

## The Key to the Mystery

A mystery story by J. Norton Cabell

Fiona had a fantastic body and an exquisite face. I'd been to her place a few times now, trying to collect the rent, so this wasn't just some quickie observation. No, she was an eye-popper. But not at six o'clock that morning, and not with blood all over her body. And her face: you couldn't even tell it was her, it was so bashed in.

Fifteen minutes earlier I had grumbled, "Hello? Hello?" even while my hand was still grappling for the telephone on my bedside table. "Hello?" I had tried again, when I finally got the phone to my ear. But all I heard was a squeak, followed by a thud. The clock-radio said five forty-five in the A.M.

Then I got smart, looked at that new gadget I've got—Caller ID—and read the little green numbers. Fiona? Never mind that she was three weeks behind on her rent and I was ready to throw her out. And never mind that her doe eyes and general gorgeousness were the only reason I put the eviction notice off this long. Today was the day. I mean, the four-plex is my uncle's property; I just manage it for him. So I couldn't let her stay there forever. The rent today, or an eviction notice, I'd told her. "Okay, Fiona. I know it's you," I said into the telephone. "I know you're there. Today didn't mean the middle of the night." Silence. So I decided I better get over there. Maybe it was like an invitation. Little did I know, hunh?

It's only a five minute drive from my apartment above Uncle Herb's TrueValue hardware store where I do his books, across the river to Uncle Mike's apartment building. He calls it Emerald Towers. Green it is, a garish lima-bean paint that's peeling off. Tower it isn't, just a squat, unattractive two-story: two apartments up, two down, with a small laundry room around back. Anyway, what with getting dressed and all, it was fifteen minutes before I got there. Still dark as Hades, of course. And raining. No lights on on the first floor where Hairy Hank lived on one side, Sue Ann the Nag on the other. I walked up the outside staircase to the small porch that has a door to Fiona's place on one side, and one to Stephanie's on the other. I tried to be quiet, knocking on the door. I mean, no need to wake up Stephanie. I watched the rain leak through the gutters. Uncle Mike doesn't like to spend money on the place. Just collect rent. I knocked again. Nothing.

Then—I know I shouldn't have done it, but this sure would be a different story if I hadn't—I tried the handle. It turned. How could...? Fiona always kept the place locked. They all did. It was that sort of neighborhood. Well, too late to back out now. I opened the door. What with the porch light I could see the monsters—actually her four-year-old twins, Stacy and Shawn—asleep on the sofa bed. That's where they always slept. "Fiona?" I didn't want to wake the monsters, so I said it like half-loud. As you can figure, she didn't answer.

Still wondering why she wouldn't talk to me on the phone, I stepped into the living room. Every day she called me with one more lame excuse: like, some problem with food stamps so too much of her paltry paycheck had to go to feed her little sweetie pies. Or, the alimony check was late. "You know, he's always so regular about that." Somehow in person the excuses made more sense. When she'd flutter those long lashes and say her mother promised to lend her some money and it was supposed to arrive... Well, I was so busy watching her hand go to that exquisite chest of hers, the date got a little hazy.

Now her blood-soaked nightie was plastered to that same exquisite chest. But her own mother wouldn't have recognized her; not with her face like it was. I wanted to be sick. I really did. But pretty obvious that wouldn't do any good. So what I did was pick up the dangling telephone and listen to that squawk the phone company sends you when there's no connection. I called the police.

Things got pretty busy in a hurry. Bunches of police guys, bright lights, someone from Children's Services to deal with the kiddies, an ambulance. I did get time—here's where a neat and tidy turn-of-mind helps—to notice the top plank was missing from the bookshelf Fiona had built out of cinder blocks and three-foot boards. Before long, I was back across the river, at the police station, talking to a hawk-nosed Detective O'Grady. He was polite enough, but I wasn't fooled; he had already read me my rights. Besides, he had little eyes.

"One more time, son—"

"I'm twenty-nine. And not your son." But I gave him—I think this was the fourth time—the blow-by-blow.

He kept coming back to how many times I'd been over there dunning her. "The rent was twenty days late? Does everyone who's late get such attention from you?"

"It doesn't happen that often." I was loath to admit that your basic gorgeousness does lend to lame excuses some scrap of credibility. Didn't want to get hauled up on a gender discrimination charge.

