest of the family wasn't far away. That's the thing about being a detective; you can read clues.

'Everybody here?', I asked Charles.

'Yes - they're in the garden. They went out to look at the roses.'

I bit my lip. I guessed that I was going to have to be the one to break the news all around. But the thing was, I had a funny feeling about doing that. I couldn't forget the way old Walter Pike used to look at me over his glass of port and wink me the tip that someone was going to try and rub him out one someday. And the way I figured things was this; if there hadn't been any threats at all, why had he gone to all the trouble and expense of bringing me over from New York? You don't hire a bodyguard unless your body needs guarding, and it began to penetrate my skull that maybe Walter Pike hadn't passed to higher service by accident.

'Excuse me,' I said, and I went through the French doors into the garden. It was hot and summery out there. There were English country flowers everywhere, and the heavy fragrance of roses. Across the lawn, wandering their way through the formal rose garden, were Hugo Pike, Walter's eldest son, a heavier version of his brother Charles; Walter's daughter, Cicely Pike, a pretty girl with dark wavy hair and a disconcerting way of looking straight through a person; and Roger Pike, Walter's own brother, a grumpy failure with a bushy mustache and a snappy way of talking. A typical middle-class cantankerous English family, with their own ideas of the way the world should be run.

As I walked towards them, I thought - could any of *them* have arranged the prompt exit of Walter Pike? Or Charles, maybe? Or dear old Emily?

'Hullo,' barked Roger Pike. 'It's that Yankee feller again!'

Cicely looked up. Her eyes were glittering and dark. A lovely lady, if you like ladies, and not broads.

'Hello, Mr Heublein. Is daddy not with you?'

I coughed. 'Please - you'd better all come inside. There's been an accident. The old man's dead.' In the time that I said that, I looked real quick from face to face, to see if there was anything there but genuine surprise and shock. Hugo looked startled, Cicely went white, and Roger's eyes popped out of his crusty head. But none of them looked anything near guilty. I began to wonder if I'd been reading too much Agatha Christie. English country houses and dark deeds. But then Charles started calling me from inside the house, and I had to leave my cynical suspicions where they were.

Death had been almost instantaneous, said the police physician. We all sat in the hot dusty

coroner's court and listened to him droning through the evidence. The chest had been crushed by the steering column, and all internal organs had been displaced. This was not uncommon, the physician said especially in high-speed crashes. That seemed okay to me - except that on that particular winding road I couldn't see the old guy travelling more than thirty-five an hour. And besides, he didn't like fast driving.

Afterwards, we filed out onto the sidewalk (sorry, *pavement*) and stood around in a bunch wondering what to do next.

'I'll see that you're paid, of course,' said Mr. Hawksworth, the family lawyer, a gray-haired old geezer with half-glasses and a wart on the end of his nose. 'We'll pay your return fare to the United States, too, if you wish.'

'That's very generous,' I told him. I didn't feel too smart in my faded nylon jacket and frayed blue shirt.

'Is there anything else?' he asked me.

'Yes,' I said. 'Just one thing. I don't mean to pry into family matters, but you know that old man Pike did trust me. Can you give me some idea of what's going to happen now - with the business?'

Hawksworth shrugged. 'It's a very simple arrangement, and there's never been anything secret about it. On Walter Pike's death, each surviving member of the family gets an equal share of the business and his personal fortune.'

'You mean - they all get the same? None of them gets more than any of the others?'

'Oh, Hugo obviously takes control of the company's affairs, but the place pretty much runs itself these days.'

I squinted over at Emily and Charles and Hugo and Roger and Cicely, all dressed up in black, and in that bright ordinary Brighton morning, I began to wonder if I wasn't having hallucinations. They all looked about as homicidal as a carton of cream cheese.

In spite of that, back at my small rented apartment overlooking the seafront up at Black Rock, I sat at the rickety desk and wrote out a list of everything I knew, and instinctively *felt*, about the Pike family.

