GOMAAKOD

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"Tell me something, cowboy," Bonnie Ulrich said, sitting up in bed and shyly wrapping a sheet around her body. "You are creeping up on seventy years of age. You ever give any thought to retirement?"

Helmut pulled on his jeans and considered the question.

"I don't know what else I'd do with my *time*," he said at last, buttoning his shirt and brushing back what was left of his hair with his rough fingernails. "I don't hunt or fish, I don't play golf. And you're in your shop all day, tiptoeing through the tulips. What else would I *do*?"

She laughed. "I wouldn't call it tiptoeing," she said, "not with *these* feet. But fine, I take your point. So what's on your agenda this lovely morning, Sam Spade?"

"I expect this is going to turn out to be a GOMAAKOD Day," he told her, and waited for the obvious question.

She asked it: "A go *where* day?"

"That's my take on somethin' I read once in a book by a fella named Lawrence Block. I don't know if he made it up himself or not, but he had one of his characters use the acronym GOYAAKOD and say it means Get Off Your Ass and Knock on Doors."

Her frown disappeared. "That's cute. But you didn't say Goya. That's an old Spanish painter's name, and I would have recognized it."

Erhard nodded. “Yup. My take is GOMAAKOD: Get Off *My* Ass and Knock on Doors.”

“There you go, then. So that means you have a—what do you call it? A *case*?”

“Every time I hear that word,” he said, “I think about beer. But, yeah, a case is what we call it—and if my meeting this morning goes the way I expect it to go, it looks like a case is what I got.”

Nathan Parker did not match Erhard’s idea of a bank president. He was somewhere in his early fifties, wore his graying hair in a Marine buzz cut, and looked like he still ran PT every morning. *This* morning, he was dressed in Casual Friday attire—jeans and a Western shirt with pearl snaps instead of buttons—and though Erhard couldn’t see his feet, he assumed they were occupying a pair of hand-tooled leather boots.

“Thanks for coming in, Mr. Erhard,” he said, rising from his swivel chair and leaning across his chrome-and-glass desk to shake hands.

“Helmut,” Erhard said. “I hear ‘Mr. Erhard,’ I turn around looking for my daddy—and he’s been dead and gone thirty years.”

“Sorry for your loss,” Parker said. “Have a seat—Helmut. And please, call me Nate.”

Tipping an imaginary hat, Erhard took the visitor’s chair he’d been offered and pulled a dime-store notebook and a ballpoint from his back pocket. “All right, then, Nate,” he said, clicking the pen’s push button, “what can I do you for?”

On the surface, it looked to be a straightforward investigation. Once or twice a week, the SouthStar Bank's daily receipts were coming up anywhere from a hundred to two hundred dollars short. Nate Parker knew it had to be one of his three tellers who was pocketing the missing money and fudging their daily account sheets, but he had no idea which and no *proof*, so he was reluctant to bring in the Hearne PD. Taking the matter public, he said, would mean publicity—and in the world of banking, unlike the restaurant and movie businesses, all publicity is *bad* publicity.

Richard Younts was the SouthStar's senior teller and assistant manager. Hired fresh out of Texas A&M in 2002, a few short months after 9-11, he still wore an American flag pin in the lapel of his charcoal-gray suit. There were rumors he only *owned* one suit and wore it to work every day, even on Casual Fridays, but the consensus was that there had to be at least three of them, perhaps as many as five—one for every business day of the week. He was married to Anne Anniston Younts, the director of Hearne's Chamber of Commerce, and their son Victor was a redshirt freshman at UT-Austin, taking care of his academics this year while preparing to play tight end for the Longhorns next season.

Yolanda Jivarez was the junior teller, hired after the retirement of William "Uncle Billy" Wilson in the early days of the COVID pandemic. She was divorced, the mother of two young boys, both of whom attended Hearne Elementary, and she'd never missed a day of work in the five years of her employment.

And rounding off Parker's list of suspects was John Weinstein, who'd been with the bank for almost a decade. Erhard knew Weinstein, had hoisted a beer with him at the Broken Stool after breaking up an attempted armed robbery a few years back and had

subsequently bumped into him here and there from time to time. He found it near impossible to imagine Weinstein as an embezzler.

