

## IF THE SHOE FITS

Feeling free at last from the anonymity in which he'd wallowed his whole life, George Milsop has barely pulled his chair beneath him at the dinner table before blurting out his exciting news.

"You're looking at a man whose success is about to soar to previously unimaginable heights," he announces to his wife.

Bertha waves off his enthusiasm with the slice of white bread she's just slathered butter onto. "Whatever it is you have in mind, George, forget it. We've been through this too many times already. These far-fetched dreams of yours have become tiresome."

Bertha returns her attention to her plate and begins sopping up the gravy along its edge with her bread. "You're a shoe salesman," she adds without looking up from her dinner. "Life's not likely to ever get any more glamorous than that for you."

George struggles to cut a piece of sinewy roast beef. Prime cuts of meat are unaffordable luxuries on a shoe salesman's pay. "But this is different, Bertha. This time Lady Luck is finally going to make things happen for me."

"All of your life things have been going to happen for you. Accept it, George. You're not the dashing hero in one of those old movies you've become so obsessed with. You never will be. You are a God-fearing, hard-working man who brings home a paycheck every two weeks. That should be satisfaction enough." Her glower signals the conversation is ended.

His movies - particularly those old black and white classics in which the daring and self-assurance of the leading man always wins the woman in the end - are his ritual escape from the monotony that his job and his life with Bertha have become. Nearly every evening after dinner, George stars in those leading roles. He'd long ago given up including Bertha, a pragmatist to a fault, in his evening fantasies. His unimaginative wife can fathom neither George as a dashing hero nor herself as the heroine wrapped in his arms at the movie's end. What eats at him most, though, is Bertha's refusal to ever picture him as anything more than a shoe salesman. So be it. Bertha's loss will be Betty Dillard's gain.

To prove her wrong about him once and for all, he toys with the idea of telling Bertha about Betty, the vivacious clerk at the jewelry counter of Plotcher's Department Store. Instead, George quietly finishes his dinner. He and Bertha are both accustomed to eating in silence.

As George watches Bertha clear the supper dishes from the table, he notices how her breasts sag beneath her frumpy housedress; how, though she is barely a year past forty, her plump figure resembles that of a woman much older. Betty Dillard, George guesses, is about Bertha's age, yet Betty's figure - smooth, firm curves to which her expensive skirts and blouses cling provocatively - arouses George in a way Bertha never has. Not even when they were married the summer after their high school graduation.

George carries this vision of Betty with him to the living room. Instinctively he thumbs through the TV listings. Channel 4 is showing a rerun of *Key Largo*, one of his all-time favorites. He likes the way the returning G.I., Humphrey Bogart, out-foxes Edward G. Robinson and his group of thugs and wins the love of the Lauren Bacall character. Betty Dillard reminds George a lot of Lauren Bacall.

He barely notices when Bertha enters the room and begins poring through one of her photograph albums, filled mostly with badly-focused snapshots of her sister Ada's family who live in south Florida. George and Bertha had visited Ada there once, nearly eight years ago in the summer of 1976. George had been excited about the trip, imagining an excursion by airboat into the Everglades, or a water-taxi tour showcasing celebrity

mansions with expansive sculpted lawns and gardens stretching beyond the luxurious yachts docked canal-side. Afterwards, maybe they would sip sunset cocktails at some romantic art-deco place overlooking the ocean. But the humidity and mosquitoes had bothered Bertha and they'd spent most of the week in the air-conditioned sunroom of Ada's tract home on the edge of a swamp. They had never been back.

Night after night, Bertha leafs through her albums while George watches his movies. So it has gone on for years, the two of them vicariously preoccupied with their respective distractions from the ennui of their daily lives.

Rarely does a Bogart movie fail to keep George's attention fixed on the romance and adventure that promises to ensue. This evening, though, Betty Dillard captivates his fantasy. Life with Betty, he imagines, would be full of glamour, excitement and romance. There would be no need to escape into his movies. He'd be living the real thing.

He recalls how that very morning Betty Dillard seemed particularly impressed when J. Rollins Plotcher himself had descended from his suite of offices on the department store's sixth floor to sit with George at his coffee break. It had been George's finest hour.

"Brilliant what you accomplished yesterday, Milsop," Plotcher had told him, "selling out our entire stock of Fleet-Foot Sneakers. My father would have thought it brilliant, as well." Plotcher had raised his eyes piously, as if gazing at an invisible portrait of the store's late founder.

George had pretended not to be overly awed that J. Rollins Plotcher had singled him out. "Just trying to be the best at my job, sir," he assured the store's owner.