Hugo was one of those well-educated English boors. Good public school, followed by Oxford University, followed by a ready-made slot in Daddy's company. He was married to a faded-looking girl called Elsie, who rarely seemed to go anyplace with him, and I suspected that Hugo was dipping the old cricket-bat handle on the side. Expensive tastes: drove a twelve-thousand-Dollar Jensen, lived in a London town house, and often wintered in the Bahamas. I hadn't talked to him much, but his conversation seemed limited to All the times he had outsped the police on Britain's highways. Gambling debts? Probably. A little extra money certainly wouldn't have done him any harm. But slay Daddy? Hugo seemed too traditional and unimaginative for that.

Emily was seventy-three years old, and in spite of the fact that old ladies are pretty prickly and lethal in England, it was hard to believe that this withered old girl would fix up the

demise of her own brother. Still - he had an expensive home to keep up, life was passing her by, and maybe she felt that if she didn't come into the money now, she never would. Maybe she dreamed of retirement On Miami Beach. On second thought, maybe she didn't. But she was eccentric and strange, and you can never rule out malice in the behavior of eccentrics, no matter how harmless they look.

Charles was the eternal younger brother. He was also married. His wife was a vixenish redhead called Norma - a hard, ambitious girl from Roedean School, the ultrasnob teaching palace for young ladies just outside Brighton. Charles, as far as I could make out, was a well-meaning dummy, but I wouldn't have put calculated murder past the vivacious Norma. Charles had always been overshadowed by Hugo: he had gone to a less impressive school and a less impressive university, and maybe he felt it was time he laid his hands on some money and bettered his lot.

Cicely was nineteen. Pretty, slightly rebellious, but still a genuine member of the Pike family. A good girl's school had been followed by a good finishing school in Switzerland, and now she seemed to spend her time dressing Up in Jaeger frocks, or riding about the Sussex countryside on her faithful horse. She mingled with the crowd who tried to rub shoulders with Princess Anne, and somehow murder didn't seem to click as far as she was concerned. Daddy had rented her a quaint little apartment in London, and she was a member of that clan of hyper-traditional Chelsea girls known as 'Sloane Rangers' - named for nearby Sloane Square. She was all silk scarves and pearls, and she dated a musician called Bill.

Finally, there came grouchy old Roger. Like Charles, he had always been the younger brother. He had been in the British Army for seventeen years or so, and then when Walter really made his pile, he had demobilized himself to share in the family's new-found wealth. He was divorced, from a plain woman with a face about as interesting as a peanut-butter sandwich. There was no doubt that Roger had a real evil temper, and that he had always felt Walter was looming over him like the Matterhorn. Jealousy? Rage? Hidden debts? Roger drove the cheapest car of any member of the family, and lived in an ugly semidetached house near Hurstpierpoint.

I went over and over my list of would-be suspects. Maybe Walter's death had been nothing to do with any of them. Maybe some rival property company had intervened, and commissioned a hit on Walter Pike, but it wasn't likely. In England, they just don't do things that way. They have you blackballed from your club, or they spread a rumour that you're frequenting a lady of ill repute. But they don't kill you.

If Walter Pike had been murdered - and there was no evidence that he had been - then it was someone in the family who had done it. That was my theory.

Late that afternoon, when a rainy gloom was settling over the sea and the dim gray structure of the Palace Pier, I went down to Brighton police station and talked to the officer in charge of Walter Pike's accident. He was pudgy, polite, and obtuse. He gave me a cup of English police tea, which is bright brown, terribly hot, and tans your stomach lining.

We sat in his little office and he looked labouriously through his notes.

'Here we are,' he said. 'Pike, Walter. Road accident. Autopsy, accident report. Nothing much here.'

'Did you check the car?' I asked.

'What do you mean?' said the officer. You have to remember that English police are very pedantic.

'Did you check the car for faults? Steering, suspension, that kind of thing?'

The officer shuffled through his notes for a further five minutes. Then he shook his head. 'No. Nothing wrong with the car. Perfect mechanical order. We've got a bulletin out on the radio, though.'

'The radio?'

'That's right. It looks as though sometime between the crash and our arrival on the scene of the accident, some person or persons unknown broke into the car and stole the radio. Bit of a madman, if you ask me.'

'I noticed that,' I said. 'I looked into the car and noticed that.'

The officer read slowly through the report, his lower lip protruding like a shelf.

