

# THE LYRICIST'S LAMENT: A JACK PRECARIOUS MYSTERY

by Laika Fawkes

The sun sets reluctantly out the window of my office, like some weight is dragging it down. It gets under my skin, wondering what its problems are, what's making it sink. Of course, if you look at it too long with the untrained eye, you might hurt yourself. The untrained eye's got it easy. When you're a private eye, stare at something too long and some thug will get a lead pipe to tell you it's nighttime.

I hear a noise behind me and turn around. I see some movement through the translucent sign on my door. From where I sit, the sign says, "suoiracerP kcaJ," and on the line below it, "eyE etavirP." From the front side, it says my name, Jack Precarious. With some things, it pays to have the viewpoint that nobody else has, the reverse angle, the backstage pass. The sign isn't one of those things. The door swings open slowly to cast a soft light on a feminine figure.

I know the type. Her eyes give it away, burning like diamonds that are on fire, luring unsuspecting chumps in only to eat them alive. Some foolish punks might think she's a girl, a woman, or even a gal. But I can see the truth. She's a dame.

Her black dress clings to her curves like those pathetic punks cling to their crazy dreams that she might notice them. Her raven hair is all tied up into one of those hats that dames sometimes wear to try and hide what kind of bird their hair reminds you of. But private eyes can tell that sort of thing nevertheless.

She tells me she's got a murder she needs solved. I hate how the clients always speak first in this job. I have all these great lines prepared, like "Precarious is the appellation, and sleuthing is the occupation," but whenever I use that one they tell me they guessed those facts from the sign on my

door. I tried taking the sign down, but that didn't do well for business. I also tried using the line to pick up girls, but that did even worse for business.

She brings up some chump named C. Geoff Elliot. Says he was just out of college. A musician. I don't listen to music much. Music can give you feelings, and feelings can throw you off your game like bad whiskey. If you're a private eye and you get caught up feeling, you might miss some goon sneaking up behind you to play a polka on your collarbone with a tire iron. But more importantly, you can never let your feelings show, even if it's just vague contempt. So I tell her she's come to the right place. I swear that I'll find the creep that knocked off this Elliot sucker. I don't actually say sucker. I need the scratch too badly to mess this one up.

"Thank you *sooo* much," she says. She pauses. "My name's Angela, by the way."

I nod. She's younger than I thought. But the young ones are often the most dangerous, like they need merit badges in deceit to get into the Dame Club. "Angela, why did you come here instead of going to the fuzz? Why'd you go through all the trouble to find the most hardboiled private eye in all the Pacific Northwest?" My office is on a side street pretty far from the freeway. I'm guessing that many prospective clients haven't been able to find it and have given up trying to look.

"Well... it's kind of a long story, but you should probably know anyhow, right? So, like, C. Geoff was my boyfriend, and a couple days ago I stopped by his house because he wasn't answering his phone, and the door was open, and when I walked in I saw him lying on the ground with a knife through his heart. So I wanted to call the police, but I left my cell phone in the car, so I went back and got it and then ran back inside, you know, to make sure I wasn't imagining things, but by the time I got back his body was gone."

"So were you imagining things?"

“No, that’s the thing: nobody’s seen him since. I checked with everyone I know, and no one has any idea where he could be. But nobody would believe me, that he just... vanished like that. I need some evidence, to find out who killed him.” During the part about killing, a tear slides down her cheek like an aqueous snake. But a genuinely sad aqueous snake.

Hmm.

“Alright, I’ll take your case.” Like I said, I need the cash. A private eye should be able to make tough decisions, but picking whether his water or electricity gets shut off shouldn’t be one of them.

When there’s no clues to go by, a private eye has to start asking questions. “What kind of music did he play?”

“Oh, I don’t know if I could put it into a genre. It was like folk, or independent, I guess. He always wrote really smart and beautiful lyrics. They told stories.” Ah, so one of those guys. The know-it-all college kids who drink lattes, strum acoustic guitars, and wear things like scarves and glasses.

“Did he have any musical rivals? Did he spar with a producer over how much reverb there should be on the theremin? Did he do any gambling about the success of his music? Were any of his lyrics especially unflattering to the Lebanese mafia?” I don’t know actually know what a theremin is, but I think it has something to do with pretension.