Plotcher went on to extol George's sales prowess. Fleet Foot Sneakers were very likely to become a fad, and the idea of a full-blown fad beginning in Plotcher's Department Store rang lucratively in J. Rollins's ears. His point made and without excusing himself, Plotcher rose from his chair. Halfway across the cafeteria he turned and - here's the good news George had wanted to share with Bertha - as much as promised him a promotion to one of the marketing jobs upstairs.

"Your kind of sales savvy is exactly what the marketing team could use more of, Milsop," Plotcher had announced.

So as to appear indifferent to this boost in his self-esteem, George nonchalantly lifted his cup in a salute. Scalding coffee sloshed over its rim and onto his lap and quivering hand.

While he was blotting the spilled coffee with a napkin, a waft of exotic perfume carried a husky female voice across the table. "Sounds like somebody's on his way to the top."

Betty Dillard had clearly overheard the exchange between George and Plotcher and was sidling into the latter's vacated chair. "We must get to know each other better, George Milsop," Betty said. "I have a real weakness for rising stars like you."

She then winked at him as she pursed her lips seductively around the straw of her cherry Coke. Each delicate draw of the drink hollowed her cheeks ever so slightly the way, he imagined, they must when she kissed. The effect had left George speechless.

How pitifully Bertha contrasts to Betty Dillard, George notes. Bertha is dozing on the couch, her photograph album spread-winged upon her lap. George decides not to wake her and quietly switches off the TV. As he climbs the stairs and prepares for bed, he ponders the interminable pathos of their life together. He falls asleep imagining Betty Dillard lying next to him.

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"I'm leaving my wife," George confides to Hank Sandstrom of the hardware department the next morning as they walk from their

cars to the store entrance. "I have good reason to believe that a certain voluptuous blonde who works at the jewelry counter has taken quite a fancy to me."

George struts across the parking lot. He is wearing his powder-blue leisure suit and a pale yellow, wide-collared shirt, its top two buttons boldly left open. Underneath, a truss conspicuously flattens the bulge around his midriff.

"Ah, you must be talking about the tantalizing Betty Dillard." Hank, accustomed by now to George's off-the-cuff schemes and fantasies, throws his arm across his friend's shoulder. "That's pretty dangerous territory there, Pal. Maybe even more than the dashing George Milsop can handle."

"Evidently *she* doesn't think so. She all but threw herself on me in a crazed lust yesterday morning - in front of half the store's employees."

Hank chuckles at the absurdity of the image. "Sounds to me like the local crime syndicate is about to be introduced to a new Top Banana," he says. "Not exactly what I'd call the next logical career step for a shoe salesman; but, what the heck, you've watched *The Godfather* at least two dozen times, so it's not like you don't have the experience."

"I'm not joking about this, Hank," George says as the two friends part and head in opposite directions to their respective departments. "Not this time."

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George attempts to sell shoes with the zeal of his stellar Fleet Foot Sneakers performance, but his attention repeatedly turns from in-steps and arches to Betty Dillard. He looks for her during his coffee break and again at lunch. When he still has not seen her by mid-afternoon, and fearing she might not have come to work at all, he dares break one of Plotcher's cardinal rules and leaves his department. Peering furtively over a rack of spangled cocktail dresses, he admires the poise and beauty of Betty Dillard as she waits on her customers at the jewelry counter. George thinks she's the classiest lady he has ever set eyes upon outside of the movies. He slips back to the shoe department only when his nose begins to tickle from the aroma of her perfume and he fears blowing his cover with a sneeze.

As the afternoon drags on, self-doubt begins to eat at George's confidence until he convinces himself that Betty Dillard is unapproachable, that he has been a fool to think she will have anything to do with someone who leads as dull of a life as his. At three minutes after six o'clock, George removes



his cash drawer and hands it to the evening security guard, the way he's done every working day for the past sixteen years.

"I almost forgot, George. I have something for you." The guard hands him a lavender envelope. Its faint smell of lilac causes George's heart to race as he tears open the note. In a flowing feminine script, the note reads: *Meet me after work for a drink at the Pink Panther.* There is no signature, nor is one necessary.

Ten minutes later, George sees the neon cat holding a cocktail glass from which bubble the words *PINK PANTHER*. He has driven past it every evening on his way home from work. Instinct tells him he should pass it by again. But Betty Dillard is not the kind of woman you stand up. George swings his station wagon into the parking lot.

Rumor has it the Pink Panther is a training camp of sorts for small-time racketeers and other wannabe mobsters. Within its inner sanctum, they lavishly celebrate paroles from the federal penitentiary downstate, revel raucously, and devise ill-planned crimes that, more often than not, land them back in the pen. Few of them, George suspects, ever make it to the mobster big leagues.

The moment George walks into the Pink Panther he knows he's glaringly out of place among its band of thugs, the more so when, after his eyes have adjusted to the dimly-lit interior, he does not find Betty Dillard waiting for him. He fights the urge to make an about-face back to the parking lot by imagining himself in the shoes of Frank McCloud, the Humphrey Bogart character in *Key Largo*. With the detached self-confidence of Bogie, George swaggers up to the bar, chooses a stool that affords him a clear view of the club's entrance, and orders a gin, straight-up. He nods toward the Al Capone lookalike who appears to be studying him with an interest that makes George more than a bit uncomfortable. As if to underscore that George has wandered onto alien turf, the rotund man pulls a red silk handkerchief from the breast pocket of his pin-striped suit and begins polishing the prosthetic metal claw that has replaced his amputated left hand. The display is effectively unnerving to George and he begins to have second thoughts about agreeing to meet Betty Dillard at the infamous Pink Panther.

Bertha will expect him home at precisely six fifty-seven. In sixteen years he has never failed to walk into their house just as she is setting dinner on the table. He glances at his wristwatch. In four minutes, his station wagon will not pull

into the driveway as usual. It never will again. George wonders if Bertha will miss either the car or him.

To the best of George's recall, no film actress has ever made a grander entrance than Betty Dillard does just then. The effect is stunning, classic Hollywood, the way the setting sun spotlights the open doorway and the way she pauses there just long enough to draw attention to her striking presence before weaving her way through the maze of tables toward the back room of the Pink Panther. George forgets about Bertha.

"I'll have another one of these - make it a double this time," he says, sliding his barely touched glass of gin towards the bartender. "And put whatever the lady normally drinks on my tab. We'll take our drinks in the back room."

With a suaveness that one can only acquire from studying the great leading men of movies, George edges off the seat of his barstool to follow Betty. All eyes turn in disbelief upon him and the din that had permeated the Pink Panther suddenly stills as he swashes after Betty. A second later, a claw with steel talons grabs his shoulder, sending an excruciating pain up George's neck and stopping him cold in his pursuit.

"Not so fast, shoe salesman," the Capone lookalike from the bar commands.

This impromptu entertainment spurs a renewed round of revelry from the club's clientele. "You gonna' fit him with cement shoes, Rocco?" George hears someone shout. "Or you just gonna' rough him up real good like you did the last guy who tried messing around with Betty?"

"Easy, boys," Rocco says, temporarily calming the blood-thirsty thugs. "This is my new partner. I ain't doin' nothin' to him - yet." George catches the iron-clawed man's emphasis on the final word.

"How 'bout we talk a bit of business now, partner," Rocco says, squeezing a bit harder with his claw and, to the amusement of the crowd, causing George to wince as he is pushed into the back room.

"I think you've mistaken me for someone else," George says when Rocco releases his grip. "Business? What business are you talking about?" George massages his shoulder where the iron claw has dug into it.

"You came here at the request of your new babe, right?" Rocco gestures toward a large-backed rattan chair in the corner where Betty Dillard is peering into the mirror of her compact and reapplying her lipstick. She does not bother to acknowledge

George's presence in the room. "And do you know why Miss Dillard asked you to meet her here?" Rocco asks.

"A drink. She invited me to have a drink with her."

"In due time. We talk business first, and then you and Miss Dillard can have your drink together." Rocco seats himself at a large oval table in the center of the room.

George tries to will his body to stop trembling. He's seen enough gangster movies to know that whatever Rocco has in mind it is certain to bode badly - maybe even deadly - for him personally. "I'm sorry, Mr. Rocco. I'm really not cut out for your kind of work," George says.

"I'll decide whether or not you're the right man for the job." As he speaks, Rocco reaches beneath his suit jacket with his good hand and removes a revolver from a shoulder holster. George knows nothing about guns, but it looks like the same kind Dirty Harry carried.

"I... I can't do this." George's reply is more of a whimper than a pronouncement. He hopes Betty Dillard does not notice the dark stain that has begun diffusing from his crotch down the inside of his left pant leg.

"Obviously, Miss Dillard and me think you can be persuaded, or we wouldn't have chosen you for the job." Rocco waves the

barrel of the gun from George to the empty chair across the table. "Now sit and listen to the plan." George obediently drops into the chair.

Rocco explains the plan. In essence, George is to act as a decoy while Rocco and Betty clean out the jewelry department on the second floor of Plotcher's Department Store.

"You drive your car up to the front of the store," Rocco tells George. "At exactly 7:45, you get out and start breaking display window glass like crazy. A minute after we hear the alarm go off, Miss Dillard and me will be removing some choice trinkets down the back fire stairs. In the meantime, you grab a couple of watches or a fur for yourself, jump into your car and get the hell out of there real fast."

"What if I wait for the police to arrive and tell them what's really going on?" George asks.

"I wouldn't advise hanging around the scene of the crime too long, shoe salesman. Miss Dillard and me will be long gone before any police arrive, and you'll be standing there holding the goodies. The cops will have their man." Rocco has a good point there, George realizes.

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Fifteen minutes later, George drives out of the Pink Panther parking lot, headed back towards Plotcher's Department Store. Rocco and Betty Dillard follow closely behind in a black Lincoln Continental. George had hoped for enough traffic to camouflage his rust-scarred station wagon in the blur of taillights ahead, allowing him to lose his pursuers. But each time George tries to speed up or maneuver through the traffic, the Lincoln moves even closer to his bumper, as if it were some voracious parasite feeding upon the station wagon's exhaust.

The evening is not particularly hot, but George is sweating. Rocco has a gun. There is no doubt in George's mind that Rocco has used it in the past; and he had as much as promised to use it on George should he foul up the heist in any manner. Guys like Rocco probably don't even think twice about shooting someone as insignificant as a shoe salesman.

He glances into his rearview mirror. The grill of the black Lincoln grins sardonically back at him. George had craved some adventure in his life, but this is his dream running terribly amuck. In the movies, the bad guys never win.

The flash of inspiration comes to George at that instant. This isn't Bogie or any of his other movie heroes talking to him. This is he, George Milsop, taking control of the situation on his own. It might be the last thing he ever does, but, by

God, no one could ever say afterwards that he did not go out in a blaze of glory.

George eases the gas pedal closer to the floor and weaves the station wagon ahead of the few remaining cars in front of him. A final time, he checks the rearview mirror. The Lincoln has kept up and, as he had hoped, is following only a few feet behind his bumper. Perfect. As the needle of the speedometer sweeps past 50, George slams his foot against the brake pedal, simultaneously bracing himself against the shock he knows will follow a split-second later.

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George remembers freeing himself from the twisted and burning wreckage of his station wagon. He remembers rolling his body across the pavement to put out the flames on the back of his jacket, the way he had seen it done at least a hundred times in the movies. He remembers the explosion seconds later that consumes the black Lincoln and its two passengers. Then blackness.

Later in the hospital, his consciousness kept constantly in that hypnagogic state between waking and sleeping with morphine, George remembers Bertha, clad in an isolation gown and a surgical mask, standing next to his bed. Her plumpness melds



into the lithe features of Betty Dillard and then back again, over and over, until it becomes hard for him to separate the real vision from the imaginary one.

Even after he no longer requires constant sedation, time remains suspended as he lies face-down, his head cushioned in a foam horseshoe, while the burns on his back slowly begin to heal.

George hears the door to his room open. He recognizes the tired, heavy footsteps of Nurse Hinkel who, beginning or end of her shift, always walks as if her feet hurt.

"Time for your dressing change, George. Are you awake?" Metal clanks against metal as Nurse Hinkel fishes for forceps and scissors from an instrument pan. The familiar odor of disinfectant permeates the room.

Nurse Hinkel plods wearily toward George and lays her instruments and sponges on a tray near his head. George studies her badly-scuffed nurse's oxfords. 6½ Triple-E's, his trained eye tells him. The white leather is badly cracked and the insteps sag over the top of the soles. Along the lateral toe of her right shoe, Nurse Hinkel has incised a hole to accommodate a bunion.

"When I get out of here, Nurse Hinkel, you must come down to Plotcher's and allow me to fit you with a new pair of shoes. I'm sure I can fix you up with something more comfortable than those you're wearing." He hears her snap on a pair of examination gloves. "I take great pride in knowing that so many of my satisfied customers are now walking around with a new spring in their step," he adds.

"Putting a spring back into these tired old puppies. Now *that* would be a truly heroic feat." Nurse Hinkel giggles at the thought, then delicately begins lifting a bandage from the burns on his back. "Try to hold still now, George. This may sting a bit," she warns him in that everything-is-going-to-be-okay voice that only nurses have.

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