

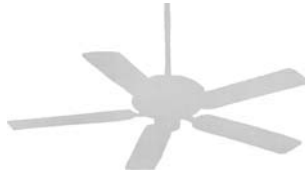
A BENNY COOPERMAN MYSTERY



EAST OF SUEZ



HOWARD ENGEL



ONE

I'D THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE HEAVY with dust and cobwebs, like a movie showing the opening of the tomb of Dracula. I'd thought that the light would be altered by bright motes of dust hanging in the air before the windows. I'd pictured mice racing out of sight as my key turned in the lock. In my imagined version of that moment, they scurried from view, hiding behind the filing cabinet or slouching in between my old galoshes under the hat stand by the door. The papers on my desk were not gritty with long neglect. The reality didn't live up to my imaginings. My dear Anna Abraham had been there before me with mop and broom.

The room was silent; stiller than I remembered it being, as though the electricity had been shut off, leaving a silence deeper than the familiar buzz of day. For a moment, I felt as though the room was punishing me for the months I'd been away from my old routines. Anna's wash and brush-up of my place of business rendered it clean, ready for work, but somewhat strange and forbidding, a bit like an old photograph of dead relations.

Through the window, the street looked chilly. It was September, but it felt more like November. The manholes blew their columns of white vapor straight up into a colorless sky, as though we were still in the grip of February. Pedestrians hurried along the sidewalk, hands thrust deep into their pockets. Were they cursing the fact that a change to warmer clothing had become necessary? The chill of another Ontario autumn and winter was claiming us again, in spite of the calendar's optimism.

The room wasn't exactly strange, but it wasn't an old friend either. It was like it had been cobbled together by a stage

designer from photographs, or recreated in a museum diorama, although I couldn't think why. It was like being part of a stage setting. Anna had come in and dusted it on the weekend, so there weren't any of the usual signs of neglect. The wastepaper basket was empty; that, at least, was uncharacteristic, as was the clear, uncluttered desk. Time had left my realm virtually unchanged. What I was seeing as change was *within* myself. *I* had been undergoing change. *I* had been away. I was the returning long-time tenant of this old second-floor office space. It was a confusion of subjects and objects. I had been out of town, flat on my back in a Toronto hospital for some months. I was the changed element. Don't blame the decor. The desk and chairs are completely innocent.

Anna, my best friend and sometime fiancée, had placed a vase of flowers in the center of the desk. I didn't recognize what kind they were. I must get a book about flowers from the library. Somewhere there must be a book that solves all minor mysteries such as when to set the clock forward and when to deliver my pillowcase full of receipts to my accountant. It would be nice to know the correct way to address an archbishop or a kirtle friar.

The note from Anna was a puzzler, as were all written or printed materials. The fact is: I'm a dogged reader, but no longer a quick one. My old head injury still made me stumble over the simplest words. It's not that I couldn't read, I just took a lot longer doing it. I worked my way through Anna's note, slowly. Letter by letter, at a pace that made molasses in January appear to be sprinting, I worked it out. It was both touching and personal:

Benny,

Welcome back to the place you know best. Don't let the strangeness get you down. You'll be up to speed in no time. Meanwhile, there's nothing that's urgent. Most of the circulars

are out of date, so you can pitch out almost everything. If you need succor, or even lunch, you know my number. Have fun!

Much love,

Anna

While the look of the room was strange, so too was my memory of the last few months. I remembered the big headlands of the experience: except for the bang on my head—*that* I had to piece together for myself from what I could squeeze from my reluctant police connections—the hospital routine, my friends from the lunchroom, the nurses and doctors, the look of the long corridor. I could remember the framed print on the wall outside the elevator which told me that I'd successfully returned to the right floor from some appointment to be X-rayed or to give blood. But the details of this time spent in a Toronto rehab hospital were fading. The names of people went first. I could no longer recall the name of my favorite nurse. I remembered the sensation of trying to remember her name while we were speaking to one another; I could still feel in my bones the exercise of running through the alphabet hoping for a clue. My doctors' names had also been erased from my memory, as had the names of my roommates and those of the other sharers of the ... was it the fifth floor or was it the tenth? Sometimes the stay at the rehab seemed like a dream, remote like a dream. And now this, my office, the scene of my work for the last fifteen or twenty years, had become as distant and as strange as my recollections of the hospital. I recognized that the sensation was eerie, but it didn't lead me on to panic. That route was occluded, a handy word I picked up at the rehab.

On—I forget the date; it's in my notebook—I had been beaned on the back of the head. They said it was a concussion, like in the movies of my youth. Next, again like in the movies of my youth, I'd have to collect a "flesh wound." As a result of

this, I had lost my easy familiarity with the here and now without upsetting my memory of time past. Let me give you the thrust of the situation. I could remember the name of the French cookie I was dunking in my coffee, but I could no longer remember the name of the person who was speaking to me from across the room. I could cross the street by myself, watching the traffic lights, but I might easily forget whom I was on my way to see. I couldn't remember the names of the people who greeted me on my way down St Andrew Street, but I could give you three main causes for the Punic Wars, remembered from school days. In short, I was a mess. And that's why I'd climbed the stairs to my office that day. I was going to clean out my desk, collect my files, and bundle up my old cases so they didn't fall into the hands of reporters from the *Beacon*.

