



WASHINGTON D.C. AND MERIDIAN MS MURDER*

by

B. K. Barry

A Charles Earl Short Mystery, Featuring the Earl Family Brain Trust

(For an interactive reading experience, please read with a smartphone equipped with a QR code reader in hand—you might even read it with a child or grandchild and have a fine interactive, intergenerational, reading experience together!)

They dined on mince, and slices of quince,
Which they ate with a runcible spoon.
And hand in hand, at the edge of the sand,
They danced by the light of the moon.

Edward Lear, The Owl and the Pussycat, 1871

Dedication from B. K.

To Bill and Sandy Arlinghaus and
to Adeline Arlinghaus

on the occasion of their nearly simultaneous celebrations of
50th wedding anniversary and
1st birthday, respectively.

Two nearly coincident landmark celebrations!

ARRIVAL IN DC

“Oh, Charles,” Judy Earl commented to her husband, “look there’s the Washington Monument, the Capitol—how exciting—let’s see what else we see from the window of the train as we pull into Union Station in DC.” Once again, Charles Earl and his wife Judy were heading toward another international bridge tournament held by the American Bridge Congress (ABC). This time, however, instead of driving, the couple had chosen to take the train.

A few years ago, they had purchased a winter home in Meridian, Mississippi, where their son Ed and his family live. Now they were traveling from Meridian to DC for the tournament and after two weeks would return to their home in Meridian. Ed owned a craft beer ‘Brewtique’ there and was planning to use it as a venue to celebrate his parents’ 50th wedding anniversary shortly after their return from the tournament.

Soon, the couple arrived in a cab under the porte cochère of their giant hotel overlooking Rock Creek Park, near the National Zoo. Charles had stayed there many times, but it was a first for Judy and, as usual, she was enthusiastic about being in a new place!



As they entered the lobby, Charles saw a long check-in line and invited Judy to sit down around the obelisk center point. “Charles,” she said, “this makes me think of Alexandria and Eratosthenes and his great measurement of the circumference of the Earth. Look, the obelisk is pointing up to a skylight to let in the sun—reminiscent of the sun’s rays

going into the well at Syene!” Judy was a mathematical geographer and she often looked at things from a vantage point that might surprise others a bit. “Well,” Charles said, “I do agree that it reminds me of Eratosthenes, but when I think of him, I think of his prime number sieve!” Charles was a mathematician specializing in algebraic graph theory and number theory. Each saw different worlds, but by and large they complemented each other; hence their almost 50 years of a happy and successful marriage.



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eratosthenes>

Judy went and sat at one of the seats around the lobby obelisk, adjacent to the Lobby Lounge. While on the train, she had spent time playing Pokemon Go on her smartphone but had had trouble collecting enough Pokeballs to capture many Pokemon; the train went too quickly past most PokeStops. Now, at the obelisk, she noted that she was sitting at the intersection of two circles surrounding two local PokeStops. With GPS drift, she moved from one to the other, and managed to snare a fair number of PokeBalls and other desirable items. There was a Gym across the street, but not in range of the PokeStop. More important, she saw that both nearby PokeStops had had lures placed on them so she was able to capture numerous Pokemon while she waited for Charles. She had fun photographing the Pokemon in real-world settings, mixing animated imaginary animals into real-world settings: Pidgey checks in at registration, she thought! Of course, with a busy hotel lobby, it was difficult to isolate the Pokemon; people walking through the background often interfered with the sort of photo she might have liked to have. After a while, Charles reappeared. Judy was hesitant to leave her new-found post, but Charles insisted that they go to the room and unpack.

IN THE ROOM

“What a great view, Charles!” Judy said, “we can see the dome of the Capitol to the right, in the distance...look at the shrubs over there...I wonder what they are; they don’t look quite like our azaleas or our crepe myrtles in Meridian, but they are somewhat similar...”

Charles listened but offered no comment; his knowledge of plants and flowers was non-existent. But, he was happy his wife enjoyed them. Eventually, he did offer what he knew. “See the bridge over the parkway? Under the bridge, we have built a café called the “TrollGate Café” as one in the Alma Mater chain of restaurants.”



The Earls had created a nation-wide chain of restaurants, with various specialties, commemorating Judy’s mother, Alma, a great chef of the 20th Century, and also tied to the Earls’ profession as professors in universities...a double entendre that amused both of them and also had delighted Judy’s mother (who knew of a few of them before she died). “We will have to go there,” Judy said to Charles, “but in the meantime, let’s get settled quickly—I want to get back down to the Lobby and collect more PokeBalls and Pokemon.”

BACK IN THE LOBBY

Soon, Judy left to go back to the Lobby and capture more Pokemon. Charles just shook his head; he had no interest in Pokemon and thought the whole thing was a bit silly. But, then again, what could he say; he had come to play cards with thousands of other people. Perhaps running around hunting for Pokemon was not a whole lot different from hunting for tops at the duplicate bridge table and associated master points. Both of the

Earls were more than a bit on the compulsive side and both enjoyed collecting all sorts of things: from postage stamps, to coins, to master points, to Pokemon...was one different from the other? In many ways they all had elements of an 'augmented' reality to them.

Charles left the room and went down to the ABC office to see how the tournament itself was being structured and to talk to the many bridge administrators he knew during the decades he had served as one himself. Now, he had retired from that service, but really just couldn't let it go!

