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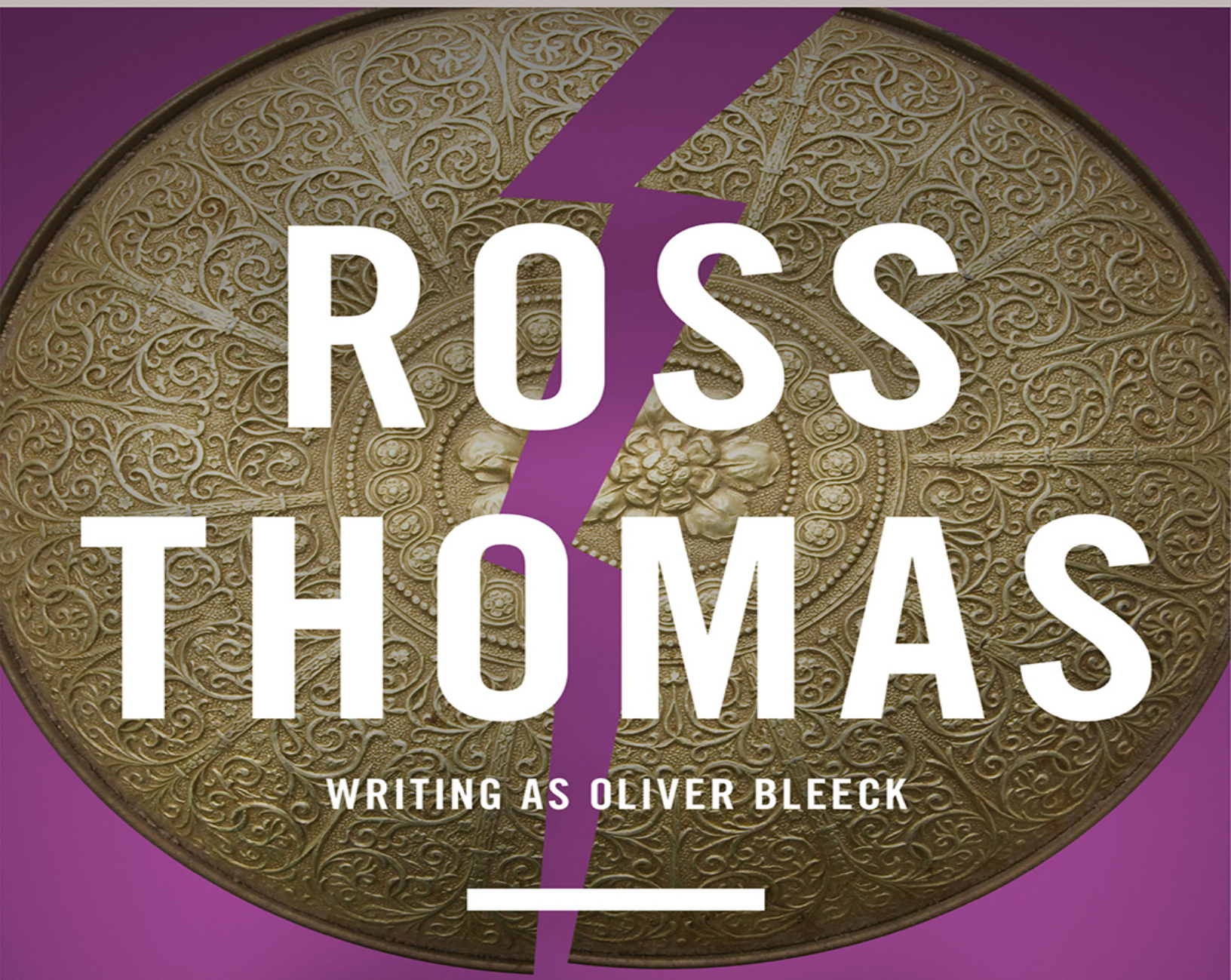

ROSS THOMAS

WRITING AS OLIVER BLEECK

THE BRASS GO-BETWEEN

A PHILIP ST. IVES MYSTERY

BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT

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Looking for more suspense?