The *Beacon*, the redoubtable Grantham two-section afternoon paper, was small, perfectly suited to a city the size of Grantham. It gave the sports scores and the international headline news. It told about where houses were being built on the old farms that used to grow cherries, grapes, and peaches. It mentioned which of the city's older buildings along Ontario or Church Street were being pulled down to make way for townhouses or maybe parking lots. This sort of thing in the *Beacon* used to make me mad. I could do twenty minutes without taking a breath on the bad decisions being made by the city fathers. But nowadays, I don't get excited. It's not that I have abandoned all my favorite causes. It's not that the paper has stopped reporting local catastrophes. And I haven't mellowed with the years. The fact is, I no longer take the paper, and if I did, I wouldn't be able to read it. That bang on the head I told you about has also made reading difficult. It would take me all day to read one story in the paper, figuring out the sense of an article word by word and at a pace that would make a seven-year-old leave me behind. I read slowly

and doggedly, but so slowly that the *Beacon* is putting out a new edition before I've digested the main story from the preceding day. Don't tell Anna, but I can't see foreign movies any more, because the subtitles vanish before I can decipher them. It would take me a week to read the pages you've just read.

So, like I said, I'm not the fellow I was the last time I sat behind this desk. If I allowed myself to continue in this business, I would lose my shirt as well as my clients. The simple truth is that my head isn't working the way it used to. Nowadays, I'm not surprised to discover that I have put my laundry in the oven and the dirty dishes in the refrigerator. I'm learning to live with these crazy new wrinkles in my life. After all, some of them are self-correcting. A hat placed in the freezer quickly announces itself the next time the door is opened. Garbage in the dishwasher is usually detected while I am trying to cram in another coffee cup.

Another thing: the city has become a stranger, although I can still walk down King Street or Queen without getting lost. I can find my way home from the library or the registry office, but when I hear a street name, I can no longer see where it is in my mind. I have to look it up on a map. Places have become near abstractions. The marriage between proper nouns and geography has been annulled. I know roughly where my old high school is, but I've forgotten the names of the streets I'd take to go there. Most flavors of geography, local, national, and international, have become a kind of melting Jell-O in my mind. Is London north or south of Paris? Is Grantham one hundred kilometers from Toronto or fifty? Is Iraq between the big rivers or is that Iran?

As I sat in my usual place behind the desk, I tried to remember the faces of clients who had stared across at me, telling me their stories and trying to engage my interest. I remembered the little speech I had memorized which I always used to scare off the triflers and jokers. With what was left, I made a living. Not that I worked that hard at it. The library,

the registry office, and back issues of the papers told me most of what I needed. For the rest, there were the local cops, who could be cajoled into telling me what I didn't already know. That way I could get them to do my work for me, and they didn't charge. I wondered whether my current rates schedule, still stuck under the antique inkstand, needed revising. Then I remembered, with a start, that I didn't have to worry about such things any longer.

How long had I been away from this desk anyway? Sometimes it seemed like a couple of weeks, sometimes like six months or a year. Time, I had come to recognize, was going to be a problem from now on. It had lost its familiar elasticity, like an old pair of briefs.

I began to put together the first of the flattened cardboard boxes I had brought with me because I wanted to make my retreat from this office a tidy, surgical procedure. Without complications. But I quickly tired of that. Change is never easy. It was something I was forced into; I didn't choose it. For one thing, I didn't know what I was going to do. Retirement is all very well in the abstract, but when it knocks on your door, when it bangs you on the head, that's more complicated.

Of course, Anna and I had discussed this many times, both while I was still in hospital and later here in Grantham after they let me go. She frankly looked forward to having me more to herself. I could see things from her side. Now she wouldn't come home to an unmade bed and dinner still in the freezer. I could become the perfect househusband. And, to be honest, there was a part of me that found the notion not unattractive. But, I felt like I was an unfinished box of popcorn; there were uneaten salty bits still down at the bottom of the package.

It's never easy to let go. It took my brother and me months to get Pa to retire and give up his business. But could he imagine St Andrew Street without his store at the top of James Street? He could not. He wondered about how he would fill in his days if he didn't come downtown for business. Still, it

didn't take him long to fill in the empty hours. He discovered the golf club, where his skill at gin rummy quickly earned him the nickname The Hammer. He lived to *savor* his retirement. Why couldn't I? Where was it written that a private investigator had to die in harness? Hadn't I at least put a down payment on retirement when I got myself clobbered on the job? At the hospital, one of my nurses told me to take things one at a time and not try to settle all of my problems at once. What I was hoping to do with the rest of my life was a problem that could wait. Right now I was going to sort out the office.

I thought that, once I'd sat down behind my desk, the queer look of the room would disappear, but it didn't. So I accepted it: things were not going to be the same. Yesterday cannot be recaptured. Take that as a given. Now get on with cleaning up the mess.