Judy took out her smartphone and began collecting items from the nearby PokeStops and capturing Pokemon. There was not too much of a challenge involved, but it was fun. In addition, the appearance of being occupied with the game let Judy engage in people watching and listening without arousing suspicion. Soon, a very attractive middle-aged woman from Finland, with beautiful blond hair on top of her large, tall, athletic frame--scantily clad in a black off-the-shoulder dress-- sat down a few seats from Judy. "Well, well, well," Judy thought; "let's see what/who turns up next." Judy was not disappointed; after about 2 minutes, a man in his early 60s sat down next to her. He told her he was a great bridge player and asked about her; was she a beginner? Did she play Stayman? The woman told him she was here practicing for the World Cup team of which she was a star member. Undaunted, the man continued to try to impress her; he picked up his smart phone and apparently phoned a fellow bridge player to apologize to him that he could not keep his lunch date with some world-class USA bridge player because he was in the lobby having a conversation with a beautiful, fascinating woman and they could not bear to part company. At this, the woman yawned loudly. Still, the man continued, as he changed his ego-oriented assault to one that attempted to get her to talk about herself. It turned out that she was a pediatric psychoanalyst. He asked her about her cases and she informed him, somewhat brusquely, that she did not discuss her patients with others and was certainly not going to discuss them with him. Now he reverted to his previous style, given the latest rebuff, and told her that he was an operations research professor who taught chemistry and mathematics at a major university in New York City, and that he did so for no pay as his kind donation to the

world at large. He claimed also to be an expert on autism and tried this approach to finding out more about her patients. He asked if she had heard about the most recent research, using the concept of a one-to-one correspondence, regarding autism and brain cell structure. The woman gave him an icy stare. He evidently interpreted that look as a lack of comprehension and so told her, incorrectly, what a one-to-one correspondence was....at that, Judy (who clearly knew the man was lying) dropped her phone on the floor lest she begin to take the man to task (verbally). Again he picked up his cell phone, and this time called his parents and talked to them briefly. When done, he explained to the woman what a loving and caring man he was, despite the incredible burden he was carrying with his own parents. At this point, the woman, who had perhaps been amusing her psychoanalytic mind with him, seemed to tire of playing with him, and simply stated that she was there waiting for her husband. Now the man dropped his phone on the floor and as he picked it up, pointed across the lobby at some short, undernourished, scruffy-looking man, and asked if that were her husband. She said no, as she stood up and walked away with a tall, handsome, muscular middle-aged man. At this point, the prospective suitor uncoiled himself from the chair and ran into the bar.

Life in the lobby was interesting. In addition to an occasional glimpse into the personal lives of some people, which oddly enough they wish to flaunt in open public spaces, there are the more usual comings and goings. It appears to take a certain mindset to want to show off in a hotel lobby. Indeed, it may even be a somewhat dangerous set of mind. The routine continued, oblivious to this odd interchange between two strangers. A man with a broken lower leg used a wheeled cart/scooter to get around; one leg was on the seat of the scooter and he used the well leg for normal walking. Judy thought about the strange pattern of footprints that an arrangement of that sort would produce in the snow or in the mud. Soon, a hotel bellman came to remove an upright piano from the lobby, which he did easily, alone. The wheeled piano seemed to glide across the polished floors with merely a slight touch. Judy reflected that those wheels must have brakes on them; otherwise the piano might go flying off under the pounding of an

overly-enthusiastic pianist! Charles's and Judy's friend, Dr. Bob walked by, in a hurry, but as always gave a big, pleasant 'hello!' He had been so helpful to Charles and to many others at various bridge tournaments; it was always delightful to see him, even if only for a fleeting minute—Charles and Judy had known the now-retired MD since he was a teenager.

Judy began to adjust her focus on a single woman sitting alone, and looking uncomfortable, on the other side of the lobby, close to the Lobby Lounge. She was wearing noise-cancelling headphones. Her slender body was coiled into a ball in a large over-stuffed chair. Judy thought this was a bit strange given that the acoustics in the lobby seemed quite good so that the noise level was certainly not overbearing. She was about to move over closer to this woman when she heard a voice from the other side of the lobby shout, "Hi Judy!" Judy put away her phone and went over to greet her friend, Faith. Faith and Bryan were just arriving; Bryan headed off to find Charles, with whom he was playing in a number of events, and Faith walked over toward Judy. "Let's go to the Lobby Lounge and sit and eat and drink and talk," Judy told her friend. Faith looked unsure but eventually agreed; it seemed as if she had something else on her mind.

IN THE LOBBY LOUNGE

"I hear the crab cake appetizer here is fantastic...and, large enough to share as a mid-afternoon treat" Judy said in an effort to get Faith back on track. "Sure, sure, Judy...whatever," Faith noted in a distracted manner. Soon, the attentive staff had brought the two women glasses of Merlot while they waited for their crab cakes. "Judy," Faith said, "we have a problem. You see, last year the wife of our dear friend, Bob, died; it was all very sudden and of course very sad. Now, I had often been a guest in their home. As you and I do, they also collected teddy bears. I had admired one beautiful bear that they had had hand-made from an out-of-style mink coat of hers. It was her favorite pet. About a month ago, Bryan and I received a package in the mail. From out of the blue, Bob sent us this bear. Naturally, I was delighted to receive the beautiful bear; we hadn't heard from Bob since his wife's funeral, so we were a bit concerned about what it might mean...much as some give away a pet prior to taking their

own lives. Well, we have had numerous conversations since with Bob and we encouraged him to get some professional grief counseling. He is doing that and I am very happy to say that he seems to be returning to his old self; obviously it is all very difficult. But, what we had not realized, until just recently, is that Bobby Bear (we named the mink bear in honor of his human family roots) also has a difficult problem.



As you know, we are here to play bridge. It turns out, however, that there is another small conference in the hotel: the Stuffed Animal Psychiatric Society (SAPS). We took Bobby to a specialist therapist at home where he was diagnosed with some sort of skin confusion identity crisis disorder that

causes him to think thinks he is a 'coat' rather than a bear. The therapist at home told us that this is a relatively recent disorder; it emanates from environmentalists who sprayed mink coats to keep women from wearing them. It's quite stressful, I understand. Not only does the poor bear not know what he is, but he often suffers from some of the same syndromes as do victims of terror attacks; he worries that people will pop up out of nowhere and attack him with cans of spray paint. We were told that there would be experts at this convention who were well-versed in the treatment of this problem. So, we brought Bobby with us; I have him right here. Isn't he beautiful?" "Oh, my," commented Judy, "yes, he certainly is. Let's put him right here. Will he leave your lap or do you want to wait until he is more secure?" "I think we should wait," Faith said, "and please, don't touch him...I know it is tempting to want to pet his lovely fur but he is overly sensitive right now."