About the Book

To recover an African artifact, St. Ives will trade $250,000 - or his life.
Philip St. Ives is the kind of man who can convince a vice cop and a paroled mobster to sit down to a hand of poker. Once he was a reporter with a daily column, a fat Rolodex, and a reputation for indifference to criminal behavior. Now he is a go-between, a professional mediator between thieves and the people they rip off. For arranging the recovery of a stolen necklace, painting, or child, St. Ives takes ten percent of the ransom. His work takes him across the globe, but more importantly, it pays his alimony.
An African warrior's shield has come to Washington, where a gang of art-minded burglars pluck it from the museum. They demand $250,000 for the return of the priceless artifact, and request that St. Ives make the hand-off. But when he goes to deliver the cash, he finds himself playing a more deadly game than five-card draw.

Review quote.

"America's best storyteller." - *The New York Times Book Review.*

"A smooth, contemporary novelist." – *Booklist.*

"Ross Thomas is that rare phenomenon, a writer of suspense whose novels can be read with pleasure more than once." - *Eric Ambler.*

About the Author

The winner of the inaugural Gumshoe Lifetime Achievement Award, Ross Thomas (1926-1995) was a prolific author whose political thrillers drew praise for their blend of wit and suspense. Born in Oklahoma City, Thomas grew up during the Great Depression, and served in the Philippines during World War II. After the war, he worked as a foreign correspondent, public relations official, and political strategist before publishing his first novel, "The Cold War Swap" (1967), based on his experience working in Bonn, Germany. The novel was a hit, winning Thomas as an Edgar Award for Best First Novel and establishing the characters Mac McCorkle and Mike Padillo.

Thomas followed it up with three more novels about McCorkle and Padillo, the last of which was published in 1990. He wrote nearly a book a year for twenty-five years, occasionally under the pen name Oliver Bleeck, and won the Edgar Award for Best Novel with "Briarpatch" (1984). Thomas died of lung cancer in California in 1995, a year after publishing his final novel, "*Ah, Treachery*!"

The Brass Go-Between

A Philip St. Ives Mystery

Ross Thomas writing as Oliver Bleeck

BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT

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Chapter 1

THE CHOICE WAS SIMPLE enough. I could either answer the knock at the door or draw to a three-card diamond flush, a foolhardy act usually associated with those who maintain an abiding faith in elves, political platforms, and money-back guarantees. The door and whoever was behind it, even the Avon lady, seemed by far the more promising, so I threw in my hand, opened the door, and was only slightly disappointed when the knocker turned out to be Myron Greene, the lawyer, who announced, a little too loudly, I thought, that he needed to speak to me in private.

The game was at my place that Saturday, five-card stud and draw, and it was to go on all day and into the night. There were five of us and we had started at ten-thirty in the morning and by midafternoon when Myron Greene, the lawyer, knocked at the door, I was almost six hundred dollars ahead. I was living on the ninth floor of the Adelphi on East 46th and the only private place was the bathroom so we went in there. I closed the door, sat on the edge of the tub, and let Myron Greene have the one thing that resembled a chair. He lowered the lid and sat down, crossed his plump legs, took off his glasses, polished them with a silk tie that was fashionably wide, and breathed as he always did, a little asthmatically.

"You're not answering your mail," he said.

"I'm not even reading it."

"You're not answering your phone either."

"The desk is taking messages. I pick them up once a day."

"I left four messages yesterday. Urgent ones."

"I forgot to check yesterday."

“I had to drive all the way in from Darien,” Myron Greene said, and there was reproof and even petulance in his voice.

“Couldn’t it have waited till Monday?” I said. “I start answering the phone again on Monday.”

“No,” Myron Greene said, “it couldn’t wait. You have to be there on Monday.”