Anna had organized things for me to a degree. There was a plastic dustbin full of bills, with the ones that she had paid on my behalf clearly marked. Another bin held letters opened but not yet answered. I wasted a quarter of an hour or more reading, trying to work out the words of this, a typical letter:

Dear Mr Cooperman,

Thank you for locating my husband in Atlantic City. I went to meet him there and now we are both working in a gambling house. George's compulsion to gamble is under control because he knows that he'll be fired if he tries placing a bet anywhere in town.

Thank you for your help and I hope to be able to pay you the rest of what I owe you next pay day ...

The letter was signed with a name that meant nothing to me. I couldn't recall the case either. It sounded like the happy ending to a skip-tracing job. The letter was dated a year ago and I could find no evidence of a check in a later letter or in

the pile of papers that Anna had dealt with. But I accepted the happy ending as payment of sorts. The cash didn't seem to matter so much just then. Which only goes to show how out of it I was that first day back on the job.

I used to pride myself on how quickly I could get through the paper that accumulated on my desk while I was working on a case or was on holiday. I loved to fill up the wastepaper basket with advertising, requests for magazine subscriptions, and other trash. Now it would take me hours, and I resented it. A blockage had appeared in the hourglass of my time, the flow of the sand had been impeded. Reading was central to my life. Now it was my hang-up. I was like an assembly line with a breakdown. A Charlie Chaplin movie.

In the closet I found a few articles of clothing that looked only vaguely familiar: a jacket, a pair of gray trousers, a shirt with a necktie still attached to the collar, and a couple of pairs of shoes. The shoes were dusty, and turned up at the toes, looking like artifacts from a display in a museum: "Here are the shoes worn by the suspect at the scene of the crime; *circa* 2002."

After sorting through the closet, the drawers, and the filing cabinet, I sat down again and leaned back just to see if the usual squeak could be anticipated. I was testing the continuity of my memory. The fact that I even remembered was a testimonial to what remained of my *pia mater*. The phone rang.

"Cooperman," I said.

"Benny, it's me. I *thought* I'd find you at the office."

"Hi, Anna! Yeah, I've been cleaning up some of the mess. How long have I been away from here?"

"It's been a long time. You *know* this is September. The season of 'mists and mellow fruitfulness' is upon us. What are you *really* up to?"

"Just trying to get to know the guy who used to work here."

"Good idea. Like Danton said, it's worth the effort."

"Who's Danton? You didn't tell me about him. Are you trying to let me down gently?"

“He’s long gone. No threat. You’re not getting depressed again, are you?” I’d had a bout or two of that since graduating from the rehab hospital. It was normal, they said.

“No, Anna, I’m thinking happy, constructive thoughts. I’m so healthy I’m already thinking of breaking for lunch. Are you available?”

“Nope. I’ve got a class. But I’ll see you after five or so.”

“I’ll give you a progress report when I see you.”

After I hung up the phone the room seemed more silent than when I first came through the door. It made me wonder about people who are always on the phone to one another every day. Does it take the place of a relationship? I don’t know.

Looking around the room, I tried to figure out how many cardboard boxes I’d need to clean the place out. I could store the files in Pa’s basement until I could legally dispose of them. The furniture could go to the junk dealer on Queenston Road whose name I couldn’t remember.

I should mention the fact that while I was never a hotshot at remembering names, since my time in hospital names are the hardest things to recall. As soon as I tried to reach for a name in my mind, it flitted like a sparrow out of sight. This didn’t happen only with obscure names, it happened with those I knew best. The list included my brother and even Anna. The rule seemed to work this way: most of ancient history was available to me, courtesy of James Palmer and Miss Lauder, my high school history teachers, but contemporary names seemed to rest intact until I reached out to grab one of them. My memory was a fishbowl and proper nouns swam about avoiding my fingers with skill and cunning. As soon as the moment passed, when I no longer needed the word, it slipped quietly back into its place and I could say it to myself. Of course, by that time, the occasion had passed and I stood stupidly with a no-longer-needed name in my mouth.

I looked at the cardboard carton with my collection of phone-bugging equipment in it. I could make a gift of the

whole works to Savas or Staziak at Niagara Regional Police. The last time I looked those guys were using tin cans and string to keep in touch with each other. I remember one of them saying that the only time they listened in on a conversation was when it was my quarter in the phone.

While I was looking at the cardboard box, I suddenly realized how ancient my own bits and pieces of technology were. I could even see a metal box with space for ten B batteries to be installed. Nowadays, electronic equipment runs on things far more sophisticated than B batteries. The only word I could think of was “transistor,” and that was probably long out of date. Who could I give this junk to? Maybe my brother’s girls might know what to do with it. Damn it! What the hell!

I wondered why the question hit me so hard. What was the point? Then I understood. This was *my life* I was dismantling. This was who *I* was. I felt like a schoolboy pulling apart a robin’s nest. No wonder I wasn’t enjoying it.