But Hearne was a small enough town that he'd met Younts and Jivarez at various community events, too—and, truth be told, he had a hard time imagining *any* of them as a habitual thief.

On the other hand, Nate Parker made it clear that only those three were in a position to be dipping into the SouthStar's cash, so when his meeting with the bank president ended and a retainer check had been written and pocketed, Erhard got off his ass and went back out into what was already a warm April morning, looking for doors to knock on.

Unfortunately, it was a *Friday* morning, which meant that all three of his suspects were in their cages at the bank, and it would cause Hearne's rumor mill to shift into overdrive were he to try interrogating them at their place of employment.

There was something to be said for doing some preliminary groundwork before tackling a suspect head-on, though, so he climbed into his aging K5 Blazer and set off to give his private eye something to look at.

Piper Lane was a dirt road six miles south of town, and it didn't seem like a likely place for a senior-teller-slash-assistant-manager to live, but Erhard's GPS steered him up a gravel driveway to an expansive ranch house that had a brand-new roof and was more modern and nicer than just about anything you'd find within the town limits. He parked and gazed unhappily at the long flagstone path leading to the Younts' front door—his left knee had been aching him the last couple weeks, but he was afraid to see the doctor, since

his heart attack last year had put him right *off* hospitals, and there was no *way* he was about to submit to a replacement and the consequent months of rehab until it was absolutely unavoidable. When he reached the door—out of breath from the *heat,* he told himself, not the walking—he didn't actually need to knock, since there was a push-button bell he heard bong somewhere within the house.

Ringing two or three times without a response, he settled his Transit Mix ball cap more firmly on his head and wandered around back, where he found another path, this one leading down a gentle slope of manicured lawn to a quiet little lake that was ringed by willow trees and hadn't even shown up on Google Maps. Sitting in one of a pair of teal Adirondack chairs looking out at the water, a glass of what he took to be iced tea and a pitcher on a matching table between the chairs, sat Anne Younts. His footsteps on the path warned her of his approach, and by the time he reached her she'd gotten to her feet.

"I'm sorry to barge in on you like this, Miz Younts," he said. "I rang the bell up to the house, but nobody came to the door, so I thought I'd mosey around back."

"Vic's in Austin, *hopefully* going to his classes," she said, "and of course Richard's at the bank. And you are—?"

"Actually," he said, "we've met before, a couple times, at Chamber events. My name's Helmut Erhard. I—"

"The investigator," she said, recognition dawning. "Of course. Forgive me—the sun's in my eyes."

Erhard nodded. "No apology needed. I don't think we ever exchanged more than two or three polite sentences."

"Even so." She waved him to one of the Adirondacks and resumed her own seat. "I'd offer you some sweet tea, but I wasn't expecting company and only brought out the one glass. What's on your mind?"

"Your husband's name came up in connection with a matter I'm looking into," he said. "I hope to talk with him directly sometime soon, but I—"

"Exactly what 'matter' would that be, Mr. Erhard?" she asked, squinting more in suspicion than in reaction to the Texas sunshine.

He leaned toward her and lowered his voice, as if concerned there might be eavesdropping fish in the little lake. "There's some cash gone missing at the bank," he said, "and I was thinking that—him being the senior teller and assistant manager and all—your husband might be able to steer me toward a possible suspect."

"Erhard," she said thoughtfully. "And Helmut. Those are German names, aren't they?"

Long experience had taught him to anticipate this question, though he realized she was only stalling for time while deciding what direction to take their conversation. "Yes, ma'am," he said. "My daddy was one of the officers imprisoned out at the POW camp. He got repatriated after the war, but then a few years later he came back here and met and married my momma."

"Mmm," she said, and—her mind made up—she reached for her glass of tea, sunlight sparkling off the diamond on the ring finger of her left hand. "I must say, Mr. Erhard, I find it *offensive* that you think my husband might know anything at all about a—for goodness sakes, about a *bank* robbery." Ice cubes tinkled against the inside of her glass as she sipped, and he realized she couldn't have been sitting out here for long.

Ursula Cantrell, the Hearne Police Department's only female detective, slid into the booth across from Erhard at the Dixie Café, picked a French fry from his plate, and dredged it through the dollop of ketchup he'd squirted off to the side of the pile.