I could never bring myself to refer to Myron Greene as *my* lawyer and that wasn’t because I didn’t like him or his fees weren’t high enough. It was just that Myron Greene didn’t fit a carefully preconceived notion of what *my* lawyer should be. This notion had my lawyer as a seedy, garrulous old goat with rheumy eyes, a rusty alpaca suit on his back, a string tie at his throat and larceny in his heart who operated out of a dingy walk-up office that he shared with a bail bondsman down near City Hall. Tufts of gray hair also grew out of his ears.

By contrast Myron Greene was a sleek, overweight thirty-five who dressed several daring (for him) sartorial degrees to the left of Brooks Brothers, had offices on Madison, a home in Darien, and clients, but for me, with six- and seven-figure bank accounts or Inc. behind their names and branch offices in Houston and Los Angeles. I was always vaguely disappointed when I talked to Myron Greene. I kept hoping to find a spot of gravy on a lapel or an unnoticed blob of mayonnaise on a tie, but I never did, and consequently Myron Greene remained *the* lawyer.

“Where do I have to be Monday?” I said.

“Washington.”

“Why?”

“A shield,” Myron Greene said. “It’s missing.”

“From where?”

“A museum. The Coulter.”

“Why me?”

“They asked for you.”

“The museum?”

“No,” Myron Greene said. “The other side. The thieves.”

“How much?”

“A quarter of a million.”

“What is it, gold?”

“No. It’s brass.”

“Usual terms?”

He nodded. “Ten percent.”

“Do I need it?”

Myron Greene crossed his legs the other way, fingered one slightly peaked lapel of his eight-button, double-breasted cavalry twill jacket, and smiled at me with white, remarkably even teeth that had had a dentist’s careful attention four times a year for the past thirty-two years. “Your wife,” he said.

“My ex-wife.”

“Her lawyer called.”

“And?”

“Your son starts to school next month. The call was to remind me that your support payments go up two hundred a month.”

“Well, two hundred a month should pay for his eleven o’clock milk and cookies. I wouldn’t want him to have to brown-bag it.”

“It’s a special school,” Myron Greene said.

“The fancy private one that she was always talking about?”

“That’s it.”

“What’s wrong with a public kindergarten?” I said.

Myron Greene smiled again. “Your son’s 164 IQ and your ex-wife.”

“Mostly my ex-wife.”

“Mostly.”

“I heard she was getting married.”

“Not for a while,” he said. “Not until May. When school’s out.”

“If the payments go up two hundred a month, that’ll make it an even thousand—right?”

“Right.”

“Then I need the money.”

Myron Greene nodded and carefully smoothed a hand over his brown hair that just escaped being too long—too long for an uptown lawyer anyway. The length of his hair was like the clothes he wore and the Excalibur he drove. They served to hint, but only hint, at what he knew the real Myron Greene to be—the one who, were it not for the house in Darien, the cottage in Kennebunkport, the wife (his first), the three kids (two boys and a girl), the firm, and the clients—especially the clients—would be out there where it’s really at, his mind and imagination unfettered, his sex life rich and varied, and his soul his own and in perfect step with the sound of that different drummer. That’s the real reason why I was Myron Greene’s client: he mistakenly thought that I knew the drummer by his first name.

“Tell me some more about the shield,” I said.

Myron Greene reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and brought out an envelope. “I dictated it yesterday after I couldn’t reach you,” he said, and tapped the envelope against the yellow American Standard lavatory. “I didn’t know if you would be here. If you weren’t, I was going to slip it under the door.”

“You want to tell me about it now that I’m here?”

He looked at his watch, a gold chronometer which I was sure could tell him what time it was in Shanghai. “I don’t have much time now.”

“Neither do I.”

Myron Greene sniffed at that. Anyone who played cards in the middle of the afternoon had all the time there was.

“Briefly,” I said.

“All right,” he said. “Briefly. But it’s all in here.” He quit tapping the envelope against the lavatory and handed it to

me.

“I’ll read it when the game breaks up.”

“If you can spare the time.” Myron Greene wasn’t very good at sarcasm.

“Briefly,” I said again.

“All right. Three days ago—that would be Thursday, wouldn’t it?”

“Thursday.”