She shook her head. “No, he produced all his own stuff in his garage. His lyrics are all very nice, and they’re the reason I first fell in love with him. Some of them were about me. Some of them I don’t really know what they mean.”

Lyrics? It could be a start. Luckily, Angela had brought a copy of Elliot’s album in her car, complete with liner notes. I flip open to a random page. It’s a song called *My Darling Angela*. The

lyrics read:

*Lo! from the cataracts, a caterwaul*

*Upon a catamaran, a caracal*

*Yet how it's plaintive cry seems a madrigal*

*When you're around\*.*

I follow the asterisk. It leads to a note in fine print at the bottom of the page, explaining, "The symbolism in this verse is that Angela makes everything seem beautiful to me." He had fallen hard for this dame, almost as if he had impaired balance from an inner ear infection.

"Hmm... I think I've discovered the symbolism," I ponder out loud. "But are there any other levels you can read it on? Any hidden meanings? Especially sinister ones."

"Oh," interrupts Angela, "Well... what do those words mean?"

I've got to admit, this dame is sharp. Probably too sharp for her own good, like a high-speed hairpin turn on a mountain pass. I know just who to consult about the meanings of words. I call him Webster. He sits in my desk between a magnum and a pack of gum.

I look at Angela. She seems concerned. "Don't worry," I assure her, "Most of the words begin with 'C,' so it should only take a few minutes to look them all up."

I flip through the dictionary's pages. The pieces start to come together. Cataract, catamaran, caterwaul, caracal... "I've got it."

"What's it about?"

"Well, there's apparently a large feral cat on a boat going over a waterfall."

"Oh."

A waterfall, eh? Where is there a waterfall around here? Maybe the large cat is code for some shadowy organization. The Lion's Club? The Black Panthers? The Detroit Tigers? I'll have to file those away in my mind, under 'S' for "Suspicious." I ask Angela if any of it means anything to her.

"No," she replies, "I think C. Geoff's lyrics are kind of over my head. I just thought they were beautiful. Maybe you could check on the Internet. This one website that reviews music didn't think his lyrics were very good, but I don't know why."

A website hated his lyrics, eh? Hated them enough to murder him? It's worth checking into. I quickly search the Internet for *C. Geoff Elliot, review, lyrics, and suck*. Only one match pops up. It's a website called "YourMusicIsBadAndYouShouldFeelBad.com" According to the bottom of the page, it's run by one Natasha Syracuse. Luckily for me, I can find her address in the local phone book. But is it too lucky, like that *Twilight Zone* episode where the guy always wins at that casino? I guess I'll just have to wait and see.

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Later that night, my nondescript gray '97 Saturn pulls into the driveway of the white house at 155 Mockingbird Lane. As a private eye, it's important to have a car that doesn't attract attention and gets decent gas mileage. I walk up the front steps and ring the doorbell. I look down and shuffle my feet for a minute, until I hear someone opening the door. "Miss Natasha Syracuse?" I ask.

"Hello," she says, "Yes, that's me. What's up?" She's definitely another one of those trendy stuck-up kids. She's got black-framed glasses that she probably doesn't need, and her hair is in a

braid that she probably doesn't need. She looks somewhat concerned.

"The name's Jack Precarious, private eye. Would you mind answering some questions for me about a Mr. C. Geoff Elliot?"

She frowns and looks around. I wonder if she's nervous, or if she's just got shifty eyes. Either way, she's a suspicious character. "C. Geoff Elliot? Why? What do you want to know about him? Why are you asking me?"

"I heard you knew a thing or two about his music. Did a review that wasn't too nice on the Internet. Is that true?" I already know that it is, but asking will help me size this character up.

"Oh, yeah. Just a couple weeks ago. His music really wasn't very good. Some college radio stations were starting to play his stuff, so I thought I needed to try and intervene."

I want to say, "*Intervene by murdering him?*" but I don't. In a game of poker, a private eye never plays his ace until the last minute. Instead I go with, "Miss Syracuse, I'm running an investigation into Elliot's song lyrics."

She interrupts. "Why, did something happen to him?"