"Three guesses why I'm here," she mumbled.

Erhard pursed his lips. "You heard I ordered a tuna melt and wanted to see if I'd give you half?"

"Richard Younts' wife called the station," she said, helping herself this time to a fistful of fries. "Said you'd been out to the house, practically accused her hubby of robbin' the bank. That sound accurate to you?"

"Hardly. I was discreet and professional. You would've been right proud of my investigative technique."

A smile twitched the corner of the detective's mouth, but she grabbed a paper napkin from the dispenser and quickly wiped it and a spot of ketchup away. "Nate Parker hired you for somethin' he didn't want to bring us in on?" she asked, keeping her voice conversational.

"Right," Erhard replied. "And you know better'n to pump me for the details, Ursie. Client confidentiality, you know that."

"Don't go pissin' off respectable citizens, Helmut," Detective Cantrell said. "The chief was—how should I put this?—*perturbed* by Mrs. Younts' call and would prefer not to be perturbed again." She leaned across the table and scooped up the untouched half of his sandwich. "Thanks for lunch," she added and slid out of the booth.

Late that afternoon, Erhard found himself sitting on a lumpy sofa in Yolanda Jivarez's living room. The junior teller and her two boys lived in a double-wide in the Encino Estates, a mobile-home park Erhard had visited some time back in connection with another case. Yolanda sat across from him in a La-Z-Boy recliner that had seen better days. Her two sons—eight-year-old Oscar and six-year-old Kenji—stood on either side of her chair, each of them hugging onto one of her arms and staring at Erhard as if he were the Oogie Boogie Man from *The Nightmare Before Christmas.*

"I din' take no money—any money—from the bank," the woman snapped angrily. "If I was estealin' money"—she waved a hand at her run-down but spic-and-span surroundings—"you think I'd be raisin' *mis hijos* in this domp?"

Kenji Jivarez tightened his grip on his mother's arm, tears welling in his wide brown eyes. "My momma din' take no money!" he echoed. "You leave her alone, you *hombre malo*!"

Erhard sighed. He knew he was treading on thin ice here. The last thing he wanted was a pair of caterwauling children berating him.

"*Tranquilízate, mijo*," Yolanda said, resting her cheek for a moment on the boy's mop of jet-black hair. "Mr. Erhard knows I din' esteal anythin'. He's jus' tryin' to find out who did."

Helmut nodded. He was pretty sure the woman's outrage was genuine. "Maybe your mom saw something that would help me figure out who *did* steal the money, son. That's why I'm asking her these questions."

"*Exactamente*. Now, Oscar, take your brother outside and play." She pushed both boys toward the double-wide's front door. "You play *nice*, now, you hear me? No yellin', no fightin'."

Oscar took Kenji's hand and led him outside, and their mother returned her attention to Erhard.

"Tell you the truth, Mr. Erhard," she said, "I been wonderin' a little about Mr. Weinstein. I seen him lookin' around, kind of nervous-like, and I wondered if he was maybe up to somethin' he shun't be…."

Helmut walked into the Broken Stool that evening and found John Weinstein saving a seat for him at the bar.

"Erhard," the burly teller greeted him, stroking his walrus mustache with his left hand and holding a pint glass in his right. If you were an optimist, the glass was half-full of what looked to be Guinness. If you were a pessimist, it was half-empty. "Sit. Buy you a beer?"

"Rather pay for my own," Erhard said and asked the hovering bartender for a Pearl. "This ain't a social call."

"Seriously?" said Weinstein. "Oh, shoot, I get it: Parker hired you to look into the missing money."

"I plead guilty as charged," Erhard said, accepting a dewy bottle from the bartender and taking a healthy swig before setting it down on a cocktail napkin. "Somebody told me you been looking kinda edgy lately."

"Nathan Parker's a good manager," Weinstein said, "but he's scared to death word'll get out about the thefts and cause some kind of run on the bank. I think he's seen *It's a Wonderful Life* one time too many. Anyway, sure, I've been on edge since the cash started showing up missing. *Somebody*'s taking it, and that's obviously bad for business."

