

2. The Snake

I have chosen this case to begin the collection of cases because it represents a case, the solution of which was essential if my position in the School of Justice were not to be terminated. [The omission of ‘criminal’ in the name of the school is not a mistake on my part. There occurred a name change in more recent times—as a matter of fact, the outcome of one of the few cases in which Colmes failed to prevail.]

I had just entered my office, having dropped off Colmes’s tea and toast for his breakfast, when I heard the loud bang on my office wall signaling to me that my presence was required. I had planned on that morning to at last finish off a draft of my dissertation proposal. “Hobson!” I heard through the wall. The rather high-pitched sound of Colmes’s voice easily penetrated the wall, without his having to yell at all. I rarely answered. Rather, simply walked out of my office and into his, without knocking.

Colmes looked up from his crossword and gulped down the last drop of tea from his daintily decorated English tea cup, having poured the tea into it, out of the much despised disposable cup in which it came.

“Hobson, we have a most interesting and pressing case before us. I will have to give it much careful thought before we proceed. I trust that you are not too busy?”

“I was just putting the finishing touches to the first draft of my dissertation proposal,” I answered in my Australian monotone, trying to appear nonchalant.

“Well, I do not want to interfere with your studies,” he said, still working on his crossword puzzle.

“It can wait,” I answered. “You know me. I can only do a little at a time anyway, as you know it’s so difficult for me.”

“Your ADD?” asked Colmes, still not looking up.

“I can manage it.”

In fact, I had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder in Australia when I was eight years old. It was one of the reasons I ended up coming to the USA. In Australia they were good at diagnosing the disease, but hopeless at doing anything about it, especially in schools where teachers interpreted my inattention as a defect in discipline, and dealt with it accordingly. My ADD also interfered with my learning and memory. So at a very young age I developed a habit of recording everything, or just about everything, in a notebook or even on a scrap of paper if it were nearby. Hence, filing cabinets were the first piece of furniture I installed in my office.

Colmes finished his tea and returned the cup to its saucer. “This case has come to me directly from the President’s office. You know he used to be the Dean of your school, right?”

“You mean criminal justice? I’m in the philosophy department now, you know.”

“Yes, I am aware of that. But you have not yet defended your dissertation for criminal justice, is that not so?”

“Er, yes, that’s right, but you know why that is.”

“Indeed I do, Hobson,” said Colmes with an amused smirk.

I decided to pick up where I left off. “Oh, yes, Dean O’Brien who was once the governor of Sing-Sing Prison, right?”

“Indeed. A most controlling sort of person. In fact he was once overheard to say in a meeting that he thought universities were not all that different from a prison to run. A good fit, wouldn’t you say?”

I nodded, but refrained from responding. Colmes was used to this, and I can attest that he rarely, at least with me anyway, expected to get an answer when he asked a question, unless it was part of a direct interrogation of a suspect or witness. Otherwise his questions were almost always rhetorical.

Colmes continued. "It appears that our President-come-governor-come-Dean has decided on a cost-cutting operation and plans to disband your School."

This stirred me to ask, "you mean he's going to abolish the whole school, the doctoral program and all the faculty?"

"It's not altogether clear how far he intends to go. But my good friend who resides in the President's office—universities have spies and confidants hidden everywhere. Let's call my friend our "trusty" just like in a Mississippi prison. He has raised the alarm and asked me to devise a way to stop this terrible destruction of an essential part of the university."

I pulled up a wicker chair, one that was probably made by prison labor, and leaned my elbows on Colmes's desk. I detected the usual small twitch at the corner of his mouth, a sign that he found what he had just said amusing, almost a joke. Of course, one had to agree with the President. Whoever heard of a School of Criminal Justice anyway? Invented by some politician close to Governor Rockefeller, so I was told. Schumaker university was the first university to house such a school. Others followed, but remained very few. Judiciously, I remained silent.

Then he looked up from his crossword and stared at me intently, as only he could do. The twitch at the corner of his mouth remained. I knew I had to respond.

"If the School is abolished along with the faculty, I will not be able to defend my dissertation and anyway there will be no such thing as a Ph.D. in criminal justice. Criminal justice will be no more," I muttered.

Colmes stared back at me, his lips now pursed together tightly. I knew I had to speak again.

"And it will be the end of my assistantship. No money. No job." I muttered forlornly.

"Indeed. Indeed. That is so. An inevitable deduction, Hobson."