His points were two. First, No sign of forced entry and it looked like she had been in bed—alone, he added—and I had a key. Two, they'd checked my place and the Caller ID said she'd called. So what exactly did we have going on? Had I been unsuccessful in suggesting a little trade in exchange for the rent that everybody in the place knew I was shagging her for? Hint. Hint. Like she's a pretty good looking woman in case I didn't notice. Well, this wasn't the time or place to say I *had* noticed, right?

I think they decided to let me go only because they couldn't find the bloody plank—clear fir one-by-sixes they were—around Emerald Towers or in my car. For now, was the obvious implication. I put in the afternoon working on Uncle Herb's books, punching mindlessly away on the old ten-key. But later I decided to check a few things myself. It bugged me that the cops were more interested in why I used Fiona's telephone—what was I supposed to do? Drive four blocks to a pay phone?—than in the squeak and the thud I heard. So I better find out myself.

I took the vac and headed over to Emerald Towers. I unlocked the laundry room—you got to keep out the neighborhood riffraff—and started cleaning the place, like I do every Wednesday and boy does it need it. Tenants, I don't care how nice they are, when it's not their own place they won't take care of it. So I 409ed the washer and dryer and vacked the floor. While I was wiping down the counter, in comes Sue Ann who lives in number two, keys jangling in her pudgy hand, a bag of laundry under each mammoth arm.

"When are you going to fix that bathroom sink?" Her voice was like Roseanne's. No, that viking woman in *What's New, Pussycat?* "The drip's driving us all crazy. Instead of oogling the woman next door you could be fixing things that need it around here." I'd get to her sink, but the more she bitched, the slower I got. And boy, could she carp. Hot water's too hot; then it's too cold; squeaky windows; peeling paint; worn out washers, flickering lights. Couldn't do anything herself except bitch at me or that bear she lives with. Al—her live-in who works sheetrock—must have gone deaf from her klaxon voice.

She stuffed her 40-C bras atop his workshirts with the nineteen-inch neck. "I figured she'd come to no good," she railed on, "the way every guy went gooey-eyed around her." She stopped her stuffing to let her eyes bore into mine. "I told Al I'd cut off his you-know-whats if I caught him even looking at her." Only she didn't call them you-know-whats.

"You here this morning?" I stared at the keys that she'd plunked on the counter.

"No. I'm working early shift. I got to be there by six." Her Burger King was just down the street from Uncle Herb's hardware store. I'd seen her there once but Shoneys' burgers are just as good and twenty cents cheaper. "Didn't know anything about it until ten, when the cops came by asking questions." She finished stuffing the washer. None of Jason's clothes, I noticed. Jason is her worthless nine-year-old. She makes him do his own laundry. Result is—cleanliness not being a nine-year-old male value—he grunges around in dirty clothes.

She stuck her quarters in and the water started gushing into the machine. “How about that sink?”

“Later.” I escaped. You got it; she intimidated me.

Hairy Hank lived in number one, the smallest apartment. “Hey bud, come on in.” A little guy, he was pushing forty and had a chest like King Kong’s. And showing it off right now, as he clicked off the wrestling match. “Man, that must be something. Finding her. Lying there like that, tits up.” He sprawled on his couch.

“Police must have talked to you, Hank. You knew her better than anyone here.”

“Yeah. Lucky for me Wilma come over yesterday, stayed the night.” Wilma was his now-and-then girl. She and her seven-year-old Ronnie stayed with Hank a few days, then left for a while. I was never sure how intimate the relationship was—none of my business, really. I didn’t squawk about her living here and not being on the lease because she always brought her laundry. Uncle Mike let me keep half the laundry money, so every load of laundry, fifty cents goes in my pocket. Makes me, unlike most landlords, love little kids, especially the dirty ones. Except grungy Jason, that is.

“I mean real lucky, man. Like, I got a key to her place. There.” He pointed to a nail next to the door and I recognized the Schlage key—I cut them at Uncle Herb’s TrueValue, so I know whereof I speak.

“That makes them *real* interested.” I said. “Believe me, I know.”

“Like I explained to them, sometimes I watch her little ones, when she works.” Fiona worked overnight at a 24-hour convenience store and would leave the little ones asleep upstairs. Some mothering, but what the hay, I’m a property manager, not a social worker. “So, like, I need a key, don’t I? Anyway, the cops come banging on the door this morning and me and Wilma are still in bed.” He gestured back to the bedroom. “Little Ronnie was dead to the world on the sofa-bed here—all that cop racket didn’t wake the kid. I had to quick throw some clothes on to answer the door. But makes my story pretty believable. Hunh?”