"Tell me why I shouldn't think *you're* the one's been skimming on the daily," Erhard said, employing a Gen Z expression he'd heard on a YouTube video and had been looking for an opportunity to work into a conversation.

"Helmut," Weinstein said, "you know me. You took down a hyped-up kid who was trying to clean out my cage and *coulda* cleaned my clock, and since then you've drank with me half a dozen times. You think I'm a good candidate for bank robber?"

Erhard shook his head. "Nope," he said simply. "I surely don't."

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"So if your gut tells you it wasn't Yolanda Jivarez," Bonnie Ulrich said, snuggled up against his chest in bed that night, "and your experience tells you it wasn't John Weinstein, then it had to be Richie Younts, right?"

Erhard reached across her and turned on the lamp that stood on the night table. "Richie?"

"Richard Younts was in some kind of 'junior lawman' program Mitch used to run a million years ago," she explained, "and everyone called him Richie. He was a bit of a wild teenager, and his parents thought the program would straighten him out. I don't know if it was that or hooking up with Annie Anniston, but he *seemed* to turn out okay. Until this, anyway."

In a previous life, Bonnie had been Bonnie Barnes, and her husband—Mitch Barnes—had been the Hearne Police Department's sheriff. Mitch was now serving a life sentence at the Eastham Unit for the murder of Elsie Jordan, a young English teacher at the local high school with whom he'd been having an affair.

Erhard turned the light back off and wrapped his arms around the woman he'd lusted after when he was in high school himself and had miraculously wound up sharing his life with.

"Sure does *seem* like it must be Richie," he said. "If Parker's right and them three are the only possible suspects."

"In that case," Bonnie murmured, "I don't suppose we're goin' out for breakfast in the morning, partner, are we?"

"Tomorrow's Saturday," Erhard said, "so he's either gonna be home or on the golf course. Can I take a rain check on breakfast?"

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Wearing a new pair of Goodfellow jeans from the Target down in Bryan and a T-shirt and red ball cap both sporting the Hearne Eagles logo, Erhard limped up the flagstones and, ignoring the bell this time, rapped sharply on the Younts' front door. "GOMAAKOD," he muttered under his breath as he waited. "Get off my ass and knock on damn doors."

A full minute passed before a man in a terrycloth bathrobe swung the door open, a steaming mug of coffee in his free hand. He looked the stranger in the ball cap up and down and drawled a lazy, "Whatever you're selling, bud, we're not buying."

"Sorry to bother you on the weekend, Mr. Younts," Erhard said, taking no offense. "I'm not sellin' a thing. My name's Helmut Erhard, and Nathan Parker's hired me to look into the money that's been going missing from the SouthStar's daily receipts."

"Wait just one second," said Younts. "*You're* Erhard? I was under the impression my wife called the police yesterday and complained about you bothering her."

"Rather talk with you out of this heat," Erhard said, wiping perspiration from his forehead with a red bandanna he then replaced in the back pocket of his jeans. "You mind if I come in and set a spell?"

"I—yes, all right, fine." Younts led him through a white-tiled foyer to an expansive Danish Modern living room and waved him to a plush leather sofa. "Give me two minutes to change," he said, and disappeared without waiting for a response.

Through the floor-to-ceiling picture windows, Erhard could see that Anne Younts was already established on one of the Adirondack chairs looking out across the lake. He was tempted to stroll back and ask her why she'd felt it necessary to contact the HPD, but his knee opined that he'd be better off staying where he was.

The senior teller returned, togged out in a pair of lime-green slacks and a pink polo shirt that suggested his next stop would indeed be either the municipal golf course on Norwood Lane or, more likely, the nine-hole Calvert Country Club ten miles north of town.

"Explain to me what you're doing here," he said impatiently, "given that the chief of police himself assured my wife he'd have you cautioned to stop harassing my family."

"Nathan Parker says there are only three people who could possibly be responsible for the missing cash, Mr. Younts: Yolanda Jivarez, John Weinstein, and you.

He hired me to see if I could figure out which one of you's been walkin' off with the money."