'Doesn't say any more,' he remarked. 'Just that the radio was gone. Forced out with a screwdriver. They looked around for dabs and foot-prints, but they didn't come up with anything sensible.'

I lit a cigarette. Without looking up, the officer pushed an ashtray towards me across the desk. I was beginning to feel that I was wasting my time. I paid twenty-five pence to walk through the Hall of Mirrors on the Palace Pier. I saw my legs stretch like rubber and my face grow as long as a fiddle. Then I went and leaned on the rail of the pier, and watched the cold waters of the English Channel foam up against the beach. English seaside resorts have a strange icy solemnity that you can never quite get out of your system.

I thought: supposing a murder *has* been committed. Why should I worry? Nobody else seemed to share my opinion. They all thought that Walter Pike had died a natural death, and maybe he really had. But there was something that irked me about the whole affair, and I didn't want to spend the rest of my life wondering if that accident had really been an accident.

A sea gull shrieked harshly across the water, hunting stale tea biscuits that a woman in a purple scarf was relentlessly tossing off the pier.

All right - I didn't know *who* might have killed Walter Pike, even if anyone had. But maybe it would help if I looked at the accident the other way around. Supposing I tried to figure out *how* he had died. It seemed odd, after all, that his car had just plunged off the road like that - without any obvious cause.

I strolled slowly along to the end of the pier. It was growing dark, and the white foam showed luminous through the gloom. A man was calling his dog with one of those silent whistles, and the dog was bounding and hopping around the pier.

The police had checked the car, and there was no sign of tampering or defect. Except for one thing - the radio. The radio was missing and I knew it hadn't been missing when I left Walter Pike earlier the same day. Someone had taken it, or else it had been hurled by a freak

concussion out of the car and into the bushes. But freak concussions don't usually use screwdrivers to get radios out of Daimler dashboards, so that meant a thief.

But what kind of person steals a radio from a car that's full of blood and corpse? You have to want a radio pretty badly to do that. The radio couldn't have been stolen *before* the accident, because old man Pike had left me and driven straight off, and it was plain from the time the crash had occurred that he hadn't stopped anywhere en route.

So the big question was—who had taken the radio, and *why*?

That evening I had dinner with the Pike family at Emily's house. The family lawyer had laid a sizable cheque in my palm, and I was supposed to be flying back to New York on the weekend. The dinner invitation was a very English Way of saying thank you and good riddance. If the British don't like someone they take a masochistic delight in inviting him around for a meal and suffering agonies of tedium and embarrassment, so that afterwards they can say what a slob he was, and how wonderful they were for enduring him.

The maid let me in. I hung up my faded nylon jacket, straightened my crumpled shirt collar as best I could, and entered the living room. Hugo came over and took me sweatily by the hand, and asked me if I wanted anything to drink. They didn't have any Jack Daniels, so I stuck to vodka.

Everyone was there. Charles, Roger, Cicely, Hugo, Emily. Even Cicely's boyfriend, Bill, was there, a morose young rock musician with long black hair, trying to be cool and rebellious, but enjoying every minute of a wealthy middle-class evening. He was beak-nosed and moody, but he didn't say no when they offered him Remy Martin and soda, and he ate cashew nuts like he hadn't been fed for three weeks. Charles had bought along his hard redheaded wife Norma, and she was busy swapping malicious gossip with Emily. Hugo seemed to have mislaid his wife Elsie again, and was soaking up huge gin-and-tonics and muttering something about working too hard.

'Well,' said Roger, coming over and slapping me on the shoulder with more enmity than enthusiasm, 'you're back to your own country, then, hey?'

'That's right, sir.'

'Well - I expect you feel a fish out of water here, eh?'

'I guess so, sometimes. But everybody's been very polite.'

Cicely looked up from the settee. She was wearing a flowing green chiffon dress and she was prettier than ever. 'Polite, Mr. Heublein? But not kind?'

I shrugged. 'I guess you British are pretty reserved. I find it hard to break through that immaculate exterior.'

Cicely smiled vaguely. 'Even if you do, Mr. Heublein, I expect you'd only find an immaculate interior.'