Great alibi, I thought. And I had a better handle on the relationship as well.

As I stood in the parking lot trying to figure out when Stephanie got home, Al the bear drove up. He turned off the lights—with the overcast it was already dark—fiddled with the radio, undid his seat belt, turned off the ignition, and opened the door. After looking at whatever and checking something else, he got out of his car. Slo-mo, like everything he did. “Figured they lock you up, swallow the key,” he said. He carried a lunch box, the old-fashioned kind that had a thermos under the round top.

“So what kind of excuse you have for the cops?”

“No problemo.” The pace of his words made it sound like siesta time. “I worked graveyard. Got home eight o’clock this morning. Double time, man.” He scratched his crotch. “Hey, she got anything on when you find her?”

“Hunh?”

“She wearing anything?”

“Oh. A nightgown.”

“Must have been a sight. All that”—the hand that had been scratching now created form in front of his chest—“just hanging out there.”

“They don’t have the same sort of, uh... attraction when they’re covered with blood and the owner is dead.”

“Hey, you’re luckier than me, there with her in the middle of the night. Once, I tried to help her, uh, fix a door. Plenty of times since I’ve wanted to mosey upstairs, get it on.”

“But you got Sue Ann.”

He shrugged.

Beyond me how Stephanie did it: three children: three, two, and one. Maybe immaculate conception. She arrived a couple of years ago, the oldest just a baby. I never saw a man around. I mean she never had time for like a date. Worked two jobs: one, a receptionist in a real estate place, another fitting aluminum pieces together in a place makes camping stuff. Anyway, she had red hair and crooked teeth.

"I don't know if I can stay here," she said when I arrived; it was after ten and she was folding baby clothes. "I knew this wasn't the greatest neighborhood, but killing like that... My mom told me to move, but I can't afford a nicer place."

"The police hassle you much?"

"If you were trying to get three children—all in diapers—ready to take to Mom so you could get to work, you think dealing with a policeman might be a hassle?" I nodded. "Besides, I couldn't help. I don't think I'd hear a fire siren outside once the kids wake me up at six-thirty—you know we all sleep together in there." She gestured toward the closed bedroom door. "And besides, I never even really knew her. We just met on the landing a few times. I'm, you know, never around." She plopped the last article of toddler wear on top of the pile, then sat beside it, grabbing some M&Ms from a bowl on the table. "I barely know anybody here, just Sue Ann a little because she washes for me—a load almost every day. And Hank, I met him the time he locked himself out of his place."

A Sunday, the only day she was home, and no one else was in the building. So he borrowed her phone to call me. He wasn't happy, I remember, because I had to charge him the twenty-five dollar lock-out fee. More than unhappy, he was POed.

"Want some?" She offered me the bowl.

"No thanks. Well, at least it hasn't happened again."

"It's that Wilma that's always forgetting and locking the door behind her. And it has happened again, but he doesn't call you anymore. I've got a spare key of his. Right here. See?" She pointed to the bottom of the bowl of M&Ms.

"But you're never home."

"Twice he's come down to the office, I loaned him my keys."

I didn't sleep much, what with my mind churning away. I had a glimmer of *what* happened, but the *why* sure was vague, and that telephonic squeak, thud... In the morning, after reckoning up Uncle Herb's daily receipts, I drove back over and banged on the door to number one. Wilma opened up. "You mind if I come in?"

"Oh. Sure. Hank got called so he's on a job and Ronnie's at school. I'm going to do laundry today." Wilma was your basic dumb blonde but I approved of her focus on cleanliness.

"I'm just checking to see he's still got the key to upstairs." I lifted the key off the nail, holding it by the tip. "The cops look at this yesterday morning?"

She yawned. "I don't know. I was in bed."

"You go upstairs with Hank when he goes?"

"Umm." She was separating whites from darks. "She'd been out of work. So Hank didn't need to help out." That Fiona had been out of work I knew, why I wasn't getting rent.

"So, you see anyone else go up there?"

She hesitated, a cotton blouse, little blue flowers on white background, in her hand: whites or darks? "No. Only—when was it? Oh, the day I got here—Hank picked me and Ronnie up. We just pulled in. She was up on that landing and the big guy next door. He was coming down the stairs." She dropped the blouse in the pile of whites. "And you know, Sue Ann." She picked something else up, red and white checks. "She's got the bluest eyes." It takes a blonde, doesn't it? I mean with a voice like Sue Ann's who's going to notice the eyes? "And man can they give you a look, only it was aimed up the stairs at him." She dropped the whatever, darks this time.