"Be very careful with your accusations, Erhard," Younts said, taking a step closer and looming over the seated P.I. His voice had dropped an octave and was shot through with steel. "If you think I—"

"You misunderstand me," Erhard cut him off, returning the man's glare. "I'm not accusing you—or anybody—of anything, not at this point. I'm just trying to get a sense of the three folks Mr. Parker identified as prime suspects in the thefts."

"Just so we're clear," Younts said, "you are calling me a *suspect*?"

Outside the picture windows, Erhard saw the teller's wife rise from her chair and begin to walk up the path to the house. He wondered what her arrival would do to the dynamic in the room.

Seeing *two* people in the house, though, instead of just her husband, she pulled up short and apparently changed her mind, reversing course and returning to her seat in the shade of the willows.

Helmut glanced around the classy living room and remembered the sparkler on her finger.

"Parker called you a suspect," he said, responding to Younts' question, "not me. But I *am* wondering how you can afford this beautiful house and your wife's diamond ring on a senior teller's pay. Or assistant manager's, whichever you get."

A laugh erupted from Richard Younts' mouth. "My wife grew up in this beautiful house," he said, "and inherited it from her parents. All we pay is the property tax—which out here in the boondocks is on the low side for Texas. And her *diamond* ring is cubic

zirconia. Set me back, oh, about forty dollars at the Costco in College Station. We're not rich, Mr. Erhard, but we're not hungry enough for money I'd risk my career stealing a dollar here and a dollar there from the bank."

"Costco," Erhard repeated, realizing he had just circled back to Square One.

He didn't literally have his hat in his hands—he left it in his Blazer when he parked and went into the bank bareheaded—but Helmut Erhard *felt* as if he did when he returned to the SouthStar later that morning.

This wasn't the first time he'd stalled out on a case he'd been hired to investigate, and it surely wouldn't be the last, but failure—as usual—left a bitter taste in his mouth that he knew would take some time to dissipate.

Earlene Glover, Nathan Parker's secretary, looked up from her keyboard and smiled at him. "You here to see the boss again, Mr. Erhard? He's with a customer, but he shouldn't be more than a couple minutes, if you want to wait."

"Roger that," he said, and settled himself onto a visitor's chair.

He was only halfway through "20 Etiquette Rules Everyone in the Monarchy Must Follow" in a recent issue of the *Reader's Digest* he'd fished out of the pile of magazines on the waiting area's coffee table when the door beside Earlene's desk opened.

An elderly man Erhard didn't recognize came out of the president's office. He wore a Sunday-go-to-meeting suit that had seen better days, and his shoulders were slumped.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Harvey," Nathan Parker said, appearing in the doorway and clapping the fellow on the back. "You dig yourself up some acceptable collateral, and I'll be happy to approve that loan for you."

"Not much chance of that, Mr. Parker," the guy said morosely, and shuffled slowly toward the bank's main entrance.

"One can always hope," the banker called after him, and the old guy—a farmer hoping to finance a new tractor, Erhard assumed—raised a hand to acknowledge the parting shot without turning back or slowing his dejected pace.

"Be with you in two minutes, Helmut," Parker said, glancing down at the pink message slip Earlene Glover handed him. "I've got to make one quick phone call." He was dressed for success today, and the contrast between the old farmer's threadbare garb and the bank president's immaculate pinstriped suit and bolo tie with its silver aiguillettes and chunky turquoise slide—his one concession to Texas fashion—was impossible to ignore. The dimes slotted into Parker's spit-shined black penny loafers glistened so brightly Erhard figured they might have teleported directly from the nearest U.S. Mint to the banker's shoes.

Over *five* minutes later, Erhard thought of a question and asked the secretary, who flipped a few pages of her desk calendar and provided an answer that caused the P.I. to rethink his view of the case.

"Damn Little League," Parker said, not long after that, when Erhard was once again facing him across his immaculate desk. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Helmut—soon as I got off that 'one quick phone call,' I got one on my cell from the coach of the

SouthStar Little Eagles. I agreed the bank'd sponsor a team this season, but nobody thought to tell me until now the boys were gonna need new uniforms."

"You going to pay for them?"

"Not me personally, no, sir. But I suppose the branch'll have to come up with the money somehow. Anyways, I'm sure you'd rather talk about your investigation than kiddie baseball."