The two women enjoyed the crab cakes and wine along with casual chit-chat and some discussion about bridge hands. Bobby said he wanted to play some three-handed bridge and so Judy pulled a deck of cards from her purse and deftly did a riffle shuffle followed by a cascade of cards. Bobby was delighted and asked for more...again, and again. After about the fifth time, the woman in the lobby near the Lounge, who was wearing the noise-cancelling headphones, ran to their table and grabbed the deck of cards and took it, saying she was hypersensitive to sound and could not stand the sound of cards snapping....here, at the bridge table (where she always wore headphones), or anywhere else. Bobby began sobbing...Judy snatched her cards back and the woman grabbed Judy and threw her on the floor and started elbowing Judy in the ribs. At this point, Dr. Bob came past again, pulled the woman off of Judy, examined Judy, and sent her up to her room as he and Faith carted the hypersensitive woman off to hotel security.

AT THE ALMA MATER TROLLGATE CAFÉ

Soon after Judy returned to the room, Charles came rushing back; Dr. Bob had found him downstairs and told him what had happened. Naturally, Charles was quite concerned about his wife and was relieved when he

came back to the room and found Judy looking around for Pokemon. “Looks as if you are doing ok...I hear you got mugged! Sassy, with the headphones, found you...she’s nuts” Charles said to his wife, “how about going over to the Alma Mater TrollGate Café?” Judy agreed. “But Charles,” she continued, “can we bring our network of assistants? You know they have been so helpful in the past in other locales. I think I’d feel a lot better, given what has happened, if I had their support. Also, I saw our friend Faith today and she brought along a pet; I suspect Theodore and the boys might get along quite well with him.” Charles agreed and so the whole group headed over to the TrollGate Café for drinks and food.

<i>Earl Family Brain Trust</i>			
		<p>Theodore E. Bear: A sedentary philosophically-inclined bear. Kind and thoughtful. A clear-thinker interested in the balance between pragmatics and abstraction. He worries about personal issues, such as being made into the bed, as well as broad-ranging issues involving world peace and global politics among all creatures, real and imaginary. He views himself as a dignified and proper teddy bear wearing a tuxedo—NOT as a panda. He is a native of Detroit, MI.</p>	
		<p>Binker Bear: Named after Christopher Robin’s [A. A. Milne, <i>When We Were Very Young</i>] “imaginary” friend Binker, as in “you can’t see Binker.” He lives largely in the realm of the imaginary, in the world of abstraction. In his “bear” persona he is physically quite large; he has a number of other personae he has been known to adopt. He is known to keep his cards close to his chest. Binker is originally from Paris, France, and was born at Galeries Lafayette. He is a part-time mystery story writer, too, known as ‘B. K.’.</p>	



Tine E. Bear: Named for his diminutive stature. Tine focuses on the pragmatics of life. He feels he has to do so...as a small creature in the world of giants. He enjoys playing duplicate bridge, as an equalizer, and has a fine partnership with Binker who is large enough to use a bidding box. Tine emigrated from Paris with Binker, but is originally from a US Zone in Germany (as his tag says). His genealogy is rooted in the Vintage (mohair) Branch of the prestigious Steiff Family.

After some time, Bryan and Faith and Bobby also entered the Café. “Charles, let’s have them join us,” Judy said. Charles agreed and the two groups got together and performed introductions. “Bobby,” Theodore insisted, “you must share some of my Mead; it is a particularly fine honey wine—do you know it?” “Well, I am not sure,” the timid bear replied. “I think he could have a taste,” Faith commented, “just not too much at once. It is very nice of you Theodore and indeed perhaps just what the doctor ordered. You see, Bobby has been in analysis all afternoon and one of the things the expert psychoanalyst recommended to help him over his skin identity crisis was to associate with other teddy bears and participate in their various conversations and rituals. I didn’t know teddy bears drank Mead, but I suppose it makes sense. I don’t think Bobby has ever had Mead, though.” Bobby appeared to enjoy his drink and his dinner companions; after dinner the group went their separate ways, but Theodore took Bobby’s smartphone contact information and promised to get back to him soon again.

AT THE BRIDGE TOURNAMENT

“Charles, I don’t know if I can stand much more of this,” Judy complained to her husband; “that woman with the headphones, Sassy, is driving me crazy—it is very hard to play bridge against her, and since the episode where she mugged me, all she does is glare at me as she goes around the room. I don’t know what security must have done to her, but clearly she has become even more hostile since that event.” “Judy,” her patient

husband noted, “you need to take advantage of people like that. She is distracted; at the bridge table, it is good when the opponents are distracted, but to gain benefit from it, you need to keep a tight focus on the card game...they are not and they will do dumb things and you need to take advantage of the opportunity.” Charles knew he was wasting his time; he had explained this philosophy to Judy on many occasions. All good bridge players knew this. But he knew that Judy was too reflective and sensitive; fine qualities in a person, but not qualities that paid off at bridge tournaments. So, he did not pursue the discussion but simply led by example and kept his own focus. “Next board,” he said.

The next few rounds went fairly smoothly and Charles was happy to snag a few average plusses and one top that he manufactured out of whole cloth. Then, all of a sudden, Sassy jumped up out of her seat about ten tables over, and shrieked “you filthy card-snapping pig...you should burn in hell...I hope your smoked oysters catch on fire and choke your pet cat...” and ran from the room with a howl trailing behind. Judy dropped her cards all over the floor and began shaking and sobbing...“I can’t take it! I just can’t take it.” A director came running over; the game stopped while the head director conferred with some of the others. Charles got up from the table and went over to join the group as they consulted. After about 10 minutes, Charles returned to the table and said to his wife, “Let’s go.” Sassy of course had been ejected (and so her partner left too). Charles volunteered to withdraw their pair in order to balance the movement.

IN THE LOBBY LOUNGE, AGAIN

Charles took Judy to the Lobby Lounge for a glass of wine and a bite of food. Just as they settled down at a table, they heard a big “Halll-o-o-o-o” emanating from the other side of the bar...it was Theodore! They went over to their table “Join us,” insisted the happy bear, “we are just having some Mead...I am buying for the table...” “Theodore,” said Charles, “don’t you mean that in fact *I* am buying for the table...aren’t you charging your extravagance to our room?” Bobby looked worried...Binker reassured him that it was just an ongoing joke between Charles and Theodore and that all

was fine. “Well, Charles,” the bear said as he waved an expressive paw, “I wanted to make our new friend comfortable...you know, when I order one round of four, Tine only drinks a few drops, and Bobby is just a beginner...Binker and I drink most of theirs. We are thus only on our fourth round...” Charles noted that that was probably more than enough, but that he was glad that Bobby was relaxing with the group. “Next time, though, please ask first,” admonished Charles.