“On Thursday the Coulter Museum in Washington opened a two-month-long exhibition of African art. It’s been on tour for almost a year—Rome, Frankfurt, Paris, London, and Moscow. Washington’s the final exhibition. The same night that it opened, Thursday night, the prize piece was stolen. Just one piece. It’s a brass shield about a yard in diameter and about seven or eight hundred years old. Or older. Anyway it’s invaluable and whoever stole it wants $250,000 to return it and they want you to handle the negotiations. That’s why the museum people got in touch with me; that’s why I tried to reach you. The museum is agreeable to the price.” Myron Greene stood up and glanced at his watch again. “Now I *am* late.” He made a vague gesture toward the envelope that I held. “It’s all in there.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll read it after the game.”

“Are you ahead?” he asked, and I knew he wanted me to say no.

“Yes.”

“How much?” It’s not something you ask, but Myron Greene did. If I were ahead enough, it might be even better.

“I don’t know,” I said. “About six hundred.”

“That much?”

“That much. Would you like to sit in?”

Myron Greene moved toward the bathroom door, toward the wife and the kids and the firm and the Chris-Craft up in

Maine. “No, I guess not. Not this time anyway. I’m really awfully late. Is it a regular game?”

“More or less,” I said. “There are about fifteen of us, but usually only five or six can make it at any one time. They drift in and out. Come on, I’ll introduce you.”

“Well, I don’t think—”

“Come on.”

He met them all. He met Henry Knight who had the lead in a play that had managed to run for fourteen weeks despite the critics’ indifference, if not their hostility. Knight, cast in yet another juvenile lead at forty-two, agreed with the critics and considered each pay check to be pure lagniappe. He spent his money as quickly as he got it and poker was not only fast, but pleasant, and didn’t necessarily entail a hangover. Knight was down almost two hundred dollars and when Myron Greene told him that he liked his current play, Knight said, “It took a lot of wonderful people to create such a wonderful piece of shit.”

Myron Greene met Johnny Parisi, recently paroled from Sing Sing where he had been doing a three-to-seven on an involuntary manslaughter conviction. Parisi ran with the Ducci brothers over in Brooklyn doing, as he had once testified in court, “this and that.” Parisi had played basketball for some small college in Pennsylvania and even made it through his junior year before they caught him shaving points. He was now in his mid-thirties, almost six-foot-five, still lean, and somehow vaguely handsome. He kept a long amber cigarette holder clenched between his teeth even when he wasn’t smoking and talked through or around it. I had to keep asking him what he said. He was into the game for about four hundred and most of it was piled in front of the man on his left who, by rights, should have arrested Parisi for parole violation. The man was Lieutenant Kenneth Ogden of the vice squad, sometimes known as Ogden the Odd, and nobody ever asked him where he got the money to play table-stakes poker

although a couple of his cronies claimed that his wife had money. If she did, she had a lot. Ogden was over fifty, looked older, and dressed better than either Knight or Parisi, both of whom were regarded as dudes in their respective social circles. Parisi mumbled something around his cigarette holder when I introduced Myron Greene; Ogden said “hi yah” and kept on shuffling the cards.

The fourth man that Myron Greene met wore chinos, a sweat shirt emblazoned with “Bluebird Inn Keglers,” and dirty white sneakers. He was Park Tyler Wisdom III, and he did absolutely nothing for a living because his grandmother had left him a seven-million-dollar trust fund when he was twenty-two. Occasionally, Wisdom would join some protest march or other and once he had been hauled in for burning what he claimed to have been his draft card, but no charges were lodged after the Federal authorities were quietly reminded that Wisdom held the Silver Star and the Purple Heart with a cluster for something he had once done during the two years he had spent with the First Air Cavalry in Vietnam. Now twenty-nine, Wisdom was a little below average height and a little above average weight. To me he looked like nothing more than a rapidly aging Puck for whom the joke got better every year. He said “hello” cheerfully enough to Myron Greene despite the fact that most of my six hundred dollars had come from him.