I sat back in my chair and waited. Colmes would have a solution, I knew it.

"Now, now Hobson. Not so glum!" smiled Colmes. "With your assistance, we will fix this."

"I can put aside my dissertation draft. After all, there's no hurry to finish it, is there?"

Colmes ignored my question. "Now here is what I want you to do."

"Dig up dirt on the President?" I asked eagerly.

"Hmmm. An obvious solution, but too direct and besides, I do not think that the main force behind this is the President. Or if he is, there is no easy way to get at him. Certainly, he cannot make such a big change without the assent of..."

I broke in, "The faculty senate!"

"Indeed not! Indeed not!" retorted Colmes. "It has little standing except a pretense that faculty are always 'consulted' by the administration. The senate is always consulted, but only after the decision has been made."

"Then what? Who?" I asked, perplexed.

"We will begin with the new Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs."

"You will confront them?" I asked, with some happy anticipation.

"Confront? Indeed not! Confront creates resistance. And it's 'her' not 'them.' She has two titles, and so far she fits the Colmes basic rule of identification in academia. Her name is Doctor Catherine Dolittle"

I sat mute, awaiting his explication of the rule.

"The more the titles, the more the incompetence," pronounced Colmes his bottom lip dropping a little as though he had just said something disgusting.

"Very funny, sir," I said, inadvertently breaking another of his sacred rules: never address him as Sir.

Colmes stood and began to walk up and down in his office, hands behind his back, head and chin held high. He then stopped at my side, where I was still sitting on the wicker chair pulled up to the desk. "Hobson, you must stop and think. Everything revolves around the Provost. We must make her ours."

“But how?”

“Information, of course. Here’s what you must do. Get a hold of her resume. Track down all the publications she lists and find any coauthors. Track her back to her undergraduate and high school academics. Get all of her grades. In short, find anything that could be a black mark against her.”

“But how? I can’t just go in and ask for all that stuff. What about the privacy rules?” I complained.

“Indeed. Indeed. But there are ways. Say that you are working for the Arcade Personnel Agency,” Colmes handed me a business card, “and say that the Provost is applying for a top government position in Homeland Security and that you are gathering information to assist in her clearance.”

“But will they believe me?”

“They will when you show them your badge,” announced Colmes.

Struck speechless I mechanically put out my hand to receive the badge. It even had my photograph ID on it.

Colmes licked his top lip slightly as he did when pleased with himself. “You will need money to get to Philadelphia.”

“Philadelphia? You mean, that’s where she got her doctorate?”

“Yes, at Drexel. In environmental studies, I believe.” Colmes turned to the wall behind him that was lined with books from floor to ceiling.

It bears repeating that his entire office walls were lined with books. Not unusual for a professor. Professors either sported a large personal library, or instead piled up papers, books, folders, unread dissertations, ungraded papers all over the floor with barely a passage for any visitor to reach the professor’s desk. This was their way of demonstrating to gullible students (graduate or undergraduate) their industry and total devotion to scholarship. But there was something out of place with Colmes’s walls of books. None had been read, or at least one could not see any finger marks that had been left in the layers of dust that clung to the books.

Except for one that was shiny and well used. Colmes grabbed it, a heavy criminal law casebook. Immediately he lifted it from the shelf, it set in motion machinery that pushed back two rows of books, and in their place a safe came forward with two separate doors. He muttered something to himself, seemingly for a very long time, turned a knob, and the door on the left swung open. He reached in and pulled out a wad of \$100 bills and counted out twenty of them.

“This should see you through. Bring back to me whatever is left over, if any. Take the train, it’s the least stressful.”

I was about to say thank you, and ask did I really need that much money, when he quickly slammed the safe shut and closed up the bookshelf.

At the time, I did not know it, but he had extremely sensitive hearing, supposedly a result of a birth defect, or should I say his inherited gift. Anyway, lucky for us, because right then the door to his office flew open, and there, standing right in the doorway was—there is no other way to describe her, his nemesis, Dr. Hannah Tochiarty (pronounced Toke-iarty), Vice President and Dean of Human Resources. In contrast to Colmes she had a way of showing up anywhere at any time. She obviously had a master key so could enter any room or office. And she was convinced that Colmes was not what or who he said he was. His personnel file lacked any information at all, except one folder within which was typed on a single legal size paper: NO CLEARANCE ALLOWED. She had taken this as high in the administration as she could go—to the President after all, supposedly a former prison governor (we know that was true) and should be a stickler for security, but he refused to do anything about it. Just shrugged it off and said to her, “there’s nothing I can do. You know what they are like.” And she would be ushered out of his office. Who “they” were she had no idea and not the courage to ask.

