

The Roller Skate Murder

The small card next to the door of the office said “Simon S. Snaeth, Attorney at Law.”

Mrs. Harold Leamon was not a woman who hesitated. She went through the door and entered what looked like a living room. There was a large, comfortable-looking sofa, an overstuffed chair, some plants, corner tables and a coffee table in front of the sofa; there was a terrarium containing some exotic vegetation and a small lizard, and subdued lighting all around. On the walls were two framed original oils (at least she had never seen them before), and some prints that she recognized as Hogarth.

No one greeted her; there was no one there. But there was a door opposite and she went through it. The next room was an office. Sitting behind a large desk, with his feet upon it, was Simon Snaeth. He wore an tailored pin-striped suit, an off-white silk shirt, and a Jerry Garcia tie. He was smoking a cigarette and asked, “May I help you?”

Mrs. Leamon was not a woman who wasted words, either. She said, “Yes. I want you to find the person who murdered my husband.”

Simon Snaeth leisurely took his feet from the desk and planted them on the floor. “Mrs. Leamon,” he said, “I am neither a detective nor a policeman. I am an attorney. Perhaps your husband – my condolences, of course – left a will that must go through probate, and I can help with that.” He indicated a chair in front of his desk, silently asking her to be seated.

Mrs. Leamon was not a woman to be put off by what she considered to be trivia. She sat. “Bullshit. You are a person who can do things that nobody else can do. A friend of mine told me. A policeman? The cops know nothing. You already know who I am, which tells me that you are a better detective than a snoop who peeks through windows. You probably expected me to come.”

Simon Snaeth said, “Yes, I did. I have read the story of your husband’s death in the media. The story made little sense. I knew that his estate would have to go through probate. But there is more than that, isn’t there? Let me try to state the problem in a way that satisfies you.”

Sneath leaned back and touched the fingers of his hands together. “Mr. Leamon was murdered. The police are at a loss and they have claimed that it was an accident. They will probably try to promote that fantasy on social media. That cannot be our concern. What we need to do is establish the manner of his murder, and who did it. And probate his will, if he had one. Did he?”

“Yes, he left a will. Why do you keep going back to his will?”

“Because, Mrs. Leamon, I am only a lawyer, not a detective. I don’t do the work of a detective. If I find out who killed your husband and deliver him to the authorities, or arrive at some other solution that satisfies you, you will pay me \$100,000 for probating your husband’s will.” Simon Snaeth sneered savagely. “Do you agree?”

“I don’t like you,” said Mrs. Leamon. “But I think you can do it. One hundred thousand dollars is exorbitant, but my husband’s estate is worth millions. You say that the police are not working on my husband’s murder. How do you know that?”

“That is a conclusion I have drawn from a concatenation of many tiny facts. Maybe I should have said instead that they are not doing a good job. Who was in charge of the investigation of your husband’s death?”

“It was a man named Murphy. There was also another man, but I didn’t catch his name.”

“No matter. I’ve met Murphy. He is in the homicide division. I only handle civil litigation, but our paths have crossed. I have several questions to ask you. Shall I proceed?”

“Yes.”

“Did you kill your husband?”

“My God, you get to the point. No. And I expected you to ask that.”

Snaeth nodded. “Certainly. If you had killed him, you would never pay me. Therefore, I had to know.”

“You have a strange sense of humor.”

Snaeth ignored it. He did not see any humor in it. “Let me see if I understand the circumstances. Your husband was at home by himself, two days ago, on Thursday, the 25th of August, while you were shopping. When you returned home he was dead at the bottom of the stairs. The police think his death was accidental. He apparently stepped on a roller skate that had been carelessly left on the stairs. That is absurd.”

“That is one way of describing it.”

“Then add something, please.”

“The roller skate belonged to my daughter Nan and it has been sitting in a closet for... almost 20 years. She stopped roller-skating when she was about 10 years old, and she is married now. She is 30 years old.”

“It could have ended up on the stairs, somehow.”

“Only the maid could have left it there and why would she do that?”

“You knew where it was, didn’t you?”

Mrs. Leamon opened her mouth and closed it. She considered a second, and said, “You don’t really want this job, do you?”