None of them was interested in the lawyer if he didn’t want to sit in, so I walked him to the elevator and when we were in the hall he stopped, turned to me, and said, “Isn’t that the Parisi who—”

“The same,” I said.

The real Myron Greene stood up. Gone was the dream of the carefree, reckless life. This was Citizen Greene, an officer of the court. “Gambling is a parole violation,” Citizen Greene said. “That detective should—”

“Lieutenant,” I said. “He’s in vice. Besides, he’s winning all of Parisi’s money.”

Myron Greene shook his head as he punched the button for the elevator. “I don’t know where you find them.”

“They’re friends and acquaintances,” I said. “If they weren’t friends and acquaintances, I wouldn’t be of much use to you, would I?”

He seemed to think about my question for a moment and apparently concluded that it didn’t deserve an answer. He had his own question. “You’ll read that memo I gave you?”

“When the game breaks up.”

“They expect you in Washington Monday.”

“So you said.”

“Call me at home tomorrow and let me know what you decide.”

“All right.”

“You need the money, you know.”

“I know.”

Myron Greene shook his head sadly as he waited for the elevator. “A killer and a cop,” he said.

“It’s the kind of world we live in.”

“Your kind maybe; not mine.”

“All right.”

For Myron Greene the sound of the different drummer had faded. The elevator came and he stepped into it, turned, and stared at me. “The least you could do is answer your phone,” he said as we waited there for the doors to close. If I started answering my phone when it rang, I might be on the path to redemption.

“Tomorrow,” I said. “I’ll answer it tomorrow.”

“Today,” he insisted. “Something might happen.”

I was six hundred ahead so I could afford to lose a little. “Okay,” I said. “Today.”

The doors began to close and Myron Greene nodded at me brusquely. I took it for a gesture of encouragement, one that would help me to shed my slothful ways, shun my evil

companions, and even answer the telephone on its first ring.

Chapter 2

THERE MUST BE A few places hotter than Washington in August. The Spice Islands, I suppose. Death Valley. Perhaps Chad down around Bokoro. *The Washington Post* that I read in the nonair-conditioned taxi that bore me from National Airport to the Madison had a small feature on page one boasting about how yesterday had been the hottest August day on record and that today should prove even hotter than that.

Congress had given up for a while and gone home the week before after accomplishing neither more nor less than usual. It wasn't an election year, not that it mattered, and home—wherever it was, even Scottsdale, Arizona—was probably cooler than Washington. The Capital's two major attractions, the Cherry Blossom Festival and the annual riot, had come and gone, the first in April, the second in July. So with Congress adjourned, the lobbyists on vacation, and even the tourists skittish of sunstroke, the lobby of the Madison was virtually deserted except for a couple of bored bellhops who looked as though they were seriously considering another profession.

The clerk at the reservation desk seemed delighted to have something to do when I asked if there was a reservation for Philip St. Ives. There was and I sneezed at the abrupt change in temperature all the way up to the sixth floor where one of the bellhops fiddled with the air-conditioning controls while making some pertinent comments about the weather.

After he left, the richer by a dollar, I took out the envelope that Myron Greene had given me Saturday and checked a name and a phone number. I dialed the number

and when the operator's voice said, "Coulter Museum," I said, "Mrs. Frances Wingo, please." After the operator there was only one secretary to go through. Then the next voice said, "This is Frances Wingo, Mr. St. Ives. I've been expecting your call." It was a good telephone voice for a woman, a shade above contralto with a confident, penetrating quality which convinced me that no one ever called her Frannie.

"Myron Greene mentioned a meeting," I said. "But he didn't mention the time."

"One o'clock. For lunch, if that's convenient."

"It is. Where?"

"Here at the museum. There'll be the two of us and the three-man executive committee. Any cab driver will know where it is."

"At one o'clock then," I said.

"At one," she said.