I lit a cigarette. 'Oh, I'm not so sure of that. I think there are some pretty rotten things going on in England, only you don't notice it so much because everyone says "Excuse me - so sorry" after they've cut you up.'

Roger reddened. 'I've heard that New York isn't exactly the Garden of Eden,' he said sourly. 'Muggings, that kind of business.'

I shook my head. 'I didn't say it was. But I wasn't talking about New York. I was talking about England.'

Emily came into the room, leaning on her cane. 'You sound very cynical, Mr. Heublien. Surely England hasn't displeased you that much.'

I took a swallow of vodka. 'It's not the country, Mrs Pike. It's the kind of things that can happen here.'

'Like what?' said Bill, Cicely's musician friend, picking his nose ostentatiously.

I stared him in the eye. 'Like the murder of Walter Pike.'

Charles sat up. 'I say,' he said, 'That's very bad taste, Mr. Heublein. We are a family in mourning!'

'But it's true,' I persisted. 'Walter Pike was killed by someone here and I know how.'

Emily looked fierce. 'This is not an amateur play, Mr. Heublein. If you have any unpleasant accusations to make, you'd better explain yourself. If you can't or won't, then I must ask you to leave this house right away.'

I raised my hand. 'Just hear me out. You have to admit that Walter Pike was afraid of someone taking his life, or he wouldn't have hired me to protect him. I guess he'd had threats, or something of that kind. Or maybe he just suspected that some of the people around him weren't too kindly disposed to him. Whatever, he called me in, and he called me in for a reason.'

Roger sniffed. 'That doesn't prove anything at all. I think you'd better come straight to the point.' I nodded. 'I will. Walter Pike's death was almost a perfect murder, but there was one awkward flaw in the whole thing, and that gave the murderer away.'

The Pike's blinked at each other like blind people who had suddenly been given their sight back, with green stamps.

'The radio was missing from the wreck. In between the time the car crashed and the time the police reached it, someone opened the car and took the radio. That means that the thief was either very fortunate to be right there on the spot, or else he knew where the car was going to crash.'

'That's absurd,' said Hugo. 'How could anyone know that?'

'They could know it if they planned it,' I told him. 'It occurred to me that nothing that was at the wreck could tell me what happened to Walter Pike - it was what *wasn't* there. The radio was missing and that meant the radio may have had something to do with Walter Pike's death.'

Cicely frowned. 'But how could a radio possibly have anything to do with daddy's death?'

'I didn't know that myself at first,' I said. 'But earlier in the day, when I was taking a walk, I saw a man out with his dog. He had one of those silent dog whistles - the ones that people can't hear but dogs can. That made me think about those opera singers who can break wine glasses by singing at particular frequencies. That reminded me of something else I had read a few years ago. I went to Brighton library and browsed through a couple of books and it didn't take me long to find out what I wanted to know.'

'About five years ago there was a French doctor who devised a kind of whistle that could reach extremely high frequencies. When he blew the whistle, it set up vibrations in the air that were painful and uncomfortable to everyone who heard them. You see, every living being has its own frequency, and when vibrations reach a certain frequency, the whole structure of that being is vibrated, too. At some frequencies, you can feel nausea and headaches. At higher frequencies, your eyeballs and your brain vibrate. And at one particular frequency, your internal organs chafe against each other, and you can die. It's a scientific fact. I read it in a book and it's all there.'

Emily shifted impatiently in her seat. 'I don't quite see where this is leading, Mr Heublein.'

'It's very easy,' I told her. 'Someone doctored the radio in your brother's car, someone who knew he always liked to have the radio playing when he drove. When he reached that particular spot on the Downs, that someone transmitted a powerful signal through the doctored radio. It set up a vibration that totally shook up Walter Pike's internal organs, and killed him. It's my belief that he was dead before the car left the road. The radio was taken out, getting rid of the only evidence there was, and that was that.' Roger laughed unpleasantly. 'That's sheer ridiculous fantasy, Mr Heublein. And even if it were true, who amongst us would want to dispose of him? I've never heard such rubbish.'

'I thought about that, too,' I said. 'You're a pretty close English family, and even though I guess you get on each other's nerves from time to time, I don't think you'd ever do anything disloyal to each other. Whoever did this was motivated by an outsider. That's my opinion, anyway.'