Colmes pushed back in his chair, placing his hands behind his head. “Good morning Dr. Tochiarty.

You bring good news, I hope?"

Dr. Tochiarty answered only indirectly, which is to say she ignored him, instead she looked my way.

"Good morning. Mr. Hobson, isn't it?"

"That's right Doctor. I was just leaving," I answered in my most polite manner, conveying the fact that I recognized her power. She could make or break pretty much anyone on campus. Colmes had battled with her over many a case. But she did not step away from the doorway, so it was impossible for me to leave without bumping into her or nudging her aside, both options were sorely tempting. She just stood, hands on her protruding hips that seemed to hold up the weight of her balloon-like upper body, a scowl erupting all over her face, from chin over fatty bulging cheeks, a tiny flat sow-like nose, to eyes almost closed by the swelling of her cheeks and the deep frown of her forehead.

"Excuse me," I muttered meekly.

She turned back to Colmes who looked at me, enjoying every minute of this impossible encounter. His face, though, only gave the tiniest indication of his personal pleasure. I know him so well. He holds everything in. His stern grey face acts as a mirror, an aggressive mirror that turns any emotive behavior of anyone he meets, back on themselves. The result is that they invariably feel uncomfortable, and, in a different way, seriously inferior from this person, Colmes, a man of brilliance—as I attest that he in fact is.

Dr. Tochiarty made a small step forward. "The news is that your housekeeper position has been approved, though the money allocated is limited."

"Indeed! Indeed!" cried Colmes, breaking out all over in smiles, a rarity no less. "One Rose lost, another Rose found!"

Rose was the daughter of Colmes's former housekeeper, a kind of Victorian era housekeeper with a thick Russian accent, who would cook for him, clean his house (or office-apartment as one might call it), go food shopping or attend to any other tasks he required. The old Rose was in fact a graduate of the Department of Philosophy, the department with which I was now also enrolled doing my second Ph.D. Colmes had actually chaired her dissertation. The new housekeeper, her daughter Rose, had recently graduated with her Ph.D. in Criminal Justice, so I knew her somewhat from my studies there. In fact she looked exactly like her mother. Always dressed in rather ill-fitting knitted sweaters, shirts, and even leggings and dress. And when she was not tending to her chores, even when doing other things, such as defending a dissertation, she always found time to knit while someone asked her a question, or even while she answered.

I managed to step around Doctor Tochiarty, muttering an "excuse me." It was my first up-close encounter with her, and I was aghast at the smell, her tobacco breath blended with a strong whiff of excessive amounts of baby powder plastered all over her round, moonlike face. I quickly glanced over my shoulder at Colmes, and I am sure I saw him sniggering.

"And when will she start?" I heard Colmes as I made my way next door into the safety of my office, Tochiarty having stepped a little aside.

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Upon returning to my office, I put away yet another rough draft of my dissertation proposal, and pottered around, placing books back on their shelves. As usual, I was not altogether sure what I was supposed to do. From Colmes, all I had was my pass as a headhunter. I retrieved as much information on Dolittle as I could from Google, it had only been going for a couple of years, but was already a great quick source of information. And the rest I scoured the *Chronicle of Higher Education* for any articles that might mention her. But obtained very little. I called the human resources office at Drexel and managed to confirm that she in fact did attend there, but they would give little else over the phone. A trip to Philadelphia was warranted. In all my time upstate New York I had never ventured south past New York City. A train trip was called for.

Meanwhile the scratchy, loud voice of Tochiarty seeped through the wall of my office, mixed with the steady high pitched mutterings of Colmes. I discovered later that Tochiarty had informed Colmes that she had launched an official investigation of him and that he would be required to answer some questions put to him by the university lawyer whose main function was to confront, warn and accuse individuals that Tochiarty fingered as having broken the equity and diversity rules of the university. This was not at all new. The Provost indulged in constant harassment of persons, whether student or faculty, whom she, for whatever reasons of her own, targeted for investigation and castigation. I even asked Colmes why he didn't go after her, but he responded that she was a known entity and that she had been a useful ploy on occasion, in fact helped solve a couple of cases. As I would find out in future cases, this turned out to be so.