With that settled, the group had fine times comparing odd or interesting experiences of the day. Judy spent most of her share of the conversation going on about the antics of Sassy and photographing Pokemon in interesting situations. “See,” Judy waved in pointing out the woman to the bears, “there’s Sassy over there in her characteristic pose, curled up in that large chair near a plug in the wall, playing on her smartphone, and sporting her headphones....irritating just to look at!” Charles was more interested in discussing bridge hands, but found few receptive as others appeared more involved in the fine points of Mead and other honey products. Bobby seemed to relax and come out of his shell and enjoy being a teddy bear; the analyst from SAPS had apparently given him good advice and Theodore, Binker, and Tine were all very helpful; they were a diverse group in many ways, yet clearly still teddy bears. Bobby could see the similarities and also appreciate that differences exist within the kingdom of teddy beardom.

As the bridge game ended, and other players came down to the Lounge area, the hotel staff wheeled the upright piano into the lobby near the bar. The local arrangements chair announced that tonight’s post-game entertainment was a joint venture between the ABC and SAPS. She introduced Roddo the Great, a world-class bridge player who was also an outstanding pianist (as the ABC rep) and Gordo the Great, an animal balloon artist, (as the SAPS rep). Judy had long been a fan of both Roddo and Gordo. Apparently, Bobby had seen Gordo in action earlier; SAPS hired him to illustrate to the stuffed animals with identity crises that there were kingdoms of all sorts, including a balloon animaldom one. Gordo worked the crowd while Roddo thrilled the group with both classical and contemporary music. Gordo came running when he saw Judy...he had

known both Judy, and her mother Alma, for years. He took special pains to make a special balloon sculpture; Bobby was thrilled.



“Wow, a squirrel,” Bobby exclaimed, “but you see, feel his skin...it’s different, but that’s ok...I know that and he knows it...you see, he is happy in his skin, AND SO AM I. I love being here with all of you!” As Roddo finished his last piece and Gordo finished his last sculpture, the crowd began to dissipate.

Judy said to Charles, “let’s go before I have to look at that woman again!” Charles agreed and the group got their stuff together, ready to head upstairs. Charles took a cursory glance in Sassy’s direction; hmmm, he thought, she looks odd—somewhat gray in the face. “Judy,” you and the boys go on upstairs; I will be up, but it might take a while.” With that, Judy left and Charles rushed over to the piano where he had earlier seen Dr.

Bob talking to Roddo. He found the good doctor and the two of them went over to where Sassy was sitting. “No doubt about it, Charles,” Dr. Bob announced, “she is dead...probably strangled with her phone charging cord...would be easy to do, especially in a crowded room with people mesmerized by two incredible talents.” “Oh dear,” commented Charles. “Charles,” the doctor continued, “you stay here and keep people away and I will go get the authorities.” With that, the doctor left; Charles, in the meantime, took a nearby napkin and secured the items he found near the scene (and took a look at Sassy’s smartphone while he had the opportunity) so that no fingerprints would accidentally get smudged by passers-by.

Soon the police arrived, escorted by hotel security and Dr. Bob. Charles remained to talk to them; he had had considerable investigative experience, albeit totally amateur, of course. But, he was a master at logic and at creating plausible sequences of logic from otherwise apparently unrelated events. About all he could comment on at this point was to give the police Sassy’s full name, details about the city in the Midwest she was from, and describe her quirky behavior patterns and consistent use of noise-cancelling headphones. He also noted that any bridge player who had been somewhat regular at national tournaments in the past decade would have known her and would have found her to be one of the most irritating people in the room. That is, motive based on dislike might be abundant; however, murder hardly seemed a likely response to her persistent, irritating behavior.

BACK IN THE HOTEL ROOM

Charles returned to the room to find that Judy and the boys, including Bobby, had ordered tuna salad sandwiches and Merlot for the group; they were having fine times. Thus, it came as a particular surprise when Charles announced to Judy that they were leaving on the next train to return to Meridian—in the morning. He said that he had talked to Bryan and Faith, and that if Bobby wanted to come with us to Meridian, it would be fine with them...he could visit for a while.

Then, as Judy began quickly packing, Charles explained what had happened and that he was certain it was best for Judy, at least, to get back to one of their homes. They all agreed, and Bobby said he wanted to travel with them; he noted that he had originally travelled to Faith and Bryan inside a box and that he could do it again; for now, though, he wanted to be with his new teddy bear friends although of course he loved Faith and Bryan very much and would miss them.

ON THE TRAIN

After a final good night's sleep in DC, the group climbed on board the train for a long trip back to Meridian (at least 22 hours). Theodore, Binker, and Tine had only once been on a train; it was a brand new experience for Bobby. The group was fortunate to get seats on short notice in Business Class; it was much better suited to this group than Coach Class, whereas Sleeper Car accommodations seemed hardly necessary for a trip of only one day. There were just a few others in the car with them so they were able to spread out and get comfortable. They plugged in their smartphones so they could play games, drink, talk, and eat, until they fell asleep yet still have fully charged phones when they got off in the morning. Charles took out his laptop and played bridge online; Theodore ordered a round of Mead for himself and the boys; Judy hunted for Pokemon.

After some time of sleeping, playing, eating, drinking, and gazing out the window, the train arrived in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. They knew it would not be too long until they arrived back in Meridian. Judy phoned their son, Ed, to let him know where they were. Ed said that he might be tied up when they arrived and unable to meet them at the train station; apparently there was some sort of issue involving Dirk, the front of the house guy, at the Brewtique. But, Ed told her that he would phone his friend Donny to see if Donny could pick them up instead. Ed promised to text back soon to confirm arrangements. Soon, a text came from Ed saying that Donny would be on the platform to help them in Meridian and that he would then bring the entire group to the Brewtique for lunch.

ARRIVAL IN MERIDIAN

Soon the train drew to a halt and the conductor helped the group onto the platform at Meridian. “Hi, Donny” Judy said, “hope you didn’t have to wait too long!” “Oh, no, it was fine,” Donny replied, “let’s go over to the Brewtique and play some trivia. I walked; it’s a beautiful day. Let me pull your suitcases for you.” As they walked, Donny filled them in some on Ed’s difficulty; Donny worked part-time at the Brewtique as a game show host. It appeared that Dirk, the front of the house manager at the Brewtique had been mishandling hiring practices and inventory management as well as other items. Ed had needed to stay at the bar because he was in the middle of doing some emergency inventory work and needed to keep track of his counts of beer kegs. Soon the group had walked the two short blocks in the pleasant Mississippi weather to Ed’s craft beer bar which boasted more craft beer on tap than any other place in the state.

After greetings were exchanged, the group sat down to play Buzztime Trivia, a favorite of all the humans there, as well as of Binker. Theodore, Tine, and Bobby chimed in when they thought they knew an answer, but it was Binker, Judy, Charles, Ed, and Donny who were core players, along with John and Jill, RK and Susan, Kelvin, Timmy, Jake, Alice, and Rick, who were not there right now. Indeed, the Brewtique consistently finished in the top 20 in North America, under the guidance of subsets of this team, and were often in the top 10. In fact, the last two times they had played together, they had ranked Number 1 and Number 2 in North America, as a bar. As Donny had noted on more than one occasion, ‘Practice Makes Perfect.’ They were quite serious when they played! Thus, when Dirk interrupted them, saying “well, you don’t look as if you are doing very well this game; probably won’t be in the top group,” it made Judy feel as if she had not left the unpleasant bridge game in DC. Charles admonished her “focus, Judy, focus—it’s just ‘Dirk the Jerk’ popping off!” The team played six games and scored in the top 20 in all of them; Dirk (whose negative predictions had not come true) left shortly thereafter while the group stayed on and enjoyed some fine local Mississippi craft beer (that cannot be exported out of state) along with local ‘hoop’ cheese, custom sausage, and

deep fried beer-steamed sauerkraut balls, as a charcuterie platter to go with fine beer.

Soon, the conversation turned to Dirk and his various inadequacies. Ed told the group that as the Brewtique had been in need of extra staff in the recent past, and Dirk claimed he had no applications of any merit, Ed had discovered a whole pile of applications, including one from Donny who had over 12 years of experience in the food service business and outstanding references. Dirk had put that one at the bottom of the pile. Dirk had also sorted the applications according to biological sex and had put at the bottom of that pile any women who were married or might be older. Naturally, when Ed saw this, he devoted more time to investigating the activities of a man whom he had trusted to oversee this business while he worked at building more new businesses and employment opportunities in support of the renaissance of downtown Meridian. While Judy and Charles were away, Ed discovered kegs and kegs of hidden stored beer, as well as hundreds of extra bottles of beer. Despite the huge backlog, Dirk continued to buy the usual order, twice a week, from the beer distributors. At best, Dirk did not know what he was doing. Ed was interested in completing the inventory as quickly as possible so that he would have iron clad support, along with unpaid bills, for firing Dirk. Most regulars had come to dislike Dirk, as evidenced by their cute nickname of 'Dirk the Jerk' which they often used in front of him, but that alone, even when coupled with suspicions of other problems, were not sufficient for firing Dirk...at least not in Ed's careful mind. He said he hoped to have Dirk out by the end of the month.

Judy told Ed that that was enough about restaurant administrative issues. Meanwhile, she was focused once again on taking photos of Pokemon in interesting positions. Ed had set a lure on the PokeStop next door so the hunting was spectacular. Judy was particularly amused at capturing a Pokemon in a pint of reddish Mississippi Hibiscus beer, 'Dracula's Delight'! The group had had a great time at lunch and in the early afternoon and now it was time to move on while retaining the positive energy of friends and fun.



BACK HOME, COUNTRY CLUB DRIVE

“Welcome back!!” a high-pitched voice yelled from the bedroom.

“Guillaume,” Judy shouted... “great to hear you!” Guillaume R. Squirrel was yet another in the group of assistants that sometimes accompanied Charles and Judy to bridge tournaments. This time, he had requested to stay home

so that he might assist Ed in planning events for the Earl's upcoming 50th wedding anniversary parties.



SPECIAL AGENT, Guillaume R. Squirrel: A linguist who is the Master Teacher of all languages to all teddy-type creatures in the Earl world. Guillaume is highly articulate and will chatter endlessly on a vast array of topics—some of greater interest than others. He claims to possess a copyright and trademark on his unique pronunciation of the word “hmmmmph!!” which he uses to express a variety of feelings. Guillaume’s gray coloration, along with his natural athletic talent and structural engineering background, make him an ideal undercover agent in a variety of environments. Guillaume, a world traveler like some of the others, emigrated from Toronto, Ontario, but was born in North Korea.



“Look, Guillaume, we brought you a present,” Judy said, “remember Gordo the Great? He made a balloon animal especially for you! Charles named it Guillaume le Deuce. I call him ‘Deuce’ for short.” “Hmmmmph,” Guillaume retorted, “I suppose you think that’s ‘cute’....well, it’s not!”

Downright insulting, I'd say...no self-respecting squirrel would have anything to do with him...only good thing is his name...'Deuce' indeed, well at least he knows his place, as secondary to moi ! But, I will do my job and train the interloper to talk...he won't hang around for long, though. Ha, ha, ha....that'll deflate him!"

"Guillaume," Charles said sharply, "I want you on your best behavior...be nice...we also brought a wonderful houseguest, Bobby Bear; he is a kind and sensitive fellow; you be nice!" "All right, all right," the mouthy squirrel chattered, "if it isn't one houseguest it's another...and I suppose I need to be nice to Charles's brother, FranJo, when he comes for your anniversary celebration...you could express appreciation...the Franjo mints I ordered for you arrived...work, work, work, that's all your squirrel does while you are out galavanting around in DC, a squirrel's work goes unnoticed and unappreciated...poor moi!" "Guillaume, that's enough," Judy said, "you know we appreciate you...now, what's this about celebrations and mints?...you know Charles absolutely loves Franjo mints!" "Ooops," Guillaume said, "spilled the beans, or do I mean mints...then again, maybe I just made it all up...now, where is Bobby, I want to meet him and assess his linguistic potential." At that, Guillaume took Bobby and Deuce on a tour of the house and grounds; Bobby was particularly fascinated by the outdoor pool area.