Why had Fiona called me in the morning? Not to tell me she had the rent. To report a pending murder? Even Wilma knew you call the police, not your landlord, for that. Why, then? And

why didn't she say anything? I used my own key to get into the apartment. The place was a mess, but eerie, being so silent. Her bed was just a spring and mattress on the floor, no frame. The sheets had disappeared; the mattress showed, besides the usual stains, a large brown one to the near side. I pictured her the way she was yesterday morning, her hand draped across the telephone, a Harlequin paperback on the floor. The phone was one of those fancy ones, with redial and speed dial and hold, lots of buttons. Speed dial. I looked closer, looked at the numbers.

At the sound of a key turning the latch on the front door, I whirled, feeling either relief or resignation when big-nosed O'Grady entered.

"Returning to the scene of the crime, hunh son? I thought you might."

I repressed an urge to call him something like 'old man.' Instead, I walked out of the bedroom, partially closing the door behind me. It squeaked. Was that the one that Al said he fixed?

"I've already read you your rights, son. But, trust me, you'll feel better getting it off your chest."

"Okay. For starters, look at this phone."

His eyes got even closer, but he looked. "So?"

"The speed dial numbers. Number three says 'landlord.' I think her hand—you saw it—knocked the phone off the receiver, then hit that number. It automatically dialed me."

He picked up the telephone, punched the number. We both heard a click, whir, and then my recorded voice.

"The squeak," I said, shoving the door so we heard it. "Whoever did it was just leaving. And the thud could have been the paperback falling to the floor. Right next to the phone would have magnified the sound." He didn't say anything, but I could see he was considering it. "We need to go outside," I said.

He followed me down the stairs, then scrunched his eyes some but kept his cool when I knocked on number two, then number one. Al the bear emerged, stood there looking us two over. Wilma came out of her place. She didn't say anything either. A policeman sure is a conversation stopper.

I turned my back on them both. "You're right I got a key, O'Grady. But I'm not the only one. Hank has a key to Fiona's. It's hanging just inside the door. Hank—or Wilma—could just as easily have gone upstairs yesterday morning and let themselves into Fiona's." I could imagine Wilma yawning behind my back.

"But I don't think they did," O'Grady said. "Why would they?"

A car drove up and Sue Ann got out, finished her morning shift. "What's going on here?" she trumpeted, her face flushed.

"We're talking about keys, Sue Ann. Come listen." She stood there, shifting her bag of Burger King goodies from one hand to the other. "I don't think Hank or Wilma," I went on, "used the key, either, but they could have. Furthermore, so could anyone who had access to their place."

"And who would that be? Besides you?" O'Grady asked.

I looked around before answering. "Stephanie, for one. She has a spare key to Hank's." No one responded. I could see faces calculating the probability of Stephanie, juggling three babies, stealing into Hank's apartment, then... Tough calculating a number small as that. "And," I added, "that means anyone who could get into Stephanie's apartment."

I turned and looked at Al, who was still working on the calculation. I said, "For instance, Sue Ann has a key to Stephanie's. What if Al took her key, snuck into Stephanie's and got the key out of the M&Ms, then went down and got Fiona's key from Hank's, then slipped upstairs?" Al stiffened, his mind no longer on higher mathematics.

"I was working," he said.

"You're right. *You* were." I turned back. "But Sue Ann wasn't. And for her it was much easier. During the day Tuesday, doing Stephanie's laundry, how easy to remove Hank's key. Then Wednesday morning—Al's at work, Jason still asleep—open up Hank's door. Ronnie still dead

to the world. Take the key upstairs, unlock, take the key back downstairs, back up. Fiona's twins still asleep. Into her room and do it."

Sue Ann's expanse of red skin had turned pale. "Why?" I think it was Wilma's voice.

"Because Al was thinking of roaming, wasn't he?" I was talking to Sue Ann. "You saw him making eyes at her, fixing something, or so he said. And he'd learned long ago to ignore your threats. If you couldn't change him, you had to remove the temptation."

"You can't prove anything." No trumpet now; just normal voice.

"I bet your fingerprints are still on the key in Hank's. And you probably tossed the piece of wood in the river when you went on to work but want to bet there's a blood stain from it in your car?"

She dropped the bag of Burger King goodies as O'Grady walked over to her car. Suddenly, when he peered in the front window, she wasn't intimidating at all. Then—I didn't know she had it in her—she actually whispered, "I tossed it in the back."