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Amazingly, the train from Rensselaer to New York was on time, and I managed without difficulty to change to the fast train to Philadelphia, out of 30th street station in New York, alighting in a little over an hour at Philadelphia's 30th street station. Then it was an easy walk to Drexel university where I showed my badge and chatted with a human resources official. After the usual pleasantries and joking about my Aussie accent, I managed to get the entire file of Dolittle. It was huge, containing an amazing amount of irrelevant information, at least that is what I thought, concerning her personal life. She had had two abortions, it seems, was never married, failed her comprehensive exams for her doctorate in religious studies twice, and was saved only by the fact that her second abortion had affected her performance in the second attempt at her comprehensive exam, so she was given a conditional pass, taking into account her handicapped condition. While this was interesting scuttlebutt, I could not see how this would help Colmes to get Dolittle to desist from her attempt to destroy the School of Criminal Justice. There was little else in the thick file, most of it listing the various honors and awards she had received, especially a big one for being the diversity faculty of the year. This was a bit puzzling since she was, after all, a middle aged white woman from the main line of Philadelphia. There was also an award for her work with the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Apparently she also worked as a volunteer at the Philadelphia Zoo for many years. I phoned Colmes and informed him of my progress. He was most appreciative. I told him that I did have to pay a little money to get access to the file, \$100 in all. He asked me to read out to him all the juicy bits of the file.

"Do you want copies of everything?" I asked. And to my surprise (at the time) he answered, "no need. Good job, Hobson. Get back as soon as you can. By the way, what was her dissertation topic?"

"Just a minute. I have it written down here... Ah yes. "The Inspiration of Species and the Discovery of Christian Purity."

It was a long trip back as I missed the train connection in New York City. I found a Starbucks hidden away somewhere deep in the busy station, sipped coffee and wondered what Colmes was up to. I was puzzled that he did not want any copies of the Dolittle file. And it was then that I had realized that there were actually no file cabinets in Colmes's office. How could that be? When he must have dealt with many cases before I joined him? All the filing cabinets were in my office, but those were what I installed. There were no files of his, until I began to make them. And even then, he seemed a little annoyed that I had done so. Of course, I am so glad I did, because without them I could not be recounting to you our cases. And he would have been truly angry if he knew that I had submitted articles based on them to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

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Of his many talents, Colmes was an outstanding photographer. He had, tucked away in the drawers of his desk and elsewhere in his apartment, a huge variety of cameras, old and new. They were hidden and operative all over his office. He had also installed them in various places around the university. To this day, I do not know where they are. I once asked him for a map or something so I could help keep track of them,

but he scorned the idea. Besides, he insisted that he had what he called a “photographic memory” and so knew exactly where every camera was installed. He could literally see the map inside his head. I had no idea what this meant, and certainly doubted that such a detailed map could be “seen” as though one had eyes inside one’s head.

Correction. Of course eyes are physically located inside one’s head. But in order to see something, there has to be a physical object outside the head (in this case a map) in order to see it inside one’s head, right? Otherwise, if one sees something inside one’s head without looking at something outside one’s head, then you are having a “vision.” Right? The sort of thing that the “prophet” Girolamo Savonarola in 15th century Florence insisted on seeing. But even there, the objects (sword, fire and brimstone etc.) had been seen prior to the vision. They could only take shape inside the head once their exterior shape previously had been seen and identified.

My apologies. There I go again, You can understand why I am doing my second Ph.D. in philosophy. It is a field that can make even the simplest of things very complicated.

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The phone rang in my little dormitory apartment and woke me with a startle. I groped for the phone and mumbled, half asleep, “who is it?” After my long trip to Philadelphia, and missing the train connection back, I had arrived to the comfort of my Dorm apartment very late and so decided to sleep a little later than usual. I need not have asked who it was phoning me at this ungodly hour of eight a.m. It was Colmes of course.

“Hobson?”

“Colmes?” I retorted, annoyed.

“There, there, Hobson. The case is but solved, thanks to you!”

“What? Where? How?” I spluttered.

“Meet me in the environmental studies department in ten minutes.”

“Colmes? Professor?” I called. But he had hung up.

I dashed out of bed, attended to my morning ablutions, rushed down to the small cafeteria that served our dormitory, grabbed a cup of coffee and a piece of bacon from one of the many plates of breakfast fast food, and was on my way, grabbing a napkin to wipe my greasy fingers as I went. What solution could he have come to—deduction as he called it—from the meager amount of information I gave him?