"Okay by me, either way, Nate," said Erhard. "You know what they say about payin' the piper and callin' the tune."

"Then let's get to your report." Parker leaned back in his swivel chair and tented his fingers across his belly. "What progress have you made?"

"I've solved the case," Erhard said. "I know who's been ripping off the bank."

Confusion spread across the president's face. "You do? Already? Why, that's—that's wonderful, Helmut. Which of them was it?"

Erhard leaned forward, rested his elbows on the edge of the banker's desk, and planted his chin on his laced fingers. "You ever heard of Sherlock Holmes?" he asked.

"Did—well, of *course* I've heard of Sherlock Holmes. Who hasn't?"

"Thirty years ago, when I was fixin' to leave the Houston PD and set up on my own as a private investigator, I read all Conan Doyle's Holmes stories, plus Hammett and Chandler and a bunch of others. I figured it was research, ought to give me some idea how to go about my new occupation."

His client's eyes narrowed. Parker clearly had no clue where this non sequitur was leading.

Erhard chuckled and continued. “Turns out real P.I. work ain’t nothin’ like what you read in books and see on the TV. Mostly, we just get up off our duffs and go around knockin’ on doors, askin’ questions.”

“And?” the banker said, glancing at his watch, obviously beginning to lose his patience.

“Check this out,” Erhard said. “It’s one good piece of advice I got from that Holmes fella: ‘When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains—however improbable—must be the truth.’”

“Really, Helmut, I don’t understand the point you’re trying to make. You said you’ve solved the case. Okay, let’s hear it: which of the three suspects I identified for you has been walking off with SouthStar cash?”

“One step at a time,” Erhard said slowly. “You told me it had to be Richard Younts, Yolanda Jivarez, or John Weinstein. I talked with all three of them, and here’s what I found out.” He ticked the names off on his fingers as he went on. “Younts’ wife Anne has plenty of money, so there’s no need for Richie to risk his career stealin’ from the bank. Yolanda lives in a trailer and could *use* some extra cash, but she’s got all the pride in the world and is determined to set a good example for her sons. And I *know* John Weinstein: he’s as honest as the day is long. No, I can’t see *any* of the three of ’em as a thief.”

“So then who’s been taking the money?” Parker demanded.

“Thing is, Nate,” Erhard said, “while I was out there waiting for you to get off the phone, I played a hunch and asked Earlene when the bank examiners are coming, and she checked her calendar and told me they’re due next week.”

"I—I," the banker stammered.

"Can't for the *life* of me understand what you wanted a couple of hundred measly extra dollars for, but when you have eliminated the impossible—you see what I mean? So I figure, once you heard your central office was about to start diggin' into your books, you thought hiring *me* to look into the missing money would divert suspicion from *you*."

Erhard watched the man's self-confidence dissolve, watched him loosen his fancy bolo tie and undo his crisp white shirt's collar button, watched perspiration break out on his forehead despite the cool air pumping out of his office's central A/C.

"All you got to do, Nate," he said kindly, "is put the money *back*. Whatever you got goin' on, surely you can pay back the chump change you took. And I won't tell nobody what you done if *you* don't."

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"So Nate Parker stole the money himself," Erhard said that evening over dinner, "and sent me off on a fool's errand, hopin' hiring me'd make *him* look innocent."

"The man's president of the damn *bank*," Bonnie protested. "What good's another couple hundred dollars going to do him?"

Erhard shook his head. "It wudn't about the money," he said. "He just got *bored*, is all, and started skimming off a few bucks here and there, just for the thrill of it. Then he found out the bank was fixin' to run an audit, and he panicked."

"Right—and hired you. And you did your little P.I. thing, your—"

Erhard laughed as she made jazz hands in the air and struggled with the acronym.

"—gummy what-do-you-call-it?"

"GOMAAKOD," he said, though he was pretty sure she could have gotten it right without his help.

"You didn't get in a fistfight?" she teased. "You didn't get knocked out with a blunt instrument or track down a missing daughter or bust up a meth lab? And you call yourself a private eye?"

Erhard forked another piece of fried chicken onto his plate and held up his glass of Pearl in a toast.

"There's always next time," he said. "Meanwhile, here's looking at *you*, kid."