"He's been missing for the past two days." I detect that she is somewhat surprised, from the way she gasps and says, "Oh God!" I hand her the liner notes. They're open to another song, called *Angela, My Love*. I ask her to take a look at them for me, seeing as how she's a professional.

"Actually, I just run the blog for fun," she replies. She adjusts her glasses and looks at the sheet for a few seconds. "Well, they're obviously about a girl named Angela. I think that it's supposed to be about the difficulty of expressing love through language. But I also think that it's mostly just him."

She's being evasive. I need something concrete to pin her down, something specific. "What about these lyrics? They appear to be in some sort of cipher." I point to the chorus of the song,

which reads:

*Angela darling, me amo a ti.*

*Como se dice what you mean to me?*

She glances at the sheet only briefly. "Oh, some of it's in Spanish."

Spanish! Of course! I only learned enough Spanish to know that the word for dames, *damas*, is the same as the word for checkers. When you're a private eye, you've got to treat dames like a game of checkers: cautiously, always looking out for trick moves. Or else they'll play you like checkers. Like a game of checkers where one player starts on white squares and the other starts on black: nobody wins.

I know enough to press the issue. "So what does it mean?"

"I think the grammar's off. I'm gonna guess that the first line is supposed to say, 'I love you,' but literally it says, 'I love myself to you,' so do what you want with that. The second line says, 'How does one say what you mean to me?' Like I said, he apparently has some trouble telling Angela about his love, or writing lyrics about love. At least it's not like that one song with the capsized lynx."

Hmm... more spite. There's a tension in the air. I know she's got the motive, but I can't nail her just yet. There is definitely a lion at the door. But a vampire lion, so it won't come in unless I invite it. The time is not yet right.

I thank her for her time and start walking back to the car. Maybe there really is something to the lyrics. The clues are starting to add up. Cats... waterfalls... Spanish... the only problem is that I have no idea what they mean. But as I'm about to open the door, a revelation hits me like a

bird into a roller coaster passenger: I had left the liner notes with Natasha! I quickly run back up her front steps. "Natasha? Miss Syracuse?"

The door is left ajar. I see the liner notes on the floor. It probably can't hurt to just push the door open, walk in, and grab them, right?

I curse silently, seeing her sitting right by the door.

Then, I curse loudly, as I notice that she's slumped over in the chair with a bloody knife protruding from her midsection!

I quickly look around, and catch a glimpse of a shadowy figure fleeing the scene. I run after him as fast as I can, through the room's other exit, out the house's backdoor, across the yard and into an alleyway. Times like these provide a simple allegory for the life of a private eye. Always trying to chase after some clue or suspect, with so much trying to throw you off, like the chain link fence I soon encounter. But here's where the metaphor breaks down. A good private eye can track any lead, but there's no requirement about him having to be able to climb a fence. I decide that it would probably be best to return to Natasha's house to look for evidence. I enter by the back door. But the house is completely abandoned! Natasha's body is nowhere to be found, and there's not a hint of blood. Just like the disappearance of Elliot, if I'm supposed to believe Angela. There's nothing more for me to do here. I decide to pay Angela a visit. I'll have to find the time to ask her a few more questions. Tough questions, about things like whether she murdered Elliot.

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The sun is a smug shade of orange from the window of my office. Any minute now, I'm going to get in my car and drive to meet Angela. However, a more important matter is at hand. A



friend sent me a link to a video on the Internet of a cat playing some notes on a piano. Frivolous? Maybe at first glance. But the musical connection is there, and Elliot's song is about a cat, so maybe I should watch it one more time...

I am startled out of my investigation by the door opening once again. It's Angela, walking in like some sort of princess. Specifically, the sort who doesn't observe social customs such as knocking. Frustrated as I am at losing my train of thought, I can't stay mad at her, because she saved me a trip.

"Angela!" I say smoothly, like I had been expecting her. Finally, I had gotten to speak first. But what to say now? Should I tell her about Natasha's murder? No, I should keep that a secret. To be a private eye, you have to know enough not to let someone know how much you know.

"Hey, Jack. I think I found something that might be a clue."

"That's great." I can't lose my train of thought again. If only there was some way to find out how much she knew without mentioning the murder. "Angela, do you happen to know anything about a shadowy figure? One that tends to run out the back door of a house when spotted? A good climber, perhaps?"