'Outsider?' said Charles. 'Which outsider? What do you mean?'

'I thought about your wife at one time, Mr. Pike. I'm sorry about that, Mrs. Pike, but I want to see justice done, and the possibility had to be considered. But I guess I kind of ruled her out, because whoever did this had technical knowledge as well as a motive, and Mrs. Pike doesn't seem to have any of that.'

'Well, thank you very much,' said Norma sarcastically.

'Please,' I said, 'Just bear with me, because this is very important. The only person here who has the technical knowledge to do something like that is Bill here. He's a musician, and he knows all about frequencies and electronics. I guess he's short of money, too, and to have a girlfriend who's wealthy is a strong attraction. He killed Walter Pike, knowing that Cicely would come into a share of the family fortune, and that *he* would benefit. I believe that Cicely knew about the murder, too, and helped Bill with inside information. You might as well know that I'm going to tell the police all of this.'

There was an awkward and uncomfortable silence. I guess I'd had fantasies of Bill stepping forward, pleading his guilt, with his wrists held out ready for the cuffs. But that was not the response I got out of the Pikes at all. Instead, I got united hostility.

'I think,' spluttered Roger, 'that you're talking complete balderdash. I have never been so outraged in my life. You were invited here this evening as a considerable courtesy, and you have repaid that courtesy by insulting a close friend of Cicely's, Cicely herself, and our hospitality. I suggest you leave at once.'

Emily stood up. 'I'm afraid you must, Mr. Heublein.'

I felt confused and embarrassed. The whole thing was getting totally out of hand.

'You don't understand,' I said, pointing to Bill. 'This young man killed Walter Pike. He killed him with electronics, and I can prove it. Walter's internal organs were all displaced, and on that winding road he couldn't possibly have been driving fast enough to inflict that much damage to his body.'

Hugo took my arm unsteadily. He must have drunk six gin-and-tonics since I'd first arrived.

'Mr. Heublein,' he said, 'we are not interested in your crackpot theories or anything else you have to say. Any American is welcome here, but I think you must ultimately remember that you fought to secede from the United Kingdom, and that any further comments you may have to make about English life will not be received kindly. I must tell you to go.'

Bill, sitting on the brocade settee next to Cicely, smirked and waved.

I was stunned. When you come from New York, you don't realise that two hundred years of American history is like yesterday to the English. The Queen was a direct descendant of George III, after all, and the English still get mad when we make rude remarks about their royal family, past or present. I think if you made a slighting comment about Ethelred the Unready, they'd ask you to leave the room.

'All right,' I said, 'But I'm going straight to the police, and I'll have that guy locked up, where he belongs.'

The Pikes just glared at me, as if they could push me out of the house with a wall of dislike.

It was Emily who showed me to the door. I pulled on my nylon jacket and prepared to go out into the night. It was warm and fragrant out there, but I was beginning to look forward to the underarm odor of New York.

The old lady took my arm as I left, and smiled at me. That was quite a surprise.

'You're very astute,' she said, 'even if you are an American. But don't get yourself into any more trouble by informing the police. It just isn't worth it. There's no evidence, you know, and I'm sure that radio has been thoroughly destroyed by now. Be a good chap and let dead dogs lie.'

I frowned. 'Mrs. Pike - do you know what you're saying?'

'Of course I do, my dear. We *all* killed him. The whole family. We got together with that nice young musician, and we worked it all out, just the way you described. But you'll never be

able to prove it, and that's that. Walter was a vicious and vengeful old man, and he got what he deserved.'

I fished for a cigarette, and lit it. My hands were trembling.

'Goodnight, Mr. Heublein,' said Emily, and closed the door behind me.

I took a drag at my cigarette, and walked over to my car. There was a pale hunter's moon in the sky, and the clouds were travelling very fast. I took one last look at the dark bulk of Emily Pike's house, with its rustling ivy and its elegant gates, and then I climbed into the car and drove back towards Brighton. I felt cold and numb, and I began to feel it was time to get back to New York before I caught the English disease of utter, lethal reserve.

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