After we hung up I read through Myron Greene's three-page memorandum again, but there was nothing in it that I had missed from previous readings. I had little else to do for the next 45 minutes so I took out my wallet and counted the money. There was a trifle more than $400. I had emerged at 3 A.M. Sunday from the poker session the winner of approximately $500 which was around $500 better than usual. If my mental tally was correct, I was nearly $35 ahead of the game, which had been running now for a little more than three years. My uncanny skill as a card player still seemed no viable substitute for industriousness, thrift, and pluck—character traits that somehow had eluded me over the years.

Because there was still nothing to do and time to waste I went into the bathroom, admired the lime green fixtures, brushed my teeth, and inspected my gums which were receding, a dentist had recently told me, at a normally healthy pace. I wondered what that was: a centimeter a year? Less? Probably more. A little depressed by my

inspection and not at all confident that the Coulter Museum served a preluncheon drink, I went down to the lobby and into the bar and ordered a martini. It was half-past noon, but the bar was barely a fourth full. Only the truly thirsty seemed willing to brave the Capital's noonday sun.

When Amos Woodrow Coulter died unexpectedly in 1964 from infectious hepatitis at the age of 51, unmarried and alone, he left most of his estimated $500 million fortune to several foundations and the Federal government, noting in his will that the government "will probably get it anyway," but including the carefully drawn provision that the money be used to build a gallery or museum in Washington to house his vast art collection and to acquire "other works of merit, interest, worth, and significance as they appear on the world market."

Coulter had made his fortune in electronics, and most of the gadgets that his firm patented and manufactured were snapped up by the government to guide its missiles and steer its rockets to the moon and beyond. When not making money, Coulter and his extremely knowledgeable agents toured the world and spent it on art in wholesale lots when possible, on individual works when not. His formal education had been ended by the depression of the thirties when he was a sophomore at Texas Christian University but even then possessed by a love for art in all its forms. There were those who claimed that Amos Coulter never married because he never found a woman who was willing to let him hang her on a wall. In any event, his eye for art more than matched his passion. He made his first purchase, a Modigliani, in 1946 shortly after he made his first million. From then, until the time of his death, he spent lavishly and bought shrewdly on a rising market. When he died, his collection, exclusive of his other holdings and interests, was conservatively valued at $200 million.

Coulter himself designed the museum that was to bear his name and it stood now just off Independence Avenue on several acres of ground formerly occupied by “temporary” World War I buildings that had been hastily thrown up in 1917 and were still in use almost a half century later. An act of Congress in 1965 had donated the land for the museum and, although in existence for only a few years, it was already acknowledged, with a few carping exceptions, as one of the finest in the world. Those who didn’t like it didn’t like the Guggenheim either.

It was an impressive building in a city of impressive buildings. Although only five stories high it still managed to soar a little, and if it didn’t command awe, it at least earned admiration and respect. Built of Italian marble and textured concrete, it covered almost a block and somehow created the atmosphere of a friendly gallery instead of a municipal jail and it seemed to beckon the passer-by to come in and look around. I admired it while the cab made its approach, and when inside a guard informed me that Mrs. Wingo’s office was on the fifth floor and that the elevators were just to my left. On the fifth floor a discreet sign pointed the way to the director’s office and when I walked in a young Negro girl looked up from her typewriter, smiled, and wanted to know if I was Mr. St. Ives. When I said that I was she said that Mrs. Wingo was expecting me.

Mrs. Frances Wingo, director of the Coulter Museum, sat behind a boomerang-shaped desk of inlaid wood that had nothing on it other than a pair of rather hideous African statues about nine inches tall and a telephone console that seemed to have at least three dozen buttons. Behind her, to the east, a window provided a view of the Capitol building which looked no more real than it does in those movies about Washington where it always seems to be just across the street from every man’s office, even if he works in the basement of the Pentagon out in Virginia. It was a large room, nicely carpeted, about the size of that

awarded to an under-secretary of State or the majority whip in the House of Representatives. There was even a fireplace at one end with some club chairs and a couch grouped around it. There were a number of paintings on the cork-lined walls and I recognized a Klee and thought it a shame that it was tucked away out of public view.

"I rotate the paintings in here every week, Mr. St. Ives," said Frances Wingo, the mind reader. "None is kept from public view. Do sit down."