She frowns. "At night, isn't everyone a shadowy figure? Whoa." She pulls out a pad of paper from her pocket. "I have to write that one down. I'm trying to get back into writing poetry of my own. I used to do it before I met C. Geoff, but, well, he was so good at it that I just gave up for a while. Oh, speaking of C. Geoff, here's what I found. I was out for a walk today and saw an old man wearing a football sweatshirt, which reminded me of my old boyfriend Scott, because this one time I walked into his dorm room and he had some friends over, and do you know what he was watching? A football game. I know, right? So I said to him, 'How would you feel if I watched a bunch of women running around on TV?' I was pretty mad, because I was taking this course about

how society doesn't let women do things like play sports on TV. So then a while later I heard this song by C. Geoff, and I think it might be about Scott."

"Intriguing. Why, is the song about televised athletic events, or hanging out with friends?"

"No, it's on the CD I let you borrow." She takes the liner notes from my desk. "See, right on this page."

She has the notes open to one called *The Ballad of Scott, the Unscrupulous Corsair*. It reads:

*And as his ship alit on shore like some dread giant guppy,*

*His crew, they threw sharp stones at every woman, child, and puppy.*

*Scott grabbed a maiden bound cruelly, and spoke too close to her head*

*His breath it smelled of mead, and this is what he said:*

*"Do you know what the best part of the pirating life is?*

*The best part is that my girlfriend will never hear of this."*

I nod. "Yes, I can see why this Scott character would be angered at having his secret life revealed."

"I don't think he was actually a pirate, but... he might as well have been, right?"

I smile. I have no idea what she means, but I do have an idea as to who might be a suspect in the murder of C. Geoff Elliot.

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I got Scott's address from Angela before she left. He lives in an apartment, the next town

over. The Autumn Springs complex, room 416C. I decide to pay him a visit the next afternoon. I knock on his door four times. I have to take a step back as he throws the door open, looking wide-eyed in his baseball cap worn at a slight angle. "Hey brah, wassup?" he greets me.

"The name's Jack Precarious, private eye. Mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"Sure, man. Sweet. I feel like I'm in one of those movies where some guy gets murdered or whatever."

"Where were you on the night of April 8<sup>th</sup>?" That was the night Angela found Elliot dead.

"Uhh... oh yeah. That was one of the nights I spent training with my frat brothers for the Forty-Eight Hour Beer Pong Regatta coming up next week."

"Didn't you already graduate a couple years back?"

"Yeah, but they named me the coach after I left. Can you believe it, brah? Brings a tear to my eye."

"Sorry, but I'm going to need proof." Private eyes need lots of proof. I think that's where the stereotype about private eyes drinking hard liquor comes from, though I find that idea ignorant and insulting to my heritage as a private eye.

"Oh, no problem. We've gotta keep track of everything to be officially sponsored by the school." He disappears for a minute, then comes back with a clipboard outlining various dates and times. It covers April 8<sup>th</sup>, and yesterday too. Just when you think you have a suspect...

"Oh hey, dude, mind telling me what you're all investigating about?"

"Do you know C. Geoff Elliot?"

"That scrawny little hippie? Yeah, kind of, I guess. Tell him I said thanks if you see him."

"Why's that?"

"For taking this girl Angela off my hands, brah. I mean, like, she's nice and stuff, you know?"

And kinda hot, I guess. But after going out with her for a couple months, it was like... she's pretty annoying, you know? It felt like during football season, when the coach would call every night to make sure you weren't out anywhere. And her favorite movies were *New Year's Eve* and *Meet the Spartans*. Without being ironic or anything. Worst of all, she'd just flip out on me for no reason sometimes, when I'd just be doin' my thing but she'd have some weird thought process going on. I just couldn't live with that, brah. So when C-dog showed up, I was all, 'Oh no, dude, your sympathy and emotions have triumphed over my evil ways,' but inside I was really like, 'Yessss.'"

"So you're not mad at him or anything?"

"Nah, dude. I mean, he's not the type of guy I'd hang around with or anything, but I've got nothing against him."

"Not even that song about you being an evil pirate?"

"Dude, you're a private eye but you didn't even bother finding out that pirates are awesome? Man..."