A FIRST BIRTHDAY PARTY

After the house tour, Guillaume got busy making arrangements for a party in honor of the first birthday of Charles' and Judy's great granddaughter, Adele. Soon the entire extended family would arrive: the Earl's son Ed, his friend Alice, Ed's son Rick, Rick's partner Kim, and their two children, Adele and Eddie. Ed also arrived with Charles's brother FranJo who had taken the City of New Orleans train from Chicago south to Jackson where Ed had picked him up and driven him to Meridian. FranJo had been the best man at the wedding, nearly 50 years earlier.

Guillaume set up everything outside around the pool: a cake with one candle, platters of food, and various decorative items. Theodore set about setting up a Mead bar for the bears while Ed was bringing growlers of craft beer. In fact, Ed and Rick had created a custom 'beer tail' called an "Alma Mater" in honor of Judy's mother, Alma. Mississippi craft beers were blended in a formula to create a beverage that tasted like scotch...beer that tasted like a blended scotch whisky, Alma's favorite.

Bobby was quite excited but Theodore warned him to protect his eyes when around small human children. He took Bobby down the driveway and showed him a tree. "Wow" Bobby exclaimed, "I have never seen a tree like that!" "It is a quince tree," Theodore replied. "Some of the fruit is ripe; some is still green. We must harvest the ripe ones so that we can enjoy them in various ways." So, the two bears each picked up one of the heavy ripe quinces that had fallen off the tree and carried them back to the house; they did so a number of times. After that, they were ready to sit down and enjoy a nice party.



Soon they were all enjoying cake and tea sandwiches and drinks around the pool. Adele and Eddie splashed in the pool with their parents. As the sun set on the happy group, all was well in Meridian...or at least that is what everyone at this party thought.

MORE PARTIES

The next day, the entire group went out to Northside Country Club for a New Orleans style feast of double pork chops, garnished artistically with microgreens and accompanied by a fried green tomato and crab stack with house made remoulade. They returned to the Earls' home for wine, Mead, and cake. There, Guillaume brought out his gift to the Earls: a 50 pound bust of Charles carved out of Franjo mint chocolate...the little squirrel was absolutely beside himself with delight as he giggled uproariously at his surprise for Charles! It was a marvelous small party for family and friends in celebration of the 50th wedding anniversary of Charles and Judy.

Finally, on Sunday, there was a large party that Ed hosted at his Brewtique. There was fine bar food, cake, custom craft beer tails, and more. Some of the group played trivia; others played Pokemon and took interesting photos; yet others sat around and talked about any number of topics of

mutual interest. At one point, the group demanded to know from Charles and Judy the formula for a long and happy marriage; that was simple, as Judy announced “enjoy good times together—everyone has problems; focus on the good times to create ever-lasting memories that will bond you together for life.” After much food and beer, over the course of six hours or so, the group finally broke up; the bar closed and people went to their respective homes for a good night’s sleep following much partying. They had indeed had good times together.

A GRUESOME DISCOVERY AND SADNESS

In the few days following the fine weekend, there were difficult times at the Brewtique. In the course the continuing detailed inventory of the beer kegs, the staff had found a number of ‘hidden’ untapped kegs. There were way too many kegs; the inventory had been badly mismanaged for quite some time. Ed, with his characteristic care, insisted that the group get way back inside the gigantic cooler; it was dark and cold in there. They went in with flashlights. There was evidence of corrosion from a leaking keg of hard apple cider; a drink with pH representing the acidity of many colas that would dissolve a penny. It also looked as if there were leakage from the backup kegs of ‘Dracula’s Delight,’ the brilliant red Mississippi hibiscus beer.

Ed was naturally quite concerned about the leaking and went back into the dark recesses of the cooler. There he found that it was not the hibiscus beer that was leaking; instead, he found a gruesome scene. There was a human arm on the floor behind one keg, and a leg behind another. Soon, he found Dirk’s scowling head looking up at him; it had a smartphone charging cord around the neck. The blood red carbonated fluid on the floor of the cooler was indeed blood; Dirk’s blood had mixed with the leaking hard cider. It was not the hibiscus beer.

Some of the staff fainted. Ed phoned his friends in the Coroner’s office and in the police department. Soon a whole group arrived from the nearby City Hall. After the shocking scene, of course the bar closed. Investigation continued. Charles and Judy came to the aid of their family.

HAVE GOOD TIMES TOGETHER?

Right now, the Earl family was not having good times together. Judy reiterated, however, that everyone has bad times...what's needed are the good ones to keep things on an even keel and flowing ahead in constructive directions. Some did not appreciate her logic—these times seemed way too hard; others, however, did. Theodore, who could turn any situation into a party, did so now.

“Come, come,” the philosophical bear said, “let’s sit together and talk about what has happened, why it might have happened, and how we can constructively support each other. I will get drinks and food as we ponder the deep structure of the situation. Mead all around, please! And, Guillaume, you have something for the group, I believe? And, Bobby, you do too?” As Theodore returned with the Mead, Guillaume brought out an extra box of Franjo Mints that he had ordered, and Bobby trotted out of the kitchen with a platter of sliced, fresh quince. Theodore quipped:

“ ‘They dined on mints, and slices of quince,
Which they ate with a runcible spoon.’ ”

Now, let’s think about the structure of that couplet which is now an altered form, in spelling and meaning, but not in sound, of Lear’s original. Please note the similar sound, but different spelling of ‘mince’ and ‘mints’. It is a good thing they are spelled differently for otherwise one could not distinguish the fruit filling of a traditional British Christmas pie from an after dinner piece of candy. This is an important idea, certainly in terms of language structure, but perhaps elsewhere in the world, too. Things that look or sound identical may not be. What we sense in one way, may in fact be something else when looked at in another way. Then, in a perhaps, or perhaps not, related manner, we see the word ‘runcible’ which is, according to dictionaries, not really a word that exists in any human language; only in the poem by Edward Lear. Yet, even though we cannot ascertain its meaning through traditional means, we do, I think have a sense of what it means. Guillaume,” the thoughtful bear continued, “what do you think when you hear the word ‘runcible’?” “Well,” the squirrel linguist stated, “I