I sat in something comfortable that was made out of down-stuffed leather and wood. There was no ashtray in sight, but Frances Wingo opened a drawer and placed a blue, oblong ceramic dish in front of me. I decided not to smoke. She was a little over or a little under thirty, and rather tall unless she was sitting on a couple of pillows. She wore a dark brown dress of some nubby weave and that slightly defensive expression that most female executives wear who have reached the top before they are thirty-five. After that, the expression usually hardens into grim resolve. She had cut her dark hair short, perhaps too short, and for a moment I thought that she might be a practicing dyke, but her eyes were too soft and brown and large, although it may have been that she was having trouble with her thyroids. Her nose tipped up slightly and she hadn't bothered to disguise the freckles that were sprinkled across its bridge. Her mouth was wide, but not too wide, and it was hard to tell whether she wore lipstick. Frances Wingo, I decided, was a long way from being beautiful, but she had a face you could remember with pleasure and it probably looked the same at breakfast as it did over cocktails.

"You come highly recommended," she said.

"By whom?"

"By your Mr. Greene and by whoever stole the shield."

"I understand that they asked for me."

"Not asked," she said. "Insisted."

“I’m not sure that I’m flattered.”

She opened a desk drawer and took out a yellow, unsharpened pencil and absently began to tap its eraser against the top of her desk. “Senator Kehoel on our executive committee also had some nice things to say about you.”

“That’s because I wrote some nice things about him,” I said. “A long time ago.”

“Four years ago,” she said, still tapping away with the pencil. “Just before your paper folded. I’m surprised that you’re no longer writing; you had an interesting style.”

“Not enough newspapers to go around; at least not in New York.”

“And elsewhere?”

“Elsewhere thinks I’m too expensive.”

She glanced at a watch that she wore on her right wrist. “The others should be in the dining room. You can save your questions until after lunch. All right?”

“Fine.”

We rose and she was as tall as I expected, nearly five-eight or -nine. The loosely cut brown dress failed to disguise her figure, but she probably knew that and used it for business purposes. I followed her across the room to the door and admired the sway of her hips and the curve of her calves which, I was pleased to note, were encased in nylon and not in cotton webbing or linsey-woolsey. When it comes to women’s clothes I seem to have decidedly reactionary tendencies, but it’s something I’ve been told that I may grow out of.

Frances Wingo paused at the door and looked at me with a kind of flickering interest, as if I were a slightly audacious water color that, while amusing perhaps, was not something one would purchase.

“Tell me something, Mr. St. Ives,” she said.

“What?”

“When you fill in that blank on your income-tax form which asks for occupation, what do you put down?”

“Go-between.”

“And that’s really what you are?”

“Yes,” I said. “That’s really what I am.”

It had all started casually enough four years back, just before the newspaper that I worked for folded, the victim of a prolonged strike, an unworkable merger, a forgettable new name, and rotten management. I wrote a feature five days a week about those New Yorkers of high, middle, and low estate who caught my fancy, and because I have a fairly good ear, a high-school course in shorthand, and a careless personality (my ex-wife called it permissive, but then she was always up on the latest clichés), the stories were usually well received. It also caused me to become acquainted with a large collection of oddballs and once there was even talk of syndication, but nothing ever came of it.

My new career began when a client of Myron Greene’s was robbed of $196,000 worth of jewelry (the insurance company’s reluctant estimate) and the thief let it be known that he was willing to sell it all back for a mere $40,000 provided that I served as the intermediary, or go-between. “I read his colyum,” the thief had told Myron Greene over the phone. “The guy don’t give a shit about nothing.”

Myron Greene and a representative of the insurance company approached me, and I agreed to serve as go-between provided that I could write about it once the negotiations were concluded. The man from the insurance company balked at that because he seemed to feel that a dose of clap was preferable to publicity. “After all, St. Ives,” he had said, “we certainly don’t want you to write a primer on extortion.”

Eventually he agreed because he didn’t have much choice, and on the day of the transaction I hung around