"Alright, I think I'm about done here. Can you think of anyone that might have had something against Elliot?"

"Sorry, man. I got nothing. Barely knew the dude."

"Well, thanks for your time."

"Peace, brah."

He closes the door. Another lead that has come to absolutely nothing. Another shot, and another miss. A single word, failure, taunting me like the dog from *Duck Hunt*. The only thing left for me to do is return to the office in shame.

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I spin around on the chair in my office. Nothing fits together. It's like that wooden desk kit I had ordered from Sweden all over again. Who else would have the motive to murder Elliot? Maybe he ripped off some other band's ideas. I search the Internet for "*bands that C. Geoff Elliot ripped off,*" and get eight hundred results. Interesting. The first one leads back to Syracuse's site. She accuses him of being history's least original songwriter. Or, she had accused him, before she was murdered. Maybe I need to investigate, find some of this music he lifted. But where could I find stolen music on the Internet?

I refresh my email for the first time in minutes. A new message appears from <anonymous>. It must have been sent via some proxy. The subject is "A Threat for You." The contents reads:

jack precarious,

you think that you are some hot shot private eye who is going to book us because we murdered c. geoff well guess what we also have murdered syracuse and we will probably murder some other people too if you do not stop trying to read into things so much so just give up

regards,

anonymous

Hmm... what can I deduce from this? The punctuation and capitalization aren't there, but there's a formal structure and not any terms like "u" or "lol," so it's probably some literate person faking it. The use of Verdana font denotes femininity. And... that's odd. *Book* them? *Read* into things? Whoever wrote this must have been thinking about literature a lot at their undisclosed

anonymous location. Too much, in fact. Unless... they were at a library. Wait a minute... that's it. After five minutes of research, everything finally makes sense. I know exactly where the murderer is located.

Or does it make too much sense? I've gotten in trouble for playing hunches before. When the first letters in the last name of the leaders of a drug cartel perfectly added up to spell the name of the President's dog, for example. I had a bit of a falling out with certain stuffed shirts over whether that gave probable cause to arrest the corgi. If there's one thing I learned from that, it's that a private eye has to put caution above all else, and not jump to conclusions. But there are some things you just can't ignore. Things that can't be coincidences. And if this isn't one of them... well, I can't fire myself.

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"The jig is up, Syracuse!" I yell at the door to the condominium. I had tried knocking a few times, but nobody answered. I try ringing the doorbell once or twice. Then, a black car pulls into the driveway. Natasha Syracuse steps out. I try it again. "The jig is up, Syracuse!"

She gasps. "Jack Precarious? How did you find me?"

"Hah. Next time you try emailing a private eye from a library, try not using the same Multnomah County Library mentioned in the song *California One / Youth and Beauty Brigade* by hyperliterate indie folk mainstays The Decemberists, the same song so blatantly ripped off by C. Geoff Elliot in his album closer *Oregon Eighteen / Teenage Truth Club*. From there it was only a short distance to the Blushing Caracal condominiums, which Elliot hinted about in his *My Darling Angela*. And I bet you didn't think that those condominiums just happened to be located just outside

Multnomah Falls, the second-tallest year round waterfall in the United States? Just when I thought all that might have been some sort of coincidence, I saw that the condos were located in none other than the small hamlet of Checkerston. Lucky for me that Elliot put so many clues in his music about the location of his future murderer.”

Natasha frowned. “When did C. Geoff’s lyrics say anything about checkers?” She took a deep breath. “Alright, let me explain. I faked my own death because –”

At that moment, the passenger side door opens. A man steps out wearing both a tweed jacket and a light gray scarf. “Hey, what’s going on?” he asks. He looks right at me. “Cool trench coat.”

I try to ignore him and continue talking to Natasha. “Yes, I know. I was able to deduce that you faked your own death because-”

“Oh hey! I remember you. You’re that private eye I saw over at Natasha’s the night she faked her own death,” the man interrupts. “I had come to get her, but I got scared because if you saw me it would ruin everything. So I have to know, did Angela hire you?”

Now I’m fairly confused. Fortunately, a private eye knows just how to handle these situations. “Wait, who the hell are you?”

“I’m C. Geoff Elliot.”

“Wait, no. I thought Natasha faked her death to escape because she thought I knew she killed you.”

