

“GEORG, OR THE BLACK BOX MURDERS”

(A Hiram Bodoni Mystery)

by

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PART ONE
SPECIAL EFFECTS

1: FEVER

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Right in the middle of the Albinoni, the fog hit.

The first thing Hiram Bodoni did was to increase the volume of his Craig in-dash stereo; then he slowed the car down. But didn't stop. And, without taking his eyes off the road—the few feet of it he could still see—Hiram reached over to the seat next to him and pressed the "record" button on the portable Sony cassette recorder, laying at the ready for just such occasions. Hiram picked up the Sony microphone, kept steering with his left hand and began, as he called it, "to do the present tense."

"Max Steiner couldn't have scored it better," Hiram began, into the Sony mike. "I mean that musical entrance when the fog hit—or, rather, when we hit the fog. And, oh, Special Effects couldn't have timed it better, bringing on the fog when it did. Oops! Forgive me, Miss Sony. First of all, that was very stentorian; very Orson Welles (remember him?) — that deep-voiced delivery starting off this present, 'present tensor.' Also, perhaps, very obscure. To you. Max Steiner was before your time, Miss Sony. Max Steiner scored those symphonies that were background for Humphrey Bogart films and *Gone With The Wind*. And Special Effects — simple in those days — in those same films, made fog happen on cue so that trench coats with revolvers in them could mysteriously dissolve in. I'll get off all that. Here's me, my Hiram Bodoni self again, with my own New York City nasality and blurred (slurred?) consonants 'present tensing' into Miss Sony. And here, Miss Sony, are the unadorned, simple-minded facts."

Hiram stopped recording to spritz some Afrin nasal spray into his nostrils. That done, he continued to record.

"Just coming out of the violin-organ interlude of the Albinoni 'Adagio' and back once again into the unbearably exquisite melody which, as you can hear, stays background for this 'present tensor,' my piece-of-shit VW Dasher Wagon dived into the fog and slowly moved--and

moves still (even as I speak) submarine-coffin-like--in it (the fog) to my destination; Bodoni Manor. And it is a classic, this fog. Actually, a nice touch when you stop to think about it. The kind of mystery I suspect I'm about to get entangled in at Bodoni Manor probably requires fog. And lush music in glorious stereophonic sound. From the new Craig in-dash stereo system. And 4 Craig speakers! Oops! I'm sorry about that, Miss Sony, but the dealer sold me on the Craig as being superior to your race. Only in cars though. Only in 'in-dash.' So take heart. Well, you've got to admit the music's gorgeous and lush and balanced now, bouncing all around and inside my head. And the recording, the Albinoni, is miraculous. Oh, yes, Miss Sony, I gush, I know, but the word is apt. Miraculous. A miracle I found it at all. At the Stuckey's, would you believe! You recall that stop out of Atlanta on I-75? Maybe you don't. Guess I wasn't 'present tensing' then.

"Guess I was thinking about Susan. Her leaving me. Her taking Miriam away from me. Telling me--at the opening night party--as soon as the reviews came in--telling me, in that cold-blooded way--that I was a flop--in every way--including my professional life--because she warned me that I would continue to be a flop if I continued to write that depressing stuff--and that I was lucky it got on the boards at all--'on the boards' was her phrase; very 'show-biz' suddenly--and that she didn't intend to stay with a flop--meaning me--that there was no future with a 'flop--flop, flop, flop'--and that she had a daughter to think of who could not be brought up in 'flop city'--and she did it all out loud!--while very drunk, it's true--still, it was demeaning, embarrassing--because that was the moment I needed comfort, stroking, right after the New York Times Review came in and suddenly everyone at the party started to ignore me, walk away from me, shun me, stopped passing the croudité--or the onion dip even--and I suddenly was offensive, smelled bad because I had written--had dared to write--a play that was declared a flop by the New York Times

"and, Miss Sony, you don't know what disgrace is until you've been given the thumbs down by the New York Times; knowing that literally the entire world of the 'ins' will read of your disgrace. But facts are facts and a flop it was and a flop I am.