“On the contrary, Mrs. Leamon, I do, but in order to get paid I must do it right. An investigation of this sort – I mean, probating a will – is always intrusive and difficult. Please do not take offense. I am willing to take the case. I have some more questions.”

“All right.”

Sneath leaned back and said, "Tell me, generally, about the house where you live, Mr. Leamon's employment, your neighbors, your social circles, and things like that."

"Good Lord."

They talked for an hour. Harold Leamon was on the board of directors of four corporations. She had been married to him for 35 years. Harold had been out of the city for two weeks on business. He arrived back the night before he died. That was Wednesday night, and the maid came on Tuesdays and Saturdays, but not today. They had bought the house upon getting married. They had never considered a larger house because it was against their natures and their principles, although they could afford one.

They lived in a good neighborhood. The house on one side was owned by an elderly lady, the widow of a corporate executive, who was visited daily by either her sons or daughters. The Leamons did not see her very much. The house on the other side was owned by Mr. William Ashlar, who lived there with his son, Robert. Mr. Ashlar was a vice-president of a glass manufacturing company, in charge of production. Harold talked with him when they were outside and he and his son visited sometimes. Robert had at one time seemed interested in Nan, who was about the same age. They were in high school together. Nan did not return the affection, if that was what it was.

Mrs. Leamon had a number of female friends with whom she went shopping. These were social occasions; many times they did not buy anything or bought only trifling objects. They went to lunch. Mrs. Leamon had tried to convince Harold to go out in the evening to play bridge, but he stayed at home with his books, his work and his hobby, which was woodworking and carpentry.

Simon Snaeth looked at the time on his computer and said, "I think I need to go to your house. I have no appointments for the next few hours. I may be able to find something that the police did not."

Mrs. Leamon laughed. "No appointments? This is Saturday. Let's go. My car is outside."

"Ah... the way you said that suggests to me that you have a car and a chauffeur; am I right?"

"Yes. I hire a limousine service."

"Well, then, we must leave him here. He would only be in the way, or worse. In what we are doing, no one can be trusted, until it is complete."

"I trust him. What are we doing that is so mysterious?"

"We are beginning to probate your husband's will, but there are complications. The police have an open investigation into his death, and I do not want to be in conflict with them." He inclined his head. "They have many ways of interfering. They told you that they thought your husband's death was accidental. It may have been a trick. You may be under observation." Mrs. Leamon looked astonished. "If not, we intend to prove them wrong, and they would not like that. We do not want any interference."

Snaeth called a cab company and arranged for a pickup in the alley in back of his office building. He told Mrs. Leamon that her car and chauffeur in front were a nice touch, a diversion, and they should stay there for a while. She said he was paranoid. After they caught the cab, he told the cab driver to take them to Highside Mall. On the way, he called a different cab company and arranged for another pickup there at a McDonalds. They took that cab to Mrs. Leamon's house, and went inside.

They went into the living room. “We will not be disturbed, I think,” Snaeth said. “You can call your driver now and tell him he is released. Let me look around a bit.” Mrs. Leamon seated herself on an elegant divan and got out her phone.

Snaeth walked back to the front of the house. There was an entrance hall that he’d already seen, with an ornate rack for coats and hats. He walked back through the living room, and at the rear of it, the stairs to the upper floor went from a small hall. The carpet was the same throughout. The hall had a closet door and an opening to a kitchen. Snaeth looked in the closet; he saw coats, hats and umbrellas. He went into the kitchen, walked to the back door, which let directly into the kitchen, and then back to the front.

“No one,” he said, “who was here in the living room or in the kitchen could have missed someone taking the stairs.”

“That’s right. There used to be a door to the kitchen, but we had it removed a long time ago when our daughter was young, so we would know when she went up or down the stairs.”

“What are those doors off the kitchen?”

“One is the pantry and the other goes to the basement, where my husband had his workshop.”

“I would like to take a look.”

“Go ahead.”

“I’d like to have you with me, please.”

Mrs. Leamon pulled herself up and followed him into the kitchen. The pantry was fully shelved, with neatly arranged jars of pasta, beans, rice and other staples, and an assortment of canned goods. Snaeth decided there was nothing to see there and opened the door to the basement. A wooden flight of stairs led downward. He found a light switch, flipped it on and descended. On the way down, he asked, “Have the police been down here?”

“No, they only looked at the stairs where he fell.”

“That was prudent of them, at least.”

They reached the basement. “Very nice,” he said, looking around. “Your husband was devoted to his hobby.” There was a bandsaw and a router table in the middle of the room, shelves against a wall holding various kinds of wood, two large wooden benches, a couple of stools, a drafting table, and tools on pegboards.

“Yes, he was very good at his woodworking, and he was also able to fix nearly everything around the house. He built the stairs because they were in poor shape when we moved in. He made the computer desk upstairs. He made other pieces of furniture that he gave away to friends or donated to charity. It was more than a hobby, in fact. He worked on it a lot between board meetings.”

Snaeth was examining a plan on one of the benches. “It seems that he laid out his work in detail, in advance. He was an artisan. I might say an artist. But what is this? It looks like a shopping list.”

She came over to look at it, and he told her, “We won’t touch it. We won’t touch anything.” She gave him an exasperated look, and he added, “Trust me in this.”

She looked at the list and said, “I don’t know. I hardly ever came down here, anyway.”

“Hmm, ‘circular saw, coping saw, electric drills, set of wood chisels, set of antique woodworking knives...’ and more.” Snaeth wrote in his notebook. “If this is a shopping list, why would he want antiques? Was he a collector?”

“Not at all. He didn’t collect anything. He had some antique tools that came from his father.”

“Woodworking was a family hobby, then?”

“Oh, yes, he talked about it quite a bit. He said he had to do better work than his father. He joked about that and called it ‘Oedipal.’”

“Indeed ... “ Snaeth looked around at the tools on pegboards over the benches and against one wall. He opened the drawers of a toolbox, and then opened a cabinet that contained more tools, along with containers of dowels and biscuits, and pieces of trim and veneer. He took his time. “Mrs. Leamon, it seems that Mr. Leamon did not own any of the tools on this list. That seems strange to me, especially the circular saw. As far as I know, every good carpenter has a circular saw. It’s used to make a rough model from cheaper wood before making the final product and finishing it by hand. He had a hand drill but not an electric one.”

“I can’t explain that. I don’t know much about it.”

“Very well. Perhaps it will become clear. Let’s go back upstairs.”

Back in the kitchen, Snaeth said he wanted to look on the second floor. “By the way,” he added, “those stairs to the basement are made well. When we go upstairs, I want to see the desk he made, among other things.”

When they arrived at the bottom of the stairs, Snaeth spoke again. “Just a second, please. May I ask, where was your husband’s body?”

“Right here, at the bottom of the stairs. They said he had broken his neck.” Mrs. Leamon started to show some distress.

“Please, Mrs. Leamon. I told you this would be intrusive and I know it is difficult for you, but we must go on. Another question: where was the roller skate?”

“It was here, too. Right next to my husband’s body.”

“Do you – no, of course – did the police take it?”

“Yes.”

“But there is another one, isn’t there? Did the police take it, too?”

“No. In fact, that is one reason why I am upset with them. I asked them why they needed to take it, and Murphy said, ‘It’s part of our investigation.’ Then he said I’d probably get it back, but when I asked, he couldn’t say when. Then I told him my husband had been murdered, and the skate being there made no sense, and he said he was sorry. Murphy – Sergeant Murphy – is a nice man. But later, I overheard them talking and one of them made a joke about finding a new kind of murder weapon.”

Snaeth shook his head. “Mrs. Leamon, the police are used to all sorts of strange things, and sometimes they make jokes about them. I am also used to strange things, but to me, the roller skate requires an explanation, not a joke.”

Looking up the stairs, he said, “What did the police do here? Did they look at the stairs, the walls, the handrail, and so forth?”

“Yes, they spent some time doing that. They didn’t find anything, I’m sure. They never said anything.”

“Did they look at your husband’s desk upstairs?”

“No.”

“Then let us do that.”

He led the way up the stairs and waited for her in the upper hall, which had the same carpet as downstairs. “Which room is the office?” he asked.

“Here, to the right,” she said. She opened the door and led Snaeth into the room. It was a well-decorated, comfortable office, with pictures on the walls, good lighting, a desk chair and an extra one with a floor lamp nearby, a wooden file cabinet, and the desk. Snaeth examined the desk. He looked at the beveled corners, pulled the drawers out and noted their joining, slid them back, and got on his knees to see underneath.

After he arose, he said, “Really, this is a remarkable piece of furniture. Did he make the file cabinet, too?”

“Oh, yes, he did. I forgot.”

“May I look in the drawers?”

“Certainly. They are not locked, I think. The keys are in the top drawer of the desk if they are.”

Snaeth pulled out the top drawer. He said in a bemused way, “You understand, of course, that it is a regular procedure to make an inventory of the estate prior to probate. Just to be able to answer any questions the judge might have, although they seldom ask any.” She had no reply. He looked through the contents. “These are your records of bill payments and household expenses, in folders by year.” She nodded, and he tried the next drawer. “Insurance ... medical ... ah... workshop.” He removed a folder.

“Let’s see,” he said. “Here’s something. The warranty information for a Bosch drill. A Makita circular saw... a Hilti drill... some sales receipts... hmm... well, all right.” He replaced the folder. “Mrs. Leamon, I think we are through here. Now, please show me the other roller skate.”

Mrs. Leamon was not a woman who hesitated. She left the room and turned right, to the end of the hall. “This was our daughter’s room and we’ve left it just the way it was. She hasn’t lived here since her sophomore year in college. When she and her husband visit, they stay here,” she added with a grin. The room had pictures of rock stars on the walls, pennants, dolls on the dresser, an ornate vanity with a lighted mirror and the other necessities of a young woman.

“Did your husband make that piece of furniture with the mirror?”

Mrs. Leamon laughed. “No. I helped her get that when she wanted one, when she was about thirteen. A friend of hers had a vanity and she was jealous, but of course she got a different kind. My husband inspected it and said he could make a better one. But he was outnumbered.”

“Of course. Now, her roller skates, I mean, skate.”

“In the closet.” Mrs. Leamon slid open a pocket door and was about to enter when Snaeth got in front of her.

“We need to look, and look carefully. We should not touch anything, as I said before.”

“All right. The skate is there, on the floor.” The closet was about five feet wide and five feet deep.

“Do you see anything unusual here? Missing items from the shelves ... anything else missing?”

“No. But maybe I wouldn’t notice. The maid might.”

“I see something unusual. I think there are footprints, there on the floor. Careful, we must not disturb them.”

“You need to tell me what’s going on. By the way, I think I like you better.”

“Thank you. That is gratifying. I’ll tell you when I know. Just a minute, please.” Snaeth, on his hands and knees, looked intently at the floor without entering the closet, which was carpeted like the rest of the house. “They don’t show very well, because your carpet is made not to show them, but there are footprints. There seem to be some little white or grey pieces of gravel.”

Also on her hands and knees, looking, Mrs. Leamon said, “Really? Yes. We find little rocks like that in the kitchen after we use the backyard. They come from the thing around the back door.”

“Very interesting. Let’s look at that.”

Mrs. Leamon was not one to deny that request. She led the way down the stairs and to the left, into the kitchen again. Snaeth opened the back door. Surrounding the three back steps to the backyard, there was a decorative circle of smaller-than-pea gravel within a metal barrier. Many of the rocks were scattered outside the barrier. Snaeth was almost amused, and said, “I don’t suppose that your husband installed that thing, landscaping or whatever you call it.”

“No, it was there when we bought the house, almost 35 years ago. My husband said there was no practical way to remove it, so he added more gravel a couple of times.”

“I think he was right. It’s terrible. You’d probably need a backhoe and a dump truck to take it out. Give me a few minutes.” Snaeth looked at the inside and outside of the back door. He locked it, stepped outside and closed the door.

He walked out into the backyard and looked around. He couldn’t see the street, or get to it, because there were privacy fences, but he could walk to the back of the house next door through a gate.

He mounted the back stairs again. Then he removed his lawyer identification card from his wallet, slipped it between the door and the frame to slip the catch, and opened the door. “That’s a very poor lock, Mrs. Leamon. You need to get another one, a deadbolt, and we need to call Sergeant Murphy. This is almost complete, I think.” Then he told her what he suspected.

Sergeant Murphy arrived about a half hour after they called. Snaeth greeted him without warmth, and Murphy returned the same. Then Snaeth said, “We need to go next door, all of us, and talk to Mr. Ashlar and his son. It’s what Mr. Leamon would have wanted.” Mrs. Leamon nodded.

When Ashlar answered the door, he exclaimed, “Harriet, I haven’t had a chance to tell you how much I am sorry. I only learned about it this morning when I was watching the news. Who are these men?”

Mrs. Leamon said, “I appreciate it, Bill. This is Mr. Snaeth, my attorney, and this is Sergeant Murphy of the police. We want to talk to you and Robert for a few minutes.”

“Robert isn’t here. What’s this about?”

Snaeth said, “I’m sorry to tell you this, Mr. Ashlar, but I have reason to believe that Robert has been stealing some of Mr. Leamon’s woodworking tools. I’ve been retained by Mrs. Leamon to handle his estate, and this is a matter of concern.”

Ashlar sighed. “Please come in and tell me about it.”

At Ashlar’s insistence they made themselves comfortable in the living room. He asked if he could get them a drink or something, and they declined. Ashlar said, “OK. Now tell me what’s going on.”

Snaeth pulled out his notebook. “I’d like to know if you’ve seen any of these things in your son’s possession.” He started to read from the list, and Ashlar’s face turned red and then white.

Ashlar said, “Stop. I’ve seen those things here. Robert said he was setting up a business with some friends, buying and selling secondhand tools. I wanted to believe it, because Robert has never had much ambition at all.”

“Are any of these things here now?” asked Snaeth.

“No, I don’t think so. They were here and then Robert took them.” He gestured helplessly. “I tried to keep an eye on what Robert was doing. I was worried. He’s never had a job. I tried to get him to work

at the factory but he didn't want that. He has hung around with bad friends since high school. Now he's been gone for two days."

Snaeth asked, "What if Mr. Leamon had told you that Robert had been stealing his tools?"

"I would have kicked him out of the house." Ashlar looked at Murphy. "But... he's my son and I wouldn't have turned him in to the police," he said defiantly.

Back at Mrs. Leamon's house, Snaeth showed Murphy around, and explained what he'd found. Murphy called in technicians.

Snaeth summarized his theory for Murphy and Mrs. Leamon. "The killer came through the back door. Mrs. Leamon was shopping. Mr. Leamon was in his workshop in the basement. Mr. Ashlar was at work. The killer went up the stairs and hid in the closet, leaving the footprints that you saw. He waited for Mr. Leamon to go upstairs, and then pushed him down the stairs from behind."

Mrs. Leamon asked, "Why did he hide in the closet?"

Sneath looked at Murphy, who had no expression. "Mrs. Leamon, that's what the law calls premeditation."

Sneath added, "Mr. Murphy, please look for the items on the list. At pawnshops and through online sales. Mr. Leamon owned them but they are gone. They may be worth quite a bit of money."

Sergeant Murphy said, "I'll do that. Why was he making that list? Was he going to report them stolen?"

Snaeth smirked. "Not to you."

"No, I'm homicide."

"Exactly. Not to the police at all. He was going to tell Mr. Ashlar that Robert had been stealing his tools. Then Ashlar would have kicked his son out of the house and probably disinherited him. Robert somehow found out that he'd been discovered. Maybe Mr. Leamon approached him."

Murphy stood up. "Thank you, Mr. Snaeth. If we can find him, I think we have a case."

Mrs. Leamon spoke up. "What about the roller skate?"

Sneath answered. "That was the point. It didn't belong there, as we agreed when you came to consult me about probating your husband's will. It was the sign of an amateur. Someone who tried too hard to make a murder look like an accident. Someone, if you will, who tried to shift his guilt to something else. He threw the roller skate down the stairs after the murder. He thought it would fool the police, perhaps. But it didn't, did it, Sergeant Murphy?"

"No, sir."