Fortunately, it was not too far to the environmental studies department, housed in a large section of the Science building, at one corner of the podium. It too, was a heavy concrete structure, though not a high-rise as were the dorms, instead a squat four story building with the characteristic ascending narrow windows. I no sooner entered the building via the heavy double doors at the entrance, and there was Colmes, pacing back and forth in the lobby.

“Ah Hobson, my boy! At last!”

I thought I had done very well getting there as soon as I did, and resented Colmes’s impatience. And his calling me ‘boy’ of course I resented, though could not complain since I was, after all, his student. But I should say, that I have carried such silly little resentments for many years. I try not to take his frequent annoyances to heart. They are simply the symptoms of genius, unintended, and without malice.

“So, Provost Dolittle has moved to the department of environmental studies?” I asked.

“Not at all, though she does visit the department a lot,” answered Colmes with a slight grin, more of a smirk. “But then, one can understand that, if she is continuing her devotion to the prevention of cruelty to animals.”

“Sure, but how does this knowledge point to a solution to our case? And why was it so urgent that you had to call me so early in the morning?”

“All in good time, Hobson. Follow me!”

Colmes led the way down a narrow passage to the end, knocked then entered through the heavy door. We stepped into a large room, full of rows of benches populated with many cages and glass cases, all containing various kinds of animal life. A person, presumably a lab assistant (she was wearing a white lab coat) smiled as we approached.

“Doctor Colmes,” she said extending her hand, “it’s an honor to meet you, and I hope I can help in any way I can.”

She was a small person, though seeming to have arms that were rather too long for the rest of her body. I realized that this impression was because she was stretching into a glass case in which there lay coiled up a very large snake, striped in yellow and dark brown.

“Is this what you had in mind?” she asked.

“Possibly” answered Colmes with a satisfied gleam in his eye.

“Just a minute,” I intervened, “that’s a tiger snake, isn’t it?”

“It sure is,” answered the lab assistant as she gently scooped up the snake and drew it out of the glass case. “I’m surprised that you recognized it.”

“I’m Australian,” I retorted proudly, “we’re used to lots of snakes down there.”

Colmes became a little agitated, and looked all around us. He was either annoyed that I had interrupted his mild interrogation or he was looking for something else. But I merrily continued on.

“But don’t you have any rattle snakes? This is America after all,” I said jokingly.

At this, Colmes quickly averted his penetrating gaze back to the tiger snake. The lab assistant noticed and held the snake out, now hanging loosely over her arm.

“Dr. Colmes, would you like to hold it?” she asked, smiling.

“I think not,” growled Colmes, “but you did not answer my colleague’s question.”

This intervention pleased me greatly. I must have accidentally turned the interrogation into a direction that suited Colmes.

“Rattle snakes? Oh yes, we have a bunch of them in the annex along with a lot of other native varieties.” She pointed out the window to a small wooden building that was obviously a temporary addition to the laboratory.

“And the Provost? She is satisfied that all your animals, snakes included are treated well?”

“Well of course, Dr. Colmes. We are very happy that she shows such interest and are well aware of her work with the Society. We work closely with her to make sure that all our species are well cared for. She even on occasion takes some of them home to mind, should we happen to be short staffed. And as I am sure you are well aware that in these times of austerity, we are often short staffed.”

Colmes nodded his assent and smiled just a tiny bit, the corner of his mouth twitching. Of course, the university, as are all universities, was in a perpetual state of austerity, even in the best of times. Such a condition provided ready excuses for whatever criticism might be leveled at academia from time to time.

“And that includes the snakes?” he asked casually.

“Oh yes. They are quite safe if you know how to handle them. She comes by pretty much every week and takes a few home with her, and sometimes if she is too busy I will take an animal or two to her house.”

“I see, said Colmes as he stood up straight and almost snapped his heels together. It was time for us to leave. “Come Hobson, I think our work here is done.”

“Aren’t we going to see the rattlers?” I asked in a silly schoolboy manner.

Colmes was already starting to leave as the lab assistant replied to my query. “Oh, I’m sorry, but there are none in the annex right now. They are with the Provost who is giving them special care this weekend. She feeds them a special diet. They have to be well fed or they become a little vicious and hard to handle.”

I saw Colmes hesitate, a slight misstep perhaps, but he then called out over his shoulder. “Come, Hobson. We are done here!” And repeated, “come Hobson, we must now meet with the Provost and settle

this problem once and for all.”