"Perhaps I should have poured out whatever I was feeling about that into you, Miss Sony. Maybe I did? No, I didn't. Why didn't I? Because I knew that when I played it all back I'd hate the stentorian self pity.

"See how quickly I get answers? Come to think of it, have I 'present tensed' at all into you, Miss Sony? since I got you, 'you portable you?' Ha ha. Forgive me for singing that last line, but it does fit that old Gershwin song; 'You Wonderful You.' 'You portable you.' See? Say, is this our first time? I know--I believe--I wanted to do some 'present tensing' back at Richmond and those strange thoughts the cigarette billboards set off. Did I? --Reminder: Play back later for possible 'Richmond, Virginia, cigarette/billboard chit-chat.'

"What was I saying? Oh, yes, the Stuckeys and the miracle. When I gassed up at Stuckey's and voided my bladder--oops!--there I go again; being cute. I took a piss, I mean. Then a peanut puff and coconut praline and coffee. And there, at the pay-up counter, pressed in the center of a small skyscraper of Stereo cassettes (Country and Western, Hard Rock, 'The Reverend Bubba Sundak's Born Again Favorites'), I spotted it! 'The Biggest Hits of 1720.' And discovered for the first time composers like Pachelbel, Campra, Corelli and especially Albinoni. His 'Adagio.' Painful. Listen. The most beautiful melody I've ever heard. And I'm into the 19th playing of it when the fog hits!--or rather, when we hit the fog!-- Just outside of Tallahassee; South, on the Perry Highway, a couple of minutes ago; where we are now and I'm fighting the impulse to lower the volume. In fact, I raised it awhile back. Reflex. The playwright in me. Increase the pressure in the environment. The thickest fog that ever was and, if there's music, play it LOUD! Because I want to drown in it. I will drown in it; the Albinoni. Just as my moving submarine-coffin is drowning in this fog! Unless I step on the gas. Yes! I have this urge to step on it. There. Oh! Wonderful! Ah, I know what it is! It's like Limbo, driving in this fog! Between heaven and hell. With no possibility of salvation, that's true; but without the responsibility of one's sins. And, anyway, it plays against the long legato line--of the Albinoni--if I speed in Limbo (and screw the danger). Yes. Yes! YES! There it is. The continuity I always need. The continuity I need to start a caper--any caper--this caper! Danger: the fog. Melody; the Albinoni. And now--the Spectres? . . . YES! There they are! But not like before. Back there. Where? North/South Carolina? But they don't

count, those Carolina spectres. They were real. Just looked unreal and like spectres in the lighter fog of that morning when I drove alone on I-85. Huge water towers, actually (see? I know the real from the unreal). Four mile-high candy-striped dowels, stuck in torso tanks. Great big bugs. Daddy Long Legs? But stiff, not bent. And they become a science-fiction ingredient for a possible story I begin to devise. They come alive, those Candy-stripe-Daddy Long Legs-Water Tanks. And in my story I'm making them walk and terrorize the landscape. But that's as far as I go with them because I can only invent as motivation their wanting to punish man for some inane reason. For wasting water? Polluting water. Ugh! You see, Miss Sony? Trite.

"That's why I've got to give up writing. Can't invent the unique anymore. Is there any unique anymore?

"And still I need to order the spectres of my life; my capers now. Find metaphors. Controlling images. Free from any motivation because they just are. May point to something later understood. May not. Just are. And they must always be in 3's. The Holy Trinity. Shit! Why can't I escape the goddamned Church! 3's! 3's! Danger, melody and the Spectres. And there they are, Miss Sony! The Spectres! See? See! Castles, this time. Turrets. Spires. Gables. Free of gargoyles. All transparent. And finally, gothic cathedrals. All transparent. And Susan's there, too, also transparent. A lot of Susans zipping by with Mona Lisa Smiles. And old Albinoni scores it all as the lush Adagio soars over it all, drowns everything out, and I'm smashing through the limbo fog at top volume on the Perry Highway somewhere south of Tallahassee and move through SusanSpectreSpires feeling the beginning giddiness of lust or being part of some cosmic orgy rushing on and on and the giddyness becomes a buzz, Miss Sony, and my cock's getting hard, yesyes, the giddyness, the buzz, and that lightness, that strangeness, that slight, floating ache when I haven't screwed or jerked off for a long time and that buzz like the buzz around the lips when dogs or Susan sniff near my mouth to lick the fog when I forget my glasses are on and go down on her and speed along--No! Got to stop! Got to stop! Or, or, or--I'll, I'll, I'll..."

But Hiram can't stop. And puts down Miss Sony; manages only with his right hand to unbuckle, unzipper, pull down, grab hold, go all hand palsy and almost immediately gisms the speedometer and steering wheel

column just before bringing his car and his tired...and ashamed...and fevered senses...to a gradual...stop...

at the...

side...

of the...

road.

2: FEELING THIN

The Albinoni played out and Bach's, An Air On A G String, began.

Hiram slowly moved his hand to the volume control on the Craig in-dash stereo and switched off Bach. Silence. He was all sweaty, weak. Feeling thin. Like after a fever breaks. Everything that happened since he fled New York City had happened in a time warp and in a jumble. Images. Thoughts. Feelings. The sex thing.

Had anything, in fact, really happened? Oh, yes. There was proof all over the steering column and speedometer. And there was Miss Sony next to him. In her belly was a vocal log of the trip thus far. Hiram pressed down the "rewind" button. Stopped it. Pressed "play." Listened for a bit. Switched it off. It had really happened.

Hiram lifted his head from the steering wheel, reached over and ejected Miss Sony's tape. "Giving birth," Hiram said out loud and examined the tape just delivered. No more room on that tape. He'd need a new one. Hiram reached over and opened the glove compartment. No new tapes in the glove compartment. More proof. "I must have been in a fever from the time I left New York City," said Hiram out loud. (The recording reflex at work. Hiram talked out loud even when he was not recording.) "Never, never, never have I gone anywhere without a large supply of blank tapes." Hiram took out a box of lemon-scented towelettes. He used half a dozen to clean up the steering column and speedometer. Then, after placing the used towelettes in a plastic trash bag, he reached back and down and pulled up a thermos of coffee. Stuckey's coffee. "Thermosed at the same stop where I found the 'Albinoni.' Terrible coffee. Necessary. Caffeine fix. And hot, still."

After cleaning out the thermos cup with another towelette, Hiram looked again at the hand-drawn map his uncle had sent him. Studied it. Then Hiram Bodoni started the car again and moved out.

3: MAYHEM AT BODONI MANOR

To Hiram--calm now, alert now--everything was as it should be in a mystery.

For starters, the fog, generally dissipated, still hung low over the road. Hiram turned from the main highway onto a two-lane, badly-pocked tar road overhung by a tunnel-archway of live oak trees and hanging Spanish moss. Then the sharp turn onto a dirt road barely wide enough for his car. Then another sharp turn through a brick archway onto another road that began the Bodoni property.

Only the brick archway made Hiram aware that he was entering another area. The thick, low-hanging, oak trees with the Spanish moss hanging like stalactites of white dust (funnel cobwebs?), the various thick bushes that thrived in the constant, near-evening shade; all were similar to the outside countryside just travelled.

Suddenly, after another sharp turn, the all-weather radials touched brick. But it was still difficult to see the brick road ahead. In addition to the low-hanging fog, visibility was poor because this was love bug season in Northern Florida. The yearly epidemic of the glued-together, randy flying insects had smashed against the windshield by the hundreds and Hiram could only view the road ahead through a blur of spattered love-bug guts and blood. . .and fog. . .and low-hanging Spanish moss.

Yes, thought Hiram Bodoni, everything was as it should be in a mystery. Except for the Manor itself.

The Manor was a newly-built Mansion in the style of an old Plantation. Had it been an authentic reproduction, the pillars and steps up to the porch would have triggered an instant flashback to gone with the Tara or anti-bellum Mandalay or those foxes of harrow. All this triggered

was one of Hiram's head ticks, because the house was made of orange brick!--including the pillars!--and the central air-conditioning unit, sitting next to the side of the house and large enough to cool a factory, was ugly.

Hiram pulled up in front of the Manor. When he got out of his air-conditioned car and hit the hot, humid air, his glasses fogged. He took the glasses off to wipe. Then he heard voices and, in the blur of his extreme myopia, saw shapes rush at him. Before he could put his glasses on, hands grabbed his arms and pinned him back against his car, while an arm pressed against his Adam's apple and other hands fluttered up and down his body.

Blur#1: "No gun!"

Blur#2:"No knife!"

Blur#3:"No underwear?"

Blur#1:"A wallet?"

Blur#2:"Not in his pants."

Blue#3:"Here it is in his jacket. . .--Jesus H. Christie, it's the relative! Nephew!"

All Blurs released Hiram.

"Jesus H. Christie, Mr. Bodoni! We're sorry!"

(Air pumping into lungs) "That's okay." (Voice scratchy but gaining in resonance) "I won't tell if you don't tell that I don't wear underwear. Underwear make my scrotum sweat. Get crotch itch."

Blur#2:"Sure, Mr. Bodoni. We understand. I got a bad case of seborrhea myself."

(On your scrotum? thought Hiram)

Blur#1:"And I got this anal itch."

"I need my glasses. I dropped them," Hiram Bodoni said out loud.

Blur#3:"Sure. Sure, Mr. Bodoni." Then as they searched for the eyeglasses:

Blur#1:Your uncle hired us since they started dumping the parts on the steps."

"Is this where they always dump on Uncle Ignazio? On the steps?"

Blur#2:"In front of the house, anyway. A car comes screeching up to this circle, keeps moving and drops a part onto the steps. Then beats it out. We thought you were another dumper--only more brazen."

"This brazen dumper," asked Hiram, "when was his last delivery?"

"Last night."

"What was in it?"

"A small box."

"How small?"

"About the size of a human ear."

"What was in it?"

"A human ear. --I think I see your glasses, Mr. Bodoni. But I'd never get 'em. I'm too heavy to get under there."

"So am I" and "me, too," said the other two blurs.

"Just guide me to them," said Hiram. "My arms are long and skinny. The human roto rooter, my mother used to call me."

On his belly, steered in the right direction, Hiram worked his way cautiously to a blur lump which he assumed were his glasses. Hiram reached out and touched his glasses. He put them on. Ah. Nice. Clear familiar underbelly of a car. Except for one thing. Attached to the muffler pipe, a human arm was cut off above the elbow with the hand making a fist. And in the fist, a note.

"Jesus H. Christie," thought Hiram, "the brazen dumper has dumped on me."

4: UNCLE IGNAZIO

"God, you're still homely, Nephew Hiram," said Uncle Ignazio.

"And you look even older than I thought possible, Uncle Ignazio," said Nephew Hiram.

"Now Hiram, it's not a nice thing to tell an old uncle he's even older."

"It's even worse, Uncle Ignazio, to tell a homely nephew he's homely."

"Not if the nephew doesn't wear underwear."

"Those Cretans snitched," said Hiram.

"Those Cretans are paid to snitch," said Uncle Ignazio.

"Speaking of pay, Uncle Ignazio--"

"But you are family, Hiram! Famiglia. Mishboche. Kin, as it were. Surely you don't expect"--(Groping for the word; then with great distaste)--"wages from your aging Uncle. Do you Hiram?"

"Yes I do, Uncle Ignazio."

"We'll talk about it later, Nephew Hiram."

"Goodbye Uncle Ignazio. Think I'll swing down to Appalachicola and have some of those great oysters before I head back to Atlanta."

"Room and Board, Hiram?"

"See you at the next family funeral, Uncle Ignazio."

"The use of the pool thrown in, Hiram."

"The nearest Travelodge, if you'd be so kind, Uncle Ignazio."

"What's your fee, greedy Hiram?"

"Two hundred and fifty dollars a day. Plus expenses. And the pool thrown in."

"My heart! George! A brandy!"

And from out of the darkness Dorian Gray appeared--no!--dissolved in. Like a trench coat.

The room was an enormous library. Wood paneled. Floor-to-ceiling bookcases, holding hundreds of red, leather-bound books. Between each bookcase was enough empty wall space to hang large paintings. All contemporary. All with the one subject: groupings of bald headed people; young men, women. Children? The subject's skins were very, very white and they were in various brooding attitudes and in environments so dimly lit that the bald, white figures seemed to be staring out at you from the abyss. The paintings, it's true, added a weird aura to the environment; but what was most striking about the room was the lighting. Every inch of space seemed to have its own special lighting. Subtly differentiated in some cases, starkly contrasted in others; almost totally dark in a variety of spots and blindingly lit in pin point spots in others. It was all so worked out that any minute move in any minute area of the room highlighted parts of your body differently.

Dorian Gray--nèe, apparently, George--was in total eclipse until Uncle Ignazio asked for the brandy. The first parts of George's body to dissolve in were his high cheekbones and forehead. Skull shot, thought Hiram. Next came cleft chin, long neck and the white-on-black striped body shirt and what remained of a bare arm above the elbow. Then came the eyes. Black onyx.

George stopped dissolving in and remained a torso-bust suspended in that incredible light in a corner of the room.

"George," repeated Uncle Ignazio, "a brandy for the old faggot."

The bust dissolved out.

"That's George," said Uncle Ignacio.

"Can George get the old faggot's nephew a brandy, too?" asked Hiram.

"On the job, my nephew?"

"What job, my uncle? There's only a job if one gets wages, fees, commissions. Tips."

"George!" Uncle Ignacio shouted into the darkness, "a brandy, too, for the old faggot's nephew." Then to Hiram, "I haven't said I wouldn't pay, my nephew. I'm trying to Greek down your price is all."

"I thought the offensive term was to 'Jew down?'"

"Not in Sicily. Where our family came from the Greeks were offensive; so it was to 'Greek down.'"

"Two hundred dollars," offered Hiram.

"My pacer can't stand this. But--well. . .ahhhhh--One hundred and seventy five dollars," countered Uncle Ignazio.

"One hundred and eighty," recountered Hiram.

"Agreed," said Uncle Ignazio. "One hundred and eighty dollars a week."

"--a day!"

"Done!" said Uncle Ignazio.

"So the Greeking is over."

"Yes," said Uncle Ignazio. "Time for a new game.--Anyway, the term is 'to Greek down.' 'Greeking' has anal intercourse connotations. However, if you want to discuss that--"

"Only if an asshole has been dumped on your driveway."

"Can't we take the time to reminisce first Hiram? I haven't had a proper family reminiscing sit down for ten years."

"Sentimental? Uncle Ignazio Bodoni? Sentimental?"

"I'm seventy two years old, nephew Hiram. I live a lot in and for the past now--and for proper sit downs."

"Because you're closer to dying?"

"Hiram, can't you speak in Euphemism? --talk about 'meeting your maker?' or 'confronting the grim reaper?' or 'going to your reward?' (that's a nice one)--or 'passing over.' I always liked 'passing

over.' Conjured up an image of a slow-motion Balletic leap onto a cloud-- or onto the bellies of two thousand soft cuddly pander bears or, better yet, onto the cottony tushies of two thousand cherubim."

"I'm sorry, Uncle Ignazio, but I hate euphemism and jargon. I mean really hate."

"I gather that's one of your problems as a playwright. You hit everything right on--" '---refuses to finesse the cutting edge of his too-explosive scenes.'"

"Ah," said Hiram. "A direct quote. I see you read the New York Times."

"Hiram, please! Of course I read the New York Times. If I only read the Tallahassee Democrat my brains would turn to calimari. And, yes; I did read the review in the New York Times. Made you feel like shit, I'll wager."

"Still does," said Hiram. "Where's that drink? And when do we talk about the brazen Dumper?"

"George! Hurry. The nephew requires booze! So do I--All right, Hiram, if we must talk about The Dumper, let's sit."

The black leather sofa Uncle Ignacio led Hiram to was actually made of of deep-brown leather, which the lighting made black. The sofa did not seem exceptionally long until you got up to it. It was enormous. Hiram and Uncle Ignazio sank into its softness and that immediately brought on a flood of light down onto the couch area; so blinding, so hot, that everything outside the light's perimeter became a blur.

"Have you noticed the lighting, Hiram?"

Hiram went all innocence. "Lighting? Is there something to notice about the lighting in this room?"

"The lighting was Michael's doing. Michael was one of my young men of yore. A genius at lighting. Outdoor shows in amphitheatres. Skyscraper plazas. Concert skulls. Theatre spectacles. Industrial shows. Insisted on doing this room.."

"And the paintings?" asked Hiram.

"That was Peter. Not Pan, but Tinker Bell. Depressing aren't they; the paintings. But he wasn't; strange to say. Peter I mean; he was gay--as in the old fashioned meaning; humorous, funny, witty, charming."

"The books?"

"Perry. A master at leather binding. The best leather. Rare, rare Perry."

"You seem always to choose artists."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"And George?" said Hiram, squinting and trying to find a trace of George outside the perimeter of light.

"George writes," said Uncle Ignazio.

"And what does George write?" said Hiram.

Skull and two arms holding brandy in brandy snifters suddenly shot into the light from the abyss.

"George writes plays," said George's voice, presumably attached to the snifters. "That's why they're dumping on Ignatz; because of my writings."

Hiram and Uncle Ignazio took the snifters. Then the skull and hands disappeared.

"That's nonsense," projected Uncle Ignazio into the abyss.

"That's not nonsense, Ignatz," projected back the voice of George from out in the abyss.

"Ignatz?" said Hiram; "George calls you 'Ignatz?'"

"George thinks that's cute; calling me Ignatz."

"Didn't the head Capo call you Ignatz?" said the voice of George out there somewhere.

"That's true. 'Piccididu Ignatz,' he'd call me," said Uncle Ignazio; and he became very Sicilian when he said it--thumb to fingers and shaking up and down of a suddenly hook-hand and a lot of turtle-neck pecking.

"Piccididu Ignatz. Then he'd pinch my cheeks and pat my ass."

"If Ignatz was good enough for the head Capo. . ." began the voice of George, then trailed off.

"You," said Uncle Ignazio, "you don't pat my ass; not the old ugly ass of Ignazio Bodoni. No."

"You pat mine. Isn't that enough?" said George from out there somewhere.

"At my age, it has to be," said Uncle Ignazio, sighing.

"What do George's writings have to do with the Brazen Dumper?" asked Hiram.

"You can address me directly, nephew Hiram," said a demanding, almost shouting George from the Abyss.

"Now, how can Hiram address you directly?" shouted Uncle Ignazio. "You insist on staying out there in the dark. And, as a result, it doesn't seem like you're in the same room."

"Yes," said Hiram, "the weird lighting."

"So," said Uncle Ignazio, "don't get overly sensitive, Georgie."

A scotch and soda--minus glass--came streaming in from the abyss and splashed all over Uncle Ignazio.

"Don't you ever call me, 'Georgie!'" said George's voice.

Hiram threw his glass and drink wildly into the abyss, jumped to his feet, reached out into the darkness, pulled George into the light and down onto the couch and slapped him across the face again and again.

"And don't you ever splash my Uncle again."