am confident that it is a spoon that one can eat from and that it is a very beautiful spoon because the poem has romantic overtones and the spoon needs to fit in with those.” “Thank you, Guillaume,” Theodore said. Charles interjected that he thought Lear had simply made up a word that would fit with the meter of the poem. Undeterred by this pragmatic approach, Theodore asked Binker the same question that he had asked of Guillaume. “I think,” Binker said, “it’s a spoon that has a bad flavor on it, sort of rancid, and that’s because owls and pussycats should not be dating each other—it’s unnatural, just a like the adjective ‘runcible’ is unnatural.” “That is an interesting point, Binker” Theodore commented, “would the rest of you agree that ‘runcible’ is an adjective?” They all agreed. “And how do we know it is an adjective? It’s because of its context; sometimes context can tell you more than single isolated facts and their technical or formal meaning. The meaning of ‘runcible’ is irrelevant in determining its part of speech. Yet, if you saw only the word with no context, you could not tell what part of speech it was; you might guess it was an adjective but you would not be certain. True?” They all agreed--everything Theodore had said was true. A number of them also thought that they had had enough of this sort of conversation for the day. Theodore had successfully distracted their minds from the tragedy of the day. But now one part of the group left. Only Theodore, Ed, Binker, and Judy remained behind; they continued the discussion and let their minds dance by the light of the moon as they debated whether a carrot has a rational soul.

LOGIC RULES

The following morning, Charles called the whole group together on the patio at the edge of the pool. “As usual,” he said, “even though Theodore’s musings often give me a headache after a while, he does have some good points that have set me to thinking in terms of developing a logical train of thought about what might reasonably have happened in regard to the tragedy discovered yesterday at the Brewtique.

First of all, it seems clear that Dirk had harmed many in his general mismanagement. He had threatened staff with firing; he had offended folks who deliver beer; he had upset customers with his inattention to detail, and

he had mishandled inventory. Perhaps most serious, he had denied opportunity to earn a living to well-qualified individuals. Almost anyone in town might have had a desire to get rid of him; but murder? It seemed to me that only those who had applied for jobs and not gotten them might have a motive for murder—getting him out of the picture was retaliation for his abuse in not considering qualified individuals and it also opened up his job which would then need to be filled by a qualified individual. Before Ed came over here this morning, I texted him to bring me the stack of applications of those whom Dirk rejected or did not consider. While I was waiting for all of you to gather here, I had a chance to sort through them briefly to see who might be particularly well-qualified within that stack. I would like to go over thoughts with all of you; please interject as you have comments or pieces of information.

First, there was a married woman, named Grace, who was 55 years old. She was applying for the position of cook, at a time when we needed one. She had worked as a sous-chef in a major New Orleans restaurant and presented well-known names in that world as references. She had at one point owned her own small restaurant. She had a degree in culinary arts from a recognized culinary school and she submitted a transcript showing good grades and offered to follow up on it with an official transcript. Although she was married, her husband had been injured and was confined to a wheelchair. She was the sole source of income for her immediate family. In addition, she had four children, one of whom still lived at home while he went to college. Dirk did not even give her a thought. Instead, he had moved a 21 year old nightclub singer, single woman, to the top of the heap. She had no restaurant or culinary experience and offered no references. It appeared she was a high school dropout who may have spent some time in jail, perhaps for prostitution. Certainly the older woman would have had a substantial grievance here.

Then, there was a younger man. You know him—Donny, the guy who met us at the train and who works as a game show host part time at the Brewtique. Ed noted that Dirk was not happy when Ed hired Donny as a part-time game show host. Now we know why. Dirk had dismissed Donny from any serious consideration for regular employment at the Brewtique.

But, Donny also had impeccable credentials. He had 12 years of service in the food industry with some of them in a bar not unlike the Brewtique. He had been a cook and had a culinary degree from a fine school. He had worked in a restaurant in New York City where he still retained connections with some of the top chefs there. He identified persistence, creativity, and imagination as his strong suits and said he enjoyed the challenge of creating paired food/beverage and entertainment events and that he had worked on such in helping to create the large scale 'Taste of Chicago'. While in Chicago, he had enjoyed helping to cater events in the spectacular Presidential Suite of the Chicago Hilton and Towers that had once been the home of Elizabeth Taylor. Indeed, he had led a fascinating life to date and bringing that experience to the Brewtique would have been a big plus to us in helping to put our bar on the map and perhaps in line for a feature on the Food Network. But Dirk did not even consider him. Donny must have been devastated. He had returned to Meridian from the large city scene because his aging parents needed him; having a good job was critical. Of course, with his talent he could find another job, but finding one that was right up his alley, such as ours, was not easy. Further, it must have been aggravating for him to come to the Brewtique every week in his hosting capacity and see Dirk, 'the jerk with a smirk.'

Now, these were the top two (in terms of motive) as far as I could tell, although I did not even want to conceive that either one of these terrific people might have been pushed over the edge by Dirk's outrageous behavior. Nonetheless, I persist with reasoning. So, the next question is, when was Dirk murdered? It appears to me that he must have been murdered during the time we were having all these parties. It was well-known that we were doing so. And, it was during those times that Ed, Rick, and others were not at the Brewtique. Dirk was there, sometimes alone, at night. Fortunately, both Ed and Rick have alibis; they were with us! Either Grace or Donny knew their way around a kitchen, knew how to butcher large animals, and of course would know that putting a body in a cooler was a good way to interfere with timing of decay. Such practice could serve as a way to create an alibi. They also both knew, from previous employment, how to handle beer kegs, and both knew their local craft beer

types, and thus could no doubt have imagined using Dracula's Delight as a cover for blood. They both had the means. Alas, we will know more about the timing issue only when we hear back from the coroner. For now, I will assume that the murder took place during one of our parties, until I hear to the contrary, about any other possible opportunities in time.

So, based on the initial assumption involving decisions about hiring as the strongest motivator, I think it's pretty much of a tie between these two: Grace, at age 55, was far less employable than the younger Donny although both have great talent. Donny is probably physically stronger than Grace, but that may not have been relevant given the dismemberment. Donny has a key to the Brewtique as a consequence of his part time work, but again that seems largely irrelevant because any time Dirk would have been there the place was probably unlocked anyway. Seems like a toss-up at this point.