I hurried to catch up with him. “Are we bringing the tiger snake?” I asked again with the relish of a mischievous schoolboy.

“No need!” cried Colmes who was already at the door to leave. “Thank you for your excellent help,” he called over his shoulder to the lab assistant.

I also thanked the lab assistant, but then called out to Colmes, “Professor. Why don’t we take the snake? Might get her to talk?”

Colmes was already at the door. He stopped and turned to face me.

“Ah, Hobson. You would enjoy that, now would you not?” he smiled, “but how would it look in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, that Colmes and his assistant intentionally, with a venomous snake, scared the daylights out of the Provost, and they were both, understandably, forcibly removed from the campus never again to return?”

“Oh, I suppose so,” I answered with a snigger. This was one serious defect of Colmes, probably a symptom of his disability. He had a limited sense of humor.

“No, Hobson. We shall wait until we have all our evidence and then act,” muttered Colmes.

We left the environmental studies building and Colmes led the way down to the tunnels, under the podium, and back to his office. I followed him into his office and took up my position on the old wicker chair at the front of his desk. I was itching to hear from Colmes what had led him to the snake, what on earth it could have to do with the Provost, and of course, how it would help us rescue the School of Criminal Justice. But as usual, Colmes more or less ignored me, which meant he discounted my ADD disability, but it also meant that he had solved the problem and would let me in on his piece of deductive brilliance when he was ready. If this sounds a little sarcastic, I admit that it is. I consider Colmes a great colleague and even friend, though the idea that one would be a devoted friend of one’s professor is a little bit of a stretch. We could never be equals, not in a university setting, at least.

So now it was my usual turn to get up from my chair and walk to-and-fro in his office. In the meantime, Colmes had disappeared into one of the rooms in his apartment, Door One I called it, and I heard voices. I was about to leave and go to my own office when Colmes entered from Door Two.

“Rose is preparing morning tea for us. Would you like to stay, that is, unless you have pressing engagements elsewhere?” asked Colmes, seemingly oblivious to my fidgety condition. Of course, an affirmative answer was presumed. It was another of Colmes’s questions that did not expect an answer, or at least to which there was only one presumed answer.

“Oh, sure. I’d love to,” I quivered, embarrassed that I would now be in a position of having an equal, that is Rose, a fellow grad student, wait on me. Besides, I was hoping that Colmes would now inform me of what he planned to do to save the School of Criminal Justice from the Provost.

Rose entered carrying a large tray with embossed pewter handles, loaded with two ornate cups with saucers, a small matching plate with two scones, two small plates, a teapot covered with a tea cozy, two small dishes, and of course two tiny pots one with raspberry jam, the other with whipped cream. Colmes sat at his desk, while Rose struggled to place the contents of her tray on his desk. It was an amusing sight, one must agree. There she was stooping over the desk, trying not to spill the tea, all the time her knitting needles stuck in her thick hair bound loosely into a bun at the top, just like her mom.

“There you are, Professor Colmes, doesn’t all that look lovely?” said Rose in her Russian voice, a light accent laced with inflections of upper class English vowels.

“Thank you Rose. You are a gem, and so was your mother,” said Colmes, trying his best to sound nice and friendly. Trouble was, as I have already intimated, Colmes had trouble being friendly. He was a loner, through and through. It took me a long time to understand and accept that. We all have our own disabilities. Including Rose. Hers was her knitting, which she inherited from her mother.

But now Rose, having emptied the tray, stood back, drew the knitting needles from her hair, and tears came to her eyes. "Oh my dear mother," she cried "how will we ever survive without her?" She had also learned from Colmes. It was a question that did not expect an answer.

As for me, I just had to stand and walk around a little, until she had gone back to the kitchen through Door Two. "Thank you Rose," I whispered, not expecting that she would hear.

"Milk first?" asked Colmes with a grin.

"Whatever," I said, as Colmes poured a little milk in each cup, then poured the tea. This was a ritual with which I was well acquainted, being an Aussie and all. It was the kind of imperialism that I willingly bore. I sat on my wicker chair and looked across at Colmes as he devoured one scone with jam and cream with one huge mouthful. Nothing dainty about Colmes. This was surely Chicago style eating. Nothing English about that. But it was a good sign. I knew that once he had munched the scone and swallowed (you could see the bulge move down his neck) he would be ready to tell me what was going on.

