

THE GOLDEN FLEECE

A historical adventure

By Joe Kloc



i.

The whole thing started with Zeus looking down at me, tail puffed, claws gripping my chest.

What's wrong, Big Z? I asked. Where's your sister?

I rubbed the sand from my eyes and put it all together.

We had all fallen asleep as usual, to a video of a British Star Wars collector

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polishing his Imperial shuttle with a toothbrush and a can of Mr. Sheen, when at some unknown hour YouTube's autoplay function took over. Now a man named Gary was shouting about vintage paperback novels in a Tri-State Area parking lot: "There is one thing that a lot of people don't know!" he said. "Of the hundreds of Barnes & Noble stores around the country, there are five of them, just five, that have a large used, out-of-print, and rare books section. And this one, in Paramus,

New Jersey, off of Route 17, is one of those five!"

Strange, I thought. Most pulps and paperbacks sold for only a dollar or two. Even the more valuable mysteries I'd seen, like the 1937 Penguin Books edition of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, in which Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson investigate a family haunted by an immortal dog, went for only a few hundred at auction. I phoned the retailer's headquarters, and a woman on the other end of the line confirmed

that no one in corporate had any idea what Gary was talking about.

Gary, I learned, was Gary Lovisi, a retired postal worker living in South Brooklyn who, since 1986, has edited and self-published more than one hundred issues of *Paperback Parade*, a near-quarterly journal in which he interviews midcentury noir and sci-fi writers, revisits the “girl-fight covers” of the “sleaze era,” and eulogizes longtime pulp book dealers as they pass on. I got Gary’s number through Gryphon Books, the publishing house through which he put out three issues last year, though he stopped updating its website nearly a decade ago.

“I didn’t think you’d call,” said Gary when I rang him in early February. I asked about the other four Barnes & Noble stores.

He laughed. “I think there was one in Manhattan. I don’t know.”

Did he know why they started carrying pulps?

“No, no, I don’t know,” he said. But he was glad they did. The Tri-State Area was once the mecca of pulp, the place where painters and washed-up reporters moonlighting as mystery writers created the golden age of comics. For collectors, there were stores like Atlantis Bookshop, on Fourth Avenue’s Book Row, which sold pulps alongside math treatises and reprints of public domain erotica; nearby was Samuel Weiser’s bookstore, a favorite of occultists and Aleister Crowley acolytes. But few of these shops survived the twentieth century. Almost all of Book Row’s three dozen or so used-



book stores were gone by the Eighties. The Isaac Mendoza Book Company, which opened near the financial district in the nineteenth century, lasted until 1990, when its seventy-year-old owner departed with a warning for booksellers: “The city is in the grip of real-estate dealers.”

It was a shame, Gary said. “These books were like postcards from a different time.”

His end of the line went silent. Then I heard the faint voice of a woman. “He should see the books, Gary.”

“Okay, okay. Saturday!” He returned the receiver to his mouth. “Joe!” he shouted. “You gotta see the books!”

Gary and his wife, Lucille Cali, live in Gerritsen Beach, a working-class neighborhood in the southeast corner of Brooklyn, just three miles from the open waters of the

Atlantic. Their brick row house sits at sea level, not far from the local Knights of Columbus lodge and the childhood home of the neighborhood’s only canonized son: Robert Anton Wilson, a science-fiction author elevated to sainthood by Discordians, or worshippers of Eris, the Greek goddess who sparked the Trojan War.

I visited Gary at his house later that week, on one of the coldest days of the year. He was seated at the table in an *Animaniacs* shirt while Lucille made coffee in the kitchen, where books were not permitted. “Not even a cookbook!” she declared, like the commander of a doomed battalion.

I scanned the room. We were surrounded by glass cabinets. I spotted the first two volumes of *The Sicilian*, Gary’s historical saga about a boy raised by Apollodorus during the early days of the Roman Empire. The meat

of the collection was in the basement, he told me.

Did he know, when he started collecting books more than forty years ago, that it would become his entire life?

"Yes," he said matter-of-factly.

"It's a disease," Lucille clarified, setting down a plate of sugar cookies. "It's like a heroin habit."

They'd known each other a long time. "We worked in the post office," said Gary. He started out in a department tasked with processing requests from customers who wanted their names removed from mailing lists. "You could really do that," he said. "Pottery Barn? Say, 'The shape of the bowls—I find that offensive.' They'd fill out a form, and I'd send it to Washington."

For years they used their PTO to put on pulp and paperback conventions in the all-purpose room of a local Holiday Inn. "I had so many great guests," Gary said. "One of the reasons I stopped doing it is so many of the people—the old greats—they passed away."

"Mm," said Lucille.

"Also, you can do it in your forties and fifties, but in your eighties it's harder. And there's not so many forty-year-old dealers anymore."

"No," Lucille said, putting her hand on Gary's. "Take him downstairs," she said.

Gary flipped on the basement light. There were shelves built into the walls holding issues of *Detective Tales*, *The Shadow*, *Adventure*, and *Black Mask*, pulp magazines from the early twentieth century. On a table in the middle of the room was an album that a friend of Gary's, now departed, had filled with thousands of bookmarks, bus tickets, and every other scrap of paper he had found tucked inside used books during his lifetime. "Never any money," Gary said as he leafed through the pages. "People always say they find money—but there is never any money."

He led me to the back of the basement, to a set of E. C. Tubb's Dumarest of Terra series. It's the chronicle of a gambler named Earl searching the universe for the planet of his childhood.

Gary sat down on a small stool in the corner. "You go to people's houses and they have no books. It is the most horrible thing I can think of."

When I asked him which book was his favorite, he said he didn't know. I think he was winding up to explain how stupid my question was when Lucille interrupted: "Should we tell him about the book, Gary?"

"Don't say its name!"

Lucille whispered: "The *Golden Fleece*."

Gary shook his head. "We don't touch it—"

"It's very—"

"It just ... it doesn't protect anything," Gary added diplomatically.

He went on to explain: they were talking about the first issue of *Golden Fleece Historical Adventure*, a pulp magazine created by Sun Publications in Chicago in 1938. Apart from its two stories by Robert E. Howard, the

DID GARY KNOW, WHEN HE STARTED COLLECTING BOOKS MORE THAN FORTY YEARS AGO, THAT IT WOULD BECOME HIS ENTIRE LIFE?

creator of Conan the Barbarian, and its two covers by Margaret Brundage, an early master of the damsel-in-distress motif, it is an unremarkable periodical that folded after nine issues. It's possible that Gary would not have given it a second glance if not for the circumstances under which they came across it: "It was maybe twenty years ago," he began.

He and Lucille were at a flea market in Brimfield, Massachusetts, when swirling black rain clouds gathered overhead. The storm broke, and they ducked under a tent in which a man was selling items recovered from a house fire. Gary noticed a pile of burnt books on a folding table and started digging through them. He brushed one off, revealing the first issue of *Golden Fleece Historical Adventure*. Somehow, it had survived the fire unharmed, the only book to do so. He showed it to the vendor, who couldn't make sense of it. Gary paid the man five dollars and drove back to Gerritsen Beach. He placed the book on a shelf in the

basement and forgot about it for a decade. Then, in the fall of 2012, Hurricane Sandy made landfall. The water rose, filling subway tunnels, submerging thousands of vehicles, and killing more than one hundred people. Gary and Lucille's basement flooded to the ceiling. Tens of thousands of their books were destroyed. Days later, as a city sanitation worker was hauling the remains of the waterlogged collection out to a garbage truck, Gary noticed that two books had swelled and fused together. He pulled the paperbacks apart to discover, wedged between them, in pristine condition, his *Golden Fleece*.

"It's invincible," said Gary.

I laughed.

Lucille turned to me: "Don't you see? It destroys everything around it in order to survive."

Later that night, back at the kitchen table, Gary's thoughts were consumed by another book. For his birthday one year, Lucille had ordered the original manuscript of a short story by Ed Doherty, a pulp writer active in the Forties. Included in the shipment was a large leather binder. Inside it were not only manuscripts for "The Corpse Who Wouldn't Die" and "Dumb as They Come," but magazine clippings and personal documents that led Gary to believe that Doherty may have been either a U.S. Customs agent or a Hollywood screenwriter concealing his involvement with pulps. Among Gary's evidence was a memo titled "Any 6,000 word Detective Yarn." It outlined how to craft a pulp story in four acts:

One. Near end of first 1500 there is a complete surprise twist in the plot development. Suspense!

Two. Hero, being heroic, struggles.

Three. Hero makes some headway and corners the villains or somebody.

Four. Final twist makes expected explanation altogether different. Leave reader with warm feeling. Everybody got what they deserved.

I looked at my watch; the hour had gotten away from me. I told Gary and Lucille that I was late to meet a friend at Vinny's, a red-sauce place in

Carroll Gardens where the few remaining regulars refer to themselves as “the old-timers.”

“Gary, isn’t that the place you got kicked out of?” Lucille said.

I asked what had happened.

Gary waved his hand.

What happened?

“Oh, forget it.”

Lucille handed me a gift bag with ribbons for handles. I peeked inside. It was a copy of *Bad Girls Need Love Too*, Gary’s monograph of pulp magazine covers.

Before I go, I said, there was one more thing: I had to see the book.

“Okay,” Gary groaned as he got up from the table and went over to a cabinet in the living room where he’d kept his *Golden Fleece* since the flood. He opened the glass case. “Huh?” he mumbled as he began pulling out books. He turned back to Lucille. “It’s gone.”

II.

Two things bothered me that night at Vinny’s: the curious absence of a crispy top layer of cheese on my baked ziti, and the whereabouts of Gary’s *Golden Fleece*.

“How’s the ziti?” my friend asked.

I told him it was fine; he’d been coming to the restaurant since he was young, and if there was an actual Vinny behind it, he probably knew the guy. He knew everyone. He was an investigator at a public defense office in New York who spent his days tracking down witnesses and lost surveillance footage. “If a private investigator is a classic black Cadillac, I am a city bus,” he liked to say. “I don’t mind being a bus.”

I wanted his opinion on the *Golden Fleece*. How does someone get his hands on a cursed book and then just lose it?

“You think Gary’s lying?”

I hadn’t considered it. But no, I told him, I didn’t think so. Gary had sounded genuine when, during the search, he shouted at Lucille: “Leave it alone! It wants to be lost.” He had ten thousand books up for sale at any given moment. He must have mistakenly swapped or sold it.

Something had to be done. There was the fire twenty years ago, then

the flood ten years later. Now it had vanished.

“Are you going to try to find it?”

Yes, I said as we paid. I saw no other option: I would have to find the *Golden Fleece*.

On our way out, I ran into a guy who owned a deli I hadn’t been to in six years. “My wife’s family is Italian,” he said, as if to explain his presence. He gave me a once-over. “Glad to see you’re okay.”

The next morning, I started by checking the stores from Gary’s heyday that were still around. Argosy Book Store in Midtown, now New York’s oldest used bookshop, was a bust, and so was The Strand, whose owners had bought its building near Union Square in the Nineties, after the Isaac Mendoza Book Company issued its parting words of caution.

When I asked for the *Golden Fleece*, the Strand clerk instead sold me on *The Voyage of Argo*, a translation of the four-part Hellenic epic by Apollonius of Rhodes from which the pulp takes its name. In the poem, Pelias, the king of the Aegean city of Iolcus, sends Jason and the Argonauts across the Black Sea to find a fleece of golden wool cut from a ram-child of Poseidon that had been sacrificed to Zeus. Only if Jason finds the fleece will Pelias abdicate the throne and return the kingdom.

Next I stopped by the old Austin Book Shop, which was tucked between a barber and a doctor’s office in the shadow of the elevated J train tracks above Jamaica Avenue in Queens. On the storefront hung a wooden sign that read OLD & RARE BOOKS, its K crooked.

Inside, I found Ray, the owner, up on his toes, straightening titles on the high shelves. “Trouble is,” he said, “vibration from the train pushes things out.”

Tacked to the wall next to Ray were yellowing photographs of regulars going back to the Seventies, when the store was run by a man named Bernie. Above them was the title BOOK BUMS.

“Most of them are gone now,” said Ray, who added that he had taken

over when he was still working at FedEx. “God help me.”

I told Ray about Gary and Lucille, how they were both retired postal workers. Did he think working in the mail business was related to collecting?

“No,” he said. Mail was just a steady job: paid the bills, put the kids through school. He pointed to a Book Bum who had worked for a newspaper on Long Island. A lot of different people collect books, he explained. Even the guy who used to live above the store.

What did he do? I asked.

“Worked in the post office.”

The store rumbled as a J passed overhead.

I asked Ray if he sold pulps.

“Some Mickey Spillanes in there,” he said, pointing to a Signet edition. “But I need them like I need a hole in my head.”

Getting nowhere, I resolved that each time Gary or Lucille mentioned a bookshop I would check it for the *Golden Fleece*.

There was Long Island’s Book-lovers Paradise, which one morning Gary and Lucille told me they’d sworn off, owing to the habits of a longtime proprietor about whom much local ink had been spilled: he was alleged to have kept the lights out, arbitrarily issued lifetime bans, repriced items at checkout, and solicited book sales from people whose names appeared in the newspaper, calling their relatives from the phone book when they didn’t reply to his emails. The cruelest of the old man’s critics described his disposition as “horrid”; his defenders called it anticapitalist.

When I phoned, he told me that he didn’t have the *Golden Fleece* and was dismayed that I wasn’t a curious enough person to accept another title in its place. “God forbid you buy a book,” he said as we hung up.

On another occasion, Gary and Lucille sat in their dining room over coffee and tried to recall a store in New Jersey where the owner reluctantly sold them an old wire rack that held her paperbacks.

“She spoke in a Russian accent,” Gary remembered.

"No, it was Italian," said Lucille.

"No, I don't think she was Italian."

Anyway, said Lucille, the woman had survived the shipwreck of the SS *Andrea Doria*, which sank after it collided with the MS *Stockholm* off the coast of Nantucket in 1956. "She was the baby on the cover of *Life* magazine. It's like being an astronaut!"

"Well, it's not *that* much like being an astronaut," said Gary.

As they debated the merits of space exploration in light of a 2007 news report about an astronaut who wore diapers to drive her car non-stop across the country and pepper-spray a woman who was dating her ex-lover, I searched on my phone for the New Jersey store in question.

The place turned out to be called Resident Junkologist. It had been run by an Italian immigrant, and a photo of her as an adult holding a baby appeared somewhere inside an August 1956 issue of *Life*. I tried calling a number listed for the store, but it had been disconnected for years.

One night, Lucille was talking about the odd ducks swimming in the book-collecting pond when she brought up a used-book store on Staten Island called Every Thing Goes. I rode the ferry there a few days later. Next to me on the starboard deck was a woman visiting from England. I overheard a middle-aged guy wearing mesh shorts and a hoodie ask her why she was going to Staten Island.

"To see the Statue of Liberty," she said, pointing to the monument moving in the distance.

"No, no, it doesn't get close enough," he said. "You gotta take the Circle Line."

"What's that?"

"You ever see *The Basketball Diaries*?"

"No."

"Yeah, you probably have."

"Oh, okay."

"It's in there."

"Ah, brilliant."

The guy nodded his way through a long silence. The ship's horn blew. "Greatest city in the world," he said at last.

Every Thing Goes Book Cafe was a few blocks from the shore. Its shelves had sections devoted to cat literature and old yearbooks. When I

asked about pulps, the shopkeeper pointed me to the magazine area, which contained a large selection of periodicals about intentional communities such as Ganas, the commune that owns the store.

Founded in the Seventies, Ganas practices recycling and "feedback learning." One of its former members begged to differ, describing it as a sex cult. In 2008, she was found not guilty of shooting a co-founder outside his home.

When I told the shopkeeper that I hadn't found what I was seeking, she suggested instead I spend some time in the back garden. Outside, I took a seat next to a plant growing from a tom-tom. A man walked out and sat down at a nearby table in silence. A few minutes later his phone buzzed and began playing the theme of *The Twilight Zone*.

It was time to go home.

In mid-February, I joined Gary and Lucille on their monthly trip to Old Book Shop in Morristown, New Jersey.

I told Gary about Ray's Mickey Spillanes as we drove over the Verrazzano Bridge.

"Signet, huh?"

Lucille turned to Gary: "No."

He changed the subject. He'd noticed that I had ridden the bus to his house and told me that he hadn't taken one in years.

"They're phasing out the MetroCard, I said.

"It's hard for people to adjust—especially older people," Gary said.

Lucille laughed: "They are phasing out old people too, hate to break it to ya—"

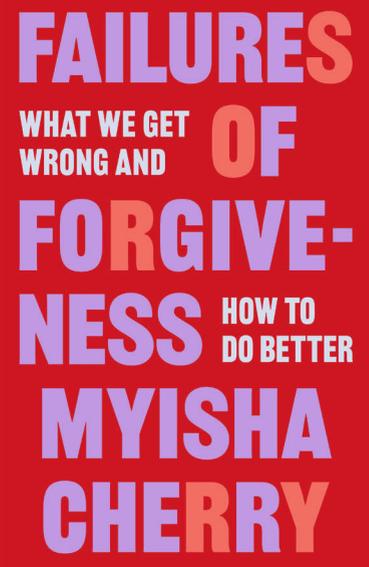
"I will not be phased out!"

We pulled up to Old Book Shop, a brick building that was unidentifiable from the road.

I followed them inside. Lucille began leafing through a collection of old postcards while Gary greeted Virginia and Chris, a slight woman with white hair and a man with a gray ponytail working together behind the counter.

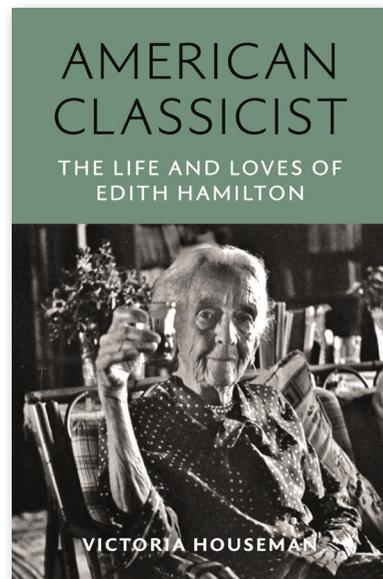
"I'm reading a lot of sci-fi," Virginia said.

She and Gary began talking about a sword owned by someone



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named Elric, who I gleaned was the ruler of the dying kingdom of Melniboné on an island of dragons in the Oldest Ocean.

Gary leaned toward me. "Sorry," he said softly, bringing me up to speed. "The prince is an albino, he's very weak. The sword gives him strength, but it drinks the souls of the people it kills."

The sword was Stormbringer, from Michael Moorcock's Elric saga. It's a modern retelling of the story of the Tyrning, a magical sword that, according to Norse mythology, was forged by dwarfs, had a golden hilt, and could cut through anything. But it came with a curse: once drawn, it would bring about three great tragedies.

I left them to it, and later found Gary in the pulp section.

Did they have the *Golden Fleece*, I pretended to joke.

No, he told me, looking down at a book cover depicting a base on Mars. "But these are sci-fi pulps about years of the future that never came to pass, I guess."

Lucille walked over and handed him a book about the Civil War. "It's fifty dollars. I'm debating getting this."

"How old is it?"

"1884."

"Wow." It was an account of daily life during the war. "You can see, human beings never change," he said. "Greed, anger, hatred, integrity—it's always there. The Bible—forget the religious stuff—that's a history of the world at that time. Xerxes, the Greeks, the Bolshevik Revolution. People are never happy. Too many bad people."

Gary and Lucille then got to talking about how you never really know anyone. During the summer of 1976, Gary said, David Berkowitz used to drive their friend's sister home to the Bronx from the bulk shipping department of the post office. Berkowitz said it was to protect her from the Son of Sam, who was on his murderous rampage across New York. Only later did they find out that Berkowitz was the killer.

Gary opened the book and squinted. "They read by candlelight. I don't know how they did it."

"Well, they died at twenty," said Lucille.

He passed the book back to her. He walked over to a set of Stormbringer novels and pulled them from the shelf. "I'll get these," he said.

Chris rang him up as Virginia brought out the store's most expensive paperback, *Orgy of the Dead*, from 1966, which she estimated was worth about a thousand dollars. The cover featured a painting of a naked woman standing in the fog. Behind her was a werewolf in a button-down and jeans next to a tied-up couple. The group studied it and laughed.

"The past was a different country," said Chris. "A bookstore is its reflection."

On the ride back to Brooklyn, I told Gary that I'd been trying to track down the *Golden Fleece*.

"Ridiculous," he said.

The car grew quiet.

Then Gary brought up a self-published book by an attorney in Chicago named Stephen Chahn Lee. It was called *Sherlock Holmes and the Silent Contest*, and a year and a half ago Lee began distributing copies of it in Sherlockian circles in New York. Lee's theory, Gary told me, was that Watson lied again and again in many of the fifty-six stories and four novels that make up the Sherlock Holmes canon. When he said on multiple occasions that Holmes used cocaine? A lie. When he said in "The Final Problem" that he'd never before heard of Holmes's archnemesis, the underworld boss Professor Moriarty? A lie. When he said Holmes fell down a waterfall and died while fighting Moriarty? A lie.

Why would Doyle do that? I asked.

"Lee is saying Watson lied."

Right, but that means Doyle made him lie.

"The stories have a life of their own."

"Oh my God," said Lucille, laughing as she patted her husband's arm.

I pressed Gary: Did Arthur Conan Doyle know, as he was writing, that Watson was lying?

"I don't know if he knew consciously . . ."

When they dropped me off at the bus stop, I was in the dark but for the orange glow of a sign buzzing atop a sandwich shop, advertising HOT BEEF.

III.

Why had Gary brought up *The Silent Contest*, I wondered.

A few days later, I visited The Mysterious Bookshop near City Hall. It had one of the largest Holmes selections in the world, but Lee's work wasn't on the shelves. I grabbed a copy of Gary's *Sherlock Holmes in Oz* instead and brought it to the register.

As Tom, the clerk, rang me up, I asked whether the store had ever stocked *The Silent Contest*.

He typed something into his computer.

"Sorry," he said, then sized me up. "You are shopping someone else's list?"

I told Tom about Gary and the *Golden Fleece*, and what he'd said about Lee's book.

"Hmm." He was more interested now. He picked up the phone and dialed.

Who was he calling? He'd already checked the inventory. I got the impression that, whoever it was, they were familiar with Lee's theory.

"Sorry," Tom said to me as he hung up. "Give Gary my best."

After I left, I went to a café and wrote to Gary, to pass along the kind wishes. Responding to an email he sent a few days earlier, in which he said that the *Golden Fleece* was "wiggling me out," I told him I'd purchased his book.

"Hope you enjoy Oz," he replied.

That night, after I got home, I opened the book and read it on the couch with the Bruisers. (That's what I call the cats, because Zeus is blue and Olive is black.)

The story was what it sounded like: Watson's relative in Kansas disappears in a great storm and so he and Holmes travel to the United States, where they befriend a Great Plains magician who takes them on a balloon ride to Frank Baum's Oz, wherein they journey to the Emerald City in search of a lion, a scarecrow, and a tin woodman, and along the way unearth an opium trafficking operation in which Moriarty is using a crystal ball to orchestrate the shipment of red poppies to nineteenth-century Europe.

Gary never explains where Oz was or how the opium was sent through a mirror to London. The possibility of passing between earth and Baum's novel was axiomatic. Even the pragmatic Baker Street pair didn't blink.

I phoned Lee at his law office in Chicago. Why would Watson lie? I asked him. The answer he gave requires a brief digression:

Since 1934, members of an international Sherlock extremist group known as the Baker Street Irregulars have been investigating a peculiarity of the Holmes canon: that many of its details don't add up. Take Watson's claim in *A Study in Scarlet* that Holmes, a man of science, was "ignorant of Copernican theory." Or, also in *Scarlet*, his claim that Holmes knew "next to nothing" about contemporary literature, philosophy, or politics, specifically Thomas Carlyle, only to portray the detective in the following book, *The Sign of the Four*, quoting Goethe in German and making a reference to Jean Paul before discussing Thomas Carlyle. These anomalies were no accident, the Irregulars contend. They can be reconciled if one considers Holmes and Watson to be capable of error, deception, and manipulation, and vulnerable to the whims of their time. This line of inquiry is sometimes called "the Great Game," and the Irregulars are always playing it.

Lee, though not an Irregular himself, has his own theory about the contradictions in the text: Watson and Holmes were lying to capture Moriarty, who they assumed was reading their popular short stories in *The Strand Magazine*. When Watson stated that Holmes was using cocaine out of boredom? It was to fool Moriarty into thinking that the detective wasn't closing in. When Watson noted that Holmes had no knowledge of literature or planetary motion? It was to trick Moriarty, a mathematician, into thinking the detective was no match for him. The Holmes canon was a trap.

"Holmes is clearly manipulating the media," Lee said on the phone. That's how the world works. Detectives lie, prosecutors lie, collectors lie, all trying to discover something. As

Lee wrote in *The Silent Contest*, "The question in these investigations is not who is the criminal, but what is the crime."

I asked: Was Doyle aware of this?

"I assume he wasn't."

But Watson and Holmes were lying?

"Once you have someone talking—'I'm telling you this story'—you get the potential for an unreliable narrator."

"These people are nuts!" Lucille hollered when I told her and Gary what I'd learned about the Great Game. We were in their living room, and Lucille was perched on the arm of the couch, laughing as she remembered encountering Irregulars at conventions in Manhattan.

"Talk about useless information," she said. "You think: Are these really Mensa-level people? And then they walk in with their deerstalker hats and their pipes and you are like—no!"

Gary countered: "Many of these people are lawyers."

"I know. But something went wrong."

I asked Gary if Watson was lying in *Sherlock Holmes in Oz*.

"No," he said. He finished it during the early days of the pandemic, before encountering Lee's theory. "I wrote it longhand."

"And then he couldn't read his writing!"

Critics were tough on the book. But Gary did not consider them serious people. "These people are dilettantes who say, I'm gonna write the next great American novel. Oh? What have you written? Oh? Nothing? Really? You are fifty and you haven't written anything and your first three hundred pages are going to be the great American novel? I write what I like to write," he said. "Hard cases and homicides."

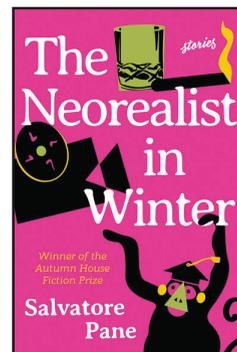
Gary said he was getting hungry. He knew a place that was better than Vinny's. "They have a wood-fired oven!" he said as he threw on his coat and ushered us out to the car.

La Villa was situated in a strip mall, a few doors down from a place called Good Fellas, which advertised laundering services but had its gate down.

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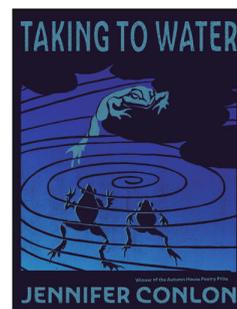
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As the waiter handed us our waters, Lucille asked what appetizer we should get.

I don't eat meat, I said.

Gary peered over his menu at me with a glare that could bake ziti.

Don't mind me, I told him. Get whatever.

He laughed and shook his head.

Lucille ordered fried zucchini for the table.

Gary met my eyes again. "Why do they say, dog eat dog? They should say, fish eat fish. I've never seen a dog eat a dog. Dog sniff dog world—maybe."

Laugh it up, I told him. When the animals rise up and take over the earth, I'm the only one at this table they will spare.

We all agreed that would be something. But right now, we had to talk business: I wanted to find the man who'd sold them the *Golden Fleece* at the flea market in Brimfield twenty years ago.

Gary asked why.

We knew it had survived a fire and a flood. Maybe there was a third disaster in its past. Or maybe it was yet to come. Anything about the bookseller would help.

Gary said all he could remember was that the guy bought the burned-out lot of books in an estate sale. I'd never find him, he assured me. He elbowed Lucille. "He's no Sherlock Holmes."

"No, he's Doyle!" Lucille said.

The waiter set down a plate of fried zucchini.

"They used to do them in sticks!" Gary said. "What is this with discs? Today is not my day."

On the drive back, Gary and Lucille reminisced about the Brooklyn of their childhoods. We weren't far from the site of the garage sale where, at ten years old, Lucille started her collection with a large plastic Godzilla that she insisted share the bed with her and her sister each night.

Lucille listed off her neighbors: "We had Mini-Hat, Franky Wiggles, the Chicken-Neck Family!"

"We had the Winky-Dink Family," shouted Gary, who had moved with his mom from Virginia to Ben-

sonhurst as a teenager. "And Muscles La Nose!"

"Everybody had a name! My uncle was Chubby. He was only chubby when he was a kid—but they kept the name."

"Huh," said Gary. "I don't remember my own name."

"Yours was Blinky, Blinky—"

"When I was a kid!"

They both laughed.

Lucille looked at me in the rear-view mirror. "My house I lived in, my parents lived there. My grandparents lived there. Everybody on that block knew each other." She couldn't pinpoint when things changed, but those people were gone now. Except, maybe, for whoever was still lighting cars on fire in the tall grass across the street.

It was dark when we got back but Lucille told me to stay awhile; she had something for me. She pulled open a drawerful of 35-mm photographs.

"I took these when we were there," she said, handing me a stack of pictures from their trip to the flea market in Brimfield.

Did she take any of the vendor?

She flipped through. No. But there was one she had taken near his tent. "I remember because I was like: Oh shit, Gary, look at the sky."

The only permanent structure visible in the frame was the corner of a barn. I snapped a photo of it with my phone. Maybe the owner of the barn would know something, I said.

Gary laughed.

Lucille told him to check one last time for the *Golden Fleece*.

Gary opened the cabinet door and looked behind an upright issue of the pulp *Captain Future*, in which Edmond Hamilton first published his novel *The Lost World of Time*. He gasped: "Here it is!"

"Really?" Lucille said, as we both jumped up.

"No."

We sank back into our chairs. Lucille joked that he was having a "senior moment."

He shook his head. "That's the power it has: the owner will never grow old."

But was he still the owner, I asked?

"Okay," Gary said. "I gotta say something: It's not here. It's not any-

where. It's one of those conundrums, wrapped in a, um, conundrum. You know, Jason and the Argonauts were on an elusive search for the Golden Fleece. They had to fight harpies—I don't want to relive that."

He closed the glass door on *The Lost World of Time*.

That night, I was in bed with the Bruisers, searching for something to put us all to sleep. I pulled up Gary's YouTube page, where he had posted a new video:

"The Barnes & Noble on Paramus, Route 17 is closing down. . . . All the books are gone, everything is gone. It's a shame, very sad. The person that used to run this here is very sad, because all of this is just ending now."

Gary walked through the store's empty shelves, bewildered. He was upset. He called the closing "disgusting" and "sick." He scorned the landlord for refusing to renew the lease. I was surprised he hadn't mentioned it to me. Or had he? I rolled over and grabbed my notebook. Flipping through it, there was nothing.

But what was this? Something I'd overlooked: When I said I'd bought *Sherlock Holmes in Oz* at The Mysterious Bookshop, Gary had mentioned someone named Otto. "He's got an office in the basement," Gary had said. And, later in the day, he brought up the man in the basement again, describing him as part of "a whole other level you don't even know about."

It sounded less literal this time around; I decided to look into it.

I returned to The Mysterious Bookshop a few days later. I told Tom that Gary had mentioned someone named Otto who worked in the basement.

"Hold on," Tom said.

He picked up the phone and explained the situation to the person on the other end.

Stay put, he told me. He opened a door cut into the bookshelves and disappeared inside.

Some long minutes later he emerged and waved for me to follow. He led me down a flight of stairs and through a concrete room in which a

man and a woman were sitting at desks, typing away on old computers. We arrived at a back office, which had an ornate rug on the floor and two velvet wingback chairs angled toward each other. A sharply dressed older man with a white beard came around from behind the desk. He shook my hand and introduced himself as Otto Penzler. The name rang a bell: the founder of The Mysterious Press, Otto had published everyone from Raymond Chandler to Mickey Spillane, and was arguably the most prolific editor of mystery and detective fiction alive. He was very busy, he informed me. He seemed disappointed to learn that I was his unexpected visitor.

We could schedule a meeting for later, I suggested.

"You're here now." He gestured for me to sit. It was nothing personal, he explained. There was just so much to get done. "I'm trying to read every book in the world."

How was that going?

"To be honest? The world is catching up to me."

I told him I'd make this quick: a pulp collector had mentioned him to me. I was trying to figure out why.

"I was an enormous mystery collector. I had the largest collection in the world—better than the Library of Congress," he said. "But I sold the collection."

Why?

"I'm eighty years old and I don't have any family."

That puzzled me. Why devote your life to collecting all these old stories just to give them up?

He shrugged. "Why do you fall in love with one person?"

Love was tricky, I gave him that. But still.

"It was compelling to me," he said, and offered Sherlock Holmes as an example: "The first one I read was 'The Red-Headed League,'" a story in which a pawnbroker with red hair asks Holmes to figure out why he and a group of other redheaded men were paid handsomely to copy the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

"Halfway through," Otto said, "I had to know."

I nodded.

He studied my face. He didn't have time for this; I wasn't getting it.

Leaning in close, he said: "Did you ever see the movie *Dirty Harry*?"

He recounted a scene from the 1971 film, loosely based on the still-unsolved case of the Zodiac Killer, in which the police inspector Harry Callahan gets into a gunfight with a man who has just robbed a bank. It seems like the man has gotten away, but Harry finds him on the ground, within arm's reach of a shotgun. As the suspect debates reaching for the gun, Harry says, "I know what you're thinking: 'Did he fire six shots or only five?' Well, to tell you the truth, in all this excitement I've kind of lost track myself. But being as this is a .44 Magnum, the most powerful handgun in the world, and would blow your head clean off, you've got to ask yourself one question: 'Do I feel lucky?'" The suspect decides not to reach for the gun.

"Finally," Otto concluded, "the guy said to Harry: 'I *gots to know*,'" and Harry points the gun at the guy and pulls the trigger.

Otto smiled at me. "You see now? I *had to know*."

I knew the feeling. I told him about the *Golden Fleece*. He told me that the story of the book surviving the flood was impossible.

I agreed. But be that as it may—

He nodded. He stood up and walked over to his desk. He said he had to get back to work.

I thanked him and made for the door.

"John Knott," he said.

Who?

John was a pulp collector in Maryland, he explained. He read off John's information. If he were me, that's where he'd look.

iv.

A few days before I left for Maryland, I found Gary and Lucille at a monthly meeting of pulp magazine readers and collectors in the basement of the New York Public Library's Mulberry Street branch.

There were three other men besides Gary at the table, and maybe ten more on Zoom, their faces projected onto the wall. One appeared to be in the driver's seat of his car.

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Another was in a log cabin with his cat. A third was in the dark.

A man in a lacrosse jersey pulled the clock from the wall and turned back the time. "Just so you guys know, we had twenty people at the last meeting," he said.

"I guess the novelty wore off," a man at the computer confirmed.

"Well, it is a nice day."

"Yeah, that's it."

A new face joined the Zoom. The man at the computer introduced me.

"He's a slick!" said the new guy.

The man at the computer turned to me. "Sorry, Joe, we don't trust the slicks."

I gathered that most of these guys knew each other, or had at least crossed paths at conventions in Manhattan and along the New Jersey Turnpike. A big one was coming up in Chicago, but it was too far for some. One collector in his sixties said he had to go to the hospital while attending a convention, after he started having heart palpitations across the street at a Max & Erma's.

"Ah jeez," Gary said.

Lucille put her hand on his shoulder.

Hours into the meeting, a twenty-something walked in, beleaguered beyond his years.

The room was thrilled; aside from me, he was the youngest by decades.

Work had tied him up back home in Connecticut, he said.

That's right, the room noted: he had gotten a new job. How was it?

"At my last job, all the time cleaning up other people's shit, having to work with my skinhead coworker, I never thought I was above it," he said. "But working at Burlington Coat Factory? I think I'm above it."

When the meeting ended, I followed Gary and Lucille out to the parking garage. Gary crossed Houston Street against the light and got himself into a pickle. Cabs and delivery trucks sped by on either side. He swung his arms wildly at them, like a kid punching waves in the ocean. He looked back at Lucille and me and beckoned us to join.

"Oh my god," Lucille said to herself. Then to him: "Get out of the road, Gary!"

When we reached the garage, Lucille handed me a plastic bag with

two small books. "We made these for you," she said. They were both titled *The Shift*. One, written by Gary, had the subtitle *The Original*; the other, by Lucille, was subtitled *The Alternate*.

Gary shook my hand goodbye. "At least I didn't kill you," he shouted over the honking.

What?

"Don't spoil it!" Lucille said, as they disappeared into the garage.

At 5 AM, my alarm sent the Bruisers spinning. It's okay, Big Z, I told Zeus. But he was inconsolable, darting this way and that.

I turned to Olive, who was flashing those mustard high beams of hers. "Foodie time, Ms. Rocko?" I asked.

I poured a double serving into their bowl and threw in a plate of the wet stuff; I wouldn't be back until late.

At Port Authority, I joined the Peter Pan bus line snaking across the Dunkin-wrapper-strewn floor. A woman handed me a piece of paper. It was a survey asking me to evaluate the quality of the four-hour ride to Silver Spring that I was about to take. When we started boarding, she returned with a pencil. "You can just fill it out now," she said.

I slept for the first couple of hours on the turnpike.

The driver's crackling voice woke me: "I'm not a timekeeper!" she shouted into the intercom. We'd stopped at a rest area, and some passengers had forsaken her departure time for a spot in the Cinnabon line. "We will leave."

As we hit the road again, I fished the two versions of *The Shift* from my bag. I opened Gary's first. It told the story of my life forty years hence, after an event called the Great Shift, in which all the animals rose up to rule the earth. In it, I am "alone and hunted by large cats who prowled the ruins of the old cities." At the end, the Lion King decides to spare me. But he has killed everyone I love.

In Lucille's version, my cats kill me:

And that's when he saw *them!* All of *them* that he had loved. Staring at him. Snarling at him. Circling him. Licking his ankles, his arms and his

face. This ordinarily wouldn't have alarmed him, but this time it was different. This time *they* were different! Joe now knew his reality would be more vicious than even his subconscious mind could have imagined!

I closed the book and examined the cover: It was a painting of me, gushing blood, as small animals gnawed at my flesh.

John's house was twenty minutes from downtown Silver Spring, on a quiet street that felt green even in winter.

When I rang the bell, he came to the door with his wife, Susan, and they invited me to join them at the kitchen table. A happy dog named Pepper came in sniffing.

I sat down and put out my hand for inspection.

"She's a very sick dog," Susan said. "She has lung cancer. She was supposed to be dead a month ago."

I turned that over in my head.

"She doesn't know she's sick."

I couldn't think of a worse thing.

Pepper curled up under the table. They brought out a plate of sandwiches. I told John that I was looking for pulps, and that Otto had sent me his way. But I kept coming up empty, and the whole thing was wearing me down.

"I think what is being seen in the pulp magazines is the comic book people moved in."

So why are they buying them up?

"The lurid covers," he said. "What's going to happen to pulps is they will put them in cases and give them grades." If that happened, a pulp's auction price would be largely based on its grade, which would drop with each rip, tear, smudge, and fold. Once it was graded, it would be sealed in plexiglass, never to be read again. It would become a financial asset bought and sold by speculators who would store it in a tax-free climate-controlled warehouse in Delaware.

They call it "slabbing," and John, who had been selling pulps and paperbacks for forty years, refused to do it. He knew of other collectors who felt the same. But they could only hold out for so long. "After us, I don't know. We are all getting older."



Pepper walked over to the sliding glass door.

“She wants to go out,” Susan said.

I leaned in and leveled with John. Truth was, I wasn’t looking for pulps so much as I was looking for one

pulp in particular: volume 1, issue 1 of *Golden Fleece Historical Adventure*. Did he know it?

He nodded.

Did he know how many were printed back in 1938?

“Probably thousands.”

And how many still existed?

“Hard to say.”

Pepper made another noise at the window. The Knotts left the table. Susan opened the door for Pepper.

A minute later John returned with a stack of pulps. "I got these from a collector in the Midwest," he said, setting them down in front of me.

I looked at the cover on top. It showed a shirtless man swinging a sword at a lion that had blood dripping from its mouth. I smiled: it was the *Golden Fleece*, issue 1.

I skipped a beat. How much?

"Two thousand for the entire set."

My heart sank. *The entire set*. It couldn't have been Gary's; his had been unmoored from the other eight issues in the series. The pulp before me was but one of thousands of copies of an unremarkable magazine that had not even merited a full-year run. I was all tangled up inside. I snapped a photo of the imposter and bid the Knotts goodbye.

At the bus stop I sidled up to a group of pigeons and texted Lucille the photo of the *Golden Fleece*.

She replied a minute later: "The search for 'The Golden Fleece,' a seemingly impossible quest! Oh how life imitates fiction!"

After the Maryland affair I was listless. I gave the Bruisers wet food two, three times a day. I stopped caring when a blue shell hit me in Mario Kart.

But I had to snap out of it. There was still the matter of the *Golden Fleece*'s provenance. I contacted an organizer at the Brimfield market and sent her Lucille's photo of the barn. I asked if she could tell me who ran the booths in that area in 2002.

She replied with the number of a woman named Lori.

"That's my building," Lori said when I phoned in late March. "You've come to the right person."

I told her everything I knew about the man who had sold Gary the *Golden Fleece*.

He didn't ring any bells, but she was still in touch with some of the old vendors. "I can give them a call," she said, and we hung up.

Weeks passed without word.

In the meantime, I worked another angle: Maybe Heritage Auctions, where most pulps are sold, had a record from the Eighties or Nineties of someone in or around

Brimfield buying the *Golden Fleece*. I called their New York office on Park Avenue and asked to speak to a pulp specialist.

"Just a moment," said the receptionist.

She put down the receiver.

"Hey," I overheard her say to a co-worker, "if someone wanted to contact someone about pulp magazines—you know, the kind where the girl is like, 'Oooaaahhh!'—who would that be?"

A moment later she returned, and patched me through to Texas. But nobody was there.

ABOVE US, BELOW US,
THE HOUSE WAS PACKED
WITH BOOKS. THE STORIES
WERE CLOSING IN

By mid-April I was out of options. I tried Lori again.

"Sorry," she wrote. "I didn't have any luck."

Just then, it dawned on me to ask: But they remembered *someone* selling piles of burned-up books, right?

"No."

I got a sinking feeling. What if there was no fire? No estate salesman at Brimfield? I thought back to Otto saying that no book would survive a flood unharmed. I needed answers. I texted Lucille and asked if they would be home the following evening.

"Hi Slick!" she replied. "You're always welcome."

Gary and Lucille were in the living room watching television. I sat down on the couch. Gary asked how my trip to Maryland had gone.

I had to leave behind the *Golden Fleece*, I told him.

"Mhmm."

But I told them that I had read both versions of *The Shift*.

He said that they had just posted a video in which he read each of them aloud, to see which fate his viewers enjoyed more. "One guy said Lucille's was like *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and mine was like *Frankenstein*."

Who won? I asked, curious what people thought of my demise.

"She won. I hate to admit it, but she always wins."

"It's because people are vicious," Lucille said.

"Yeah."

"And because your animals talked. Why is a lion talking? That bugs me."

Gary swatted the comment out of the air. "Let's order a pie!" he said, and Lucille called it in.

As we waited for the pizza, I told them how John had predicted that pulps would soon be locked away in cases.

"Ugh!" Lucille said, as she knelt down on the carpet. "Everything doesn't need to be slabbed." She put her hand on the glass door of a hutch filled with books. "I collected a lot of shit: Jewelry, purses, wall pockets, pictures. When storm Sandy came, everything that I collected for my whole life was gone. But my life didn't change. And that's when the light bulb went off: I never really had it."

Because she didn't miss it?

"Because I didn't even know what I'd lost." She looked at Gary. "There is so much stuff that you put it away. Why do you have it?"

"To protect it!"

"From what? When you say, 'A good collection is coming up for sale,' what does that mean? Someone died. Sooner or later nobody is going to be left to be interested in this stuff, and what will you be left with? A bunch of books in plastic."

I looked around. Above us, below us, the house was packed with books. The stories were closing in. Gary would never make it through them all. I asked him if he remembered reading the penultimate novel in E. C. Tubb's *Dumarest of Terra*, the thirty-three-book space odyssey he showed me the day we met.

"What about it?"

Earl, the main character, finally makes it back to his childhood planet, which he had spent his whole life seeking.

"I know! I published that one!"

I asked why, when he first told me about the books, he left out how disappointed Earl was in the end.

Gary was surprised I needed to be told. "I guess you don't think about it when you're younger, but when you are older you realize: You made choices. Sometimes they were good and sometimes they were not."

Collecting all these books, had that been a good choice?

"This isn't something that I did last week—"

"It's true," Lucille said. "When we first met, he was always carrying a book. But I could never see what he was reading." She mimed Gary walking into the post office trying to hide a damsel-in-distress cover in his coat. "So, I asked him . . ."

Gary smiled at the thought.

"I have the first magazine that he gave me." She opened up her cabinet and pulled out the July 1955 issue of *Wanted*.

"I had told him that I liked true crime," she said, handing it to me.

I looked down at the crumbling yellow pulp. The cover line was: I LOVE THE GIRLS I KILL!

"If I was a different person," she said, "it might not have worked out."

What was it about collecting that drew them together?

"It's the hunt," she said. "Even if we don't get anything."

"We *always* have a good time," Gary said.

There was something about the way he said it. I thought again of the *Golden Fleece*. The past three months raced through my mind. Was I crazy? Was my detective friend right? Could they have made the whole thing up? I stood up and said: Gary!

"What?"

There is something I *have* to know.

"What is it?"

I could hear Lucille in the kitchen, setting out the basket of garlic powder and chili flakes, pulling soda bottles from the fridge. On the TV, the Yankees were up by two.

"What?!"

Why'd they kick you out of Vinny's? I said, as I sat back down.

"Ahhh—okay! The guy threw me out because I was wearing a tank top!"

Lucille started laughing.

"He said I had no shirt! I thought he was kidding!"

"There was no one in there!" Lucille told me. "You couldn't get a game of checkers going!"

The doorbell rang. Gary got the pizza, still chuckling.

We passed the night around the table. I ate pizza and drank cream soda while Gary and Lucille reminisced about the decades they'd spent in the U.S. Postal Service. Once, some co-workers had accidentally poisoned the wrong person's coffee with lye. Another time, a few blocks from the courthouse during John Gotti's trial, one worker had shot the lover of another co-worker with whom they'd both been having an affair. And another time, Lucille's boss had tried to send her to prison by framing her for stealing ten thousand dollars because she'd walked in on him having sex with a mail clerk on his desk. A few years later, they found him shot to death in his government-issued vehicle in East New York.

"Okay, okay!" Gary suggested that they switch topics. "He doesn't want to know about us working at the post office."

"Maybe he should. *That* is a good story."

"Yeah. It is." He grabbed another slice.

When I got home that night, the Bruisers were screaming like banshees. Dinnertime was hours ago.

The light in the front hall was dead; I must have left it on all day.

I kicked off my shoes and stumbled through the dark toward the kitchen, knocking over the water bowl. As I poured dry food into Zeus's dish, he rammed the bag with his head. Kibble splashed into the puddle on the floor.

I flipped on the light in the kitchen. Olive was marching back and forth in front of me, still screeching like an old train break. She looked up at me and licked her chops: only wet food would make this right.

I reached for a can of tender liver and chicken feast pâté.

It was good to be missed. ■

In.Visible

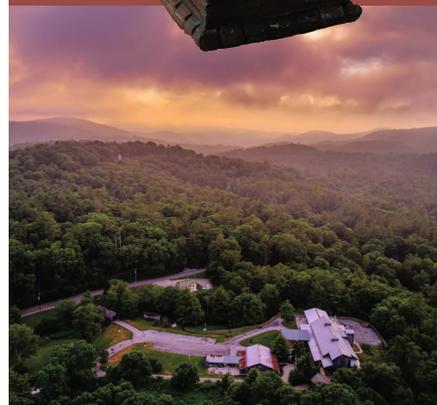
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