“Nope. We both did. See, we used this.” He pulls out a knife and stabs it into his leg. “It’s a spring-loaded retractable prop knife. I had it from a play I was in at the University a few years back. We also used ketchup, for fake blood. And duct tape to get the knife to stick, of course”

“Ah, I see. You faked your death because...” I trail off. I was hoping he would interrupt in

the middle of my sentence again, but no dice. Thinking quickly, I decide to mutter something indecipherable.

Now, he speaks up. "I feel bad, I really do. Angela's nice and stuff, you know? But to be honest, after you know her a while, she can get a little annoying. I had gone through all the trouble of writing a whole album about her, and when it started playing on college radio stations, I knew I couldn't just break up with her. Yet, I couldn't stand being with her, just a naïve crush, when I had met my true love, Natasha."

Natasha smiles. "We met when I went to one of his concerts to write about how bad it was. I knew I was in love from the moment I saw him, but... his music was so bad. I would be the laughingstock of the indie music blogging community if word ever got out. I didn't know what to do."

"So I thought of a plan, inspired by *Romeo and Juliet*. We would fake our own deaths and escape safely to freedom, moving to the middle of nowhere and living off the land."

Of course! I should have known from his literary ode *I Feel Like Holden Caulfield in Love with Star-Crossed Juliet in the World of 1984*. Still, there's one more thing I have to know. Actually two. First, "You uh... know that they ended up dieing, right?"

"Who?"

Natasha raises her eyebrows. "Yeah, that's why nobody would suspect our plan. Right?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"Hold on!" I say, "Enough with the petty acquiescence! I still need to know, C. Geoff, why would you put so many clues in your music about your plot?"

He looks puzzled. "You must mean the lyrics I had written out for *O, to Move to Checkerston!* I thought I had hidden those well before I left. That's some good sleuthing, there, to



have found it.”

I nod once, then start to walk away. From behind me, I hear Elliot nervously yell, “Hey, wait! Please don’t tell Angela about this. If anyone asks, C. Geoff Elliot died. I’m Miguel-Pierre Valentin, and I’ve never met you, right? Please?”

“Relax,” I reply, still walking towards the sunset. “When you’re a private eye, you know how to handle these things.”

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“Hello?”

“Angela?”

“Jack?”

“Hi.”

“Did you find anything?”

“Well... I was looking around his song lyrics... and I figured something out.”

“What?”

“C. Geoff faked his own death to escape your relationship and then ran away with another woman.”

“Oh.”

“Sorry.”

She sighs. “I should have known.”

“I know, from *I Feel Like Holden Caulfield in Love with Star-Crossed Juliet in the World of 1984*? It was right there in front of us, but sometimes it takes a private eye to figure that out.”

“No, it’s just... it’s not exactly the first time that’s happened to me.”

“Ah. Well, sometimes... sometimes there’s... well, look at that, another client. The bill is in the mail. Good luck in your future endeavors.”

There isn’t really another client. I had just walked over to the door and opened and closed it. When you’re a private eye, you have to use your wit to get out of some tough situations. If you don’t use your wit, you might lose it when some mug knocks it out of your skull with an unchalked pool cue.

The sun sets through the half-drawn blinds of my office window. The light filtering through them makes bright lines on the hat rack and filing cabinet. I walk over to the filing cabinet so I can take my file for this case and close it. It looks like I had already left it closed, but I take it out again just to make sure. Ah, I’d forgotten to fill out the self-evaluation I made up. Let’s see. *Were you able to follow all the clues until the mystery was solved?* Of course. *Did you catch a tire iron to the collarbone?* No, but I forget if that one was good or bad. *Did you successfully outwit any wily conniving dames?* Yeah, I just took care of that one, I can check it off. *Were the criminals brought to justice?* Well, there weren’t really any criminals, so technically that’s got to be yes, right? Finally, *Did you get to say that the jig is up?* That one goes without saying. That wraps it up. I finally close the file.

I lean back in my office chair. Another case closed for Jack Precarious. Sometimes, when you’re a private eye, the pieces come together in ways that you would never have guessed. Like when you end up lighting your desk kit on fire and using it to roast marshmallows. But the clues are always there. That’s what’s being a private eye is all about.