"An excellent morning's work, Hobson, don't you think?"

"If you say so, Professor. But I don't know what the Aussie tiger snake has to do with getting the Provost to cancel the plans to do away with my former School."

"All in good time, young man," Colmes answered. That is, he once again, having taken the opportunity created by myself, put me in my place.

"Doctor Colmes," I said with a smirk, knowing how much this would get under his skin, though I could have added 'it's Doctor Colmes, right?'

Colmes sipped his tea and looked past me at the open door of his office. Naturally, I turned to see who was there. But of course, there was no one.

"Hobson, close the door, if you don't mind," he said with a serious tone.

I put my cup down on its saucer, got up to close the door, and returned quickly, now at the ready to receive his pearls of wisdom.

"When you mentioned that the Provost's dissertation was a combination of religion and environmental studies, it rang a bell. I often wonder what our unconscious mind is up to, when it seems to remember things that you do not know you have remembered until something triggers that memory. That is what happened when you mentioned religious studies."

I nodded in assent. It was the sign for him to continue.

"I suddenly remembered that she carries with her a small leather bound book, one of those that has a little ribbon that keeps one's place. Not only that. She carries it everywhere, meetings, even while giving a talk to a faculty meeting. I even saw her looking at it in the cafeteria when she was eating, even in the faculty dining room, though she kept it under her bottom on her seat."

Colmes paused. I knew not to interrupt. He gave a little cough, as if to warn me that something important was coming.

"At first I assumed that it was her daily diary, you know. These administrators have an awful lot of meetings to attend to. They need a notebook of some kind. I understand that. Especially if those people have a poor memory, not like me. I have everything stored in my head."

Colmes looked at me frowning, not expecting me to say something in agreement, but simply assuming that I already knew that. Which I did. He had what lay people call a photographic memory, a characteristic of his dyslexia, and what, in my opinion contributed to his genius. I fidgeted a little with the pencils contained in an old honey jar that sat on the corner of his desk. It annoyed him, I knew. But then he gazed seeming vacantly over my shoulder, and again I turned to see if there was anyone there, but there was not. I turned back, and saw that tweak at the corner of his mouth. He was playing with me! Though I had worked for him for some sixteen years at this point, I was not always ready for his smart-ass tricks of what could only be described as broken social graces. Still, I knew to keep my mouth shut, and in time, he would reveal

his plot or plan.

“Hobson, are you not curious at all? Do you not see where the snake fits into this puzzle?” teased Colmes.

“It’s a puzzle of your making,” I mumbled, “so I suppose you are the only one who knows its answer.” There, I had taken him on, sort of.

“Quite right, Hobson! Quite right! But mind you, it was your research that pointed the way to the solution.”

I slumped back in my chair and looked at the pencil jar. I wasn’t going to get dragged in to another “I told you so.”

Colmes again looked over my shoulder to the door, but this time I heard footsteps followed by a light knock at the door.

“Enter!” called Colmes.

I turned and saw before me the most beautiful young thing ever. No doubt a young undergraduate, oozing with the sprightliness of youth, her African American hair pulled tightly to a bunch at the top of a tall slender body, her face gleaming with life. Good God, I thought to myself, how did Colmes find her?

“Ah, Cecilia,” purred Colmes with much solicitude, “you got it.”

“Yes, Professor. It was easy. Doctor Dolittle is such a lovely person. And she didn’t mind one bit when I got up close to her. I think she likes people like me, if you see what I mean.”

Did I see Cecilia wink just a little at Colmes? I admit that I was completely overwhelmed by her presence, not to mention Colmes’s solicitude. Colmes reached out and Cecilia placed in his hand (their hands did not touch, I watched closely to see that, I can tell you) what I guessed to be the Provost’s diary.

Colmes got up from his chair and stood up straight; for a moment I thought he was going to click his heels and salute. But then he flipped through the diary as Cecilia turned to leave.

“No wait, my dear,” said Colmes, “I need only a few minutes then you can take it back and put it in her handbag and she will never know it had been on a small journey without her.”

He flipped through the pages, quickly taking in every important notation. I had known him long enough to recognize his incredible mental gift at work, he was memorizing the entire relevant contents of the book. And he even chatted as he did so.

“And how is granny, these days? Healthy and robust I hope?” asked Colmes.

“She’s great, all thanks to you, Professor. She sends her love by the way.”