Then I began to think about what our brilliant philosopher, Theodore, had to say last night. Are there two things that look the same, but in reality are quite different, as in 'mince' and 'mints'? And, are there isolated pieces of information which seem to have no function or meaning, but when put into the proper context have a clear function or meaning, as in 'runcible' or 'a runcible spoon' (where it becomes clear that 'runcible' is in fact an adjective)? I will refer to the first phenomenon as 'double', or perhaps I should say 'deuce' (inspired by Guillaume le Deuce), and to the second one as 'context'.

One thing that is often asked of suspects is to produce an alibi. I had heard, via gossip at the Brewtique, that Grace was going to Dallas to visit some of her children and grandchildren. I don't know when she was going or how reliable the information might have been. I do know that the only flights that leave Meridian go to Dallas. She could have timed things to make what appeared to be an airtight alibi. But, that can be determined and checked out. It is logical that she might have grandchildren and that she might visit them; but it is premature to check all this out until we have scientific evidence on the time of death.

Where Donny is concerned, he has no apparent alibi; he was here in Meridian the whole time. He met us at the train; then he played trivia with us and came to a big party where he appeared to be his usual peppy self.

But, when I began to think about this a bit more, that smartphone cord around the neck kept nagging at me. I had seen one before. Are all smartphone cords the same? Indeed, I had seen one around the neck of Sassy in DC and then around the neck of Dirk in Meridian. Both were murdered. Was this a 'deuce' situation like the sound of 'mince' and 'mints'? What might be the difference in 'meaning' behind the two murders? The murder of Sassy was odd; she was an irritating woman, but hardly seemed the sort someone would kill; the risk of doing so was greater than any possible benefit. Or at least it appeared that way. So, perhaps Sassy's was a 'random' murder of some sort. Whereas, it seemed obvious that Dirk's murder had been carefully planned and carried out.

But that consideration brings up the question as to whether it was possible for these two murders, almost a thousand miles apart, to have been committed by the same killer. Without Theodore's comments, I might never have considered this idea. I know that Donny is a very intelligent young man. I would expect that if he were to plan an elaborate murder that he certainly would provide himself with an alibi. So, the fact that he appears to have none is odd in and of itself. He was in Meridian the whole time, he says. Perhaps, then, that is an alibi for NOT being in DC—that is, being in Meridian is an alibi, in itself, for some other event? But, if he were not in Meridian the whole time, and were in fact in DC, how did he work the arrangement of picking us up at the train station? The answer of how this could be done has to do with different ticket classes on the train.

Remember, we were in Business Class. There is also Coach Class. When Ed phoned Donny, assume Donny was on the train (unbeknownst to Ed), in Coach Class. Donny agreed to pick us up. The train stops first to let off riders in Coach Class. Donny got off. Then, the train moves forward to let off passengers from Business Class. We got off; Donny was already on the platform. Remember, he said he did not have to wait long for us. He also said he had walked to the train station. Those statements could all have been true. We assumed that when Ed contacted Donny that both

were in Meridian; however, that need not have been true. Smartphones are great; Ed played right into Donny's hands when he phoned him to pick us up—if we hadn't all been on the same train, Donny could simply have told Ed he was busy and not have aroused suspicion. Being able to fulfill Ed's request, however, made a much stronger alibi for him—the alibi that he was in Meridian and not in DC. So, from a logistics standpoint, Donny could have taken off for a few days and still appeared to have been around given that he picked us up at the train. This is a 'context' issue; we assumed because we saw him pick us up that he was coming from the Brewtique, whereas in fact he, too, had just come from the train. A check at his day job might reveal information about timing possibilities.

Even though that is all possible, why would Donny want to go to DC and murder some woman he presumably did not know by strangling her with a phone cord? There we look to meaning, again. The real focus, carefully planned, was in Meridian. Perhaps the DC murder was part of that plan. Assume that Donny has never murdered anyone. We know him to be a careful person; indeed, many times I have heard him, while playing trivia, comment that 'practice makes perfect' or, 'that was just a warm-up game.' When he was planning the perfect murder of Dirk, he needed to practice, and he needed to do so in a different locale in order to avoid detection, should he be awkward in his first effort. Thus, he went to a large city to a hotel hosting a major conference. He did not know that we would also be there. So, why did he choose Sassy? She was probably convenient; she sat alone and others stayed away from her because no one could stand to be near her lest she accuse them of abusing her with excessive noise. Also, she was quite slender so Donny could learn how much force he needed to apply to a phone cord in order to choke her quickly. Once he had gauged that, he could determine if ramping up the force would work for the beefy-necked Dirk.

Now, in this case, I do actually have the possibility for getting some evidence. I noticed the other day that Donny often wears white tennis shoes and that they are quite clean in appearance. Yet they do not look new. So, I assume that he is careful about keeping them clean. After Sassy was murdered, I had the opportunity to 'take' her recent smart phone

photos from her phone. You will recall that she took many photos and played with her camera and Pokemon images in much the way that Judy does, by superimposing Pokemon characters on real world scenes. The last photo she shows is that of a person wearing white tennis shoes, apparently near her, with a 'Pidgey' on his feet. The shoes had a mark on them that appeared to be some sort of nasty black crescent-shaped smudge on the left shoe on the instep side and flopping over to cover the top of the laces. Judy, may I see your smartphone?" The group waited with baited breath. Charles shook his head; "ah, yes, and here we have it. A Meridian photo of what appears to be the same feet (this time with a Goldene on them), with new shoe laces but bearing the remnant of the crescent mark on the side of the shoe and on the tongue of the shoe between the laces. The next photo in that string shows a full shot of a young man wearing those shoes; I believe it is a photo of Donny.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I think we should all congratulate Theodore as the hero who has helped to solve this murder case. At this point, with your support and permission, I would like to turn my theory over to the Meridian police department. They will have wonderful experts who can validate, or not validate, these theories and, if needed, work in conjunction with the DC police. I am confident they will appreciate having various trains of thought to consider as they await the return of results from scientific testing. At that point the sobbing crowd cheered for both Charles and Theodore; they were deeply saddened at the apparent action of their friend Donny but they were at least as proud of Charles and Theodore. It was a mixed bag; or as local Meridian folks have been known to say during a sunshower, it was 'the Devil beatin' his wife.'

* All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.