I tried to catch Colmes’s eye, but no luck. His eyes were fixed squarely on the book as the pages zipped by. This was a mystery remaining just out of sight, that I would for several years hope to find the answer. Were Cecilia’s mother, or was it grandmother, and my boss once a couple? I ventured to ask myself, not game to ask Colmes of course.

“Excellent. This is exactly what I needed,” announced Colmes as he handed back the book and with a very light bow, or nod of the head, hard to say which, he thanked her again, and asked to give her mother his love.

“So you want me to sneak the diary back to the Provost?” asked Cecilia, smiling broadly, obviously enjoying her undercover work.

“Indeed. Indeed. No doubt you can do that, I have no doubt at all,” answered Colmes with a broad smile, one that I rarely saw.

“Bye, then,” grinned Cecilia, and off she trotted, even giving me a little nod as she passed me, glued as I was to my wicker chair.

I turned back to Colmes who was now leaning back in his chair, rhythmically tapping the fingers of both hands against each other.

“I think we have it,” he said with a look of satisfaction that seemed to be focused over my shoulder.

“Yes, indeed. We have.”

“The book? Or was it a diary?” I asked. I could not see what kind of book it was from where I was sitting.

“Interestingly, Hobson, it is something of both. A diary, I’d say, primarily, but it has a page from various passages of the bible —New Testament mostly,—one for every day.”

“Good Lord!” I exclaimed, grinning at my own sort of joke, “how could so much be crammed into such a small sized book? The printing must be very small, and the pages very thin.”

“Right again Hobson. Indeed. Indeed. It was a bit of a challenge for me to comprehend all those passages from the bible, lucky that my eyesight is as good as an eagle’s.”

“But, professor, what does the bible have to do with environmental studies? And the snake...” I asked, feeling so foolish that I had not been able to deduce from this meager amount of information in the way that Colmes obviously had.

Colmes appeared to take pity on me, or perhaps it was the natural expression of his superiority that could not be hidden. Either way, I was well used to it and took it simply as a defect in his character caused by the disability of his genius. He leaned forward a little in his chair, still tapping his fingers together.

“First, there was no entry for her visiting the Department of Environment Studies at any time of the day and we already know that she went there often. Second there is a series of entries for every Saturday afternoon that simply states ‘Voorheesville’ I think that might be what we are looking for.

I turned to Colmes in consternation. “Voorheesville. It’s just a little country village a few miles from here. So what? She could be visiting a relative or something.”

“Indeed, indeed. It is time we met with the Provost.

*

What I am about to tell you is based on my experience over several years working under the Provost, fair disclosure I think, and necessary because as years pass, and incidents occur that may be unrelated to the current case, nevertheless may make me vulnerable to exhibiting biases or grudges even (I don’t think I have any, but one never knows what is going on in one’s, should I say it, “unconscious” a Freudian word that is very much out of favor these days). Since I have never been ambitious in the academic sense, I have never had to undergo those awful procedures of getting a tenure track line, getting one’s position renewed or going up for tenure. It is the Provost who, as the academic head, and on the “advice” of various faculty committees and Deans, pronounces, as does a judge in a large courtroom, or an Emperor in the Colosseum, a thumbs up or down decision.

In any case, here is what I now know about her (at the time of the case I here describe I knew very little as she was quite a new addition to the faculty and administrative staff) , some of it quite strange but very interesting. First, there is her Asiatic look and composure. I say “Asiatic” because I have never been sure, and never found the right moment or person to ask, exactly where she came from. One can detect no special accent in her English, though I have heard that she speaks Chinese and possibly Japanese. But I have no personal knowledge of such. Keep in mind, though, at the time, not that long after the Vietnam war, persons of Asiatic extraction were relatively rare in the small cities and towns of the USA, especially upstate New York. For those of us whose experience with a person of Asiatic extraction was limited to the stories of Fu Manchu, or to comic books of the Korean war, of Americans fighting the “Gooks,” Asians were a mysterious bunch, who ate weird foods and too much rice.

Dr. Dolittle was, therefore, an object of curiosity to me, though in her mannerisms and physique rather entertaining. She was tiny, by my standards (I’d say about five feet), yet a solid squat body, not skinny as were all Asians supposed to be. She wore always a tightly fitting dark gray women’s suit, the top piece, as a male I would call it the “suitcoat” seemed to be too small for her, tightly buttoned giving the impression that her breasts were fighting to be released. And the shoulders of the jacket square and pointy, as though

the jacket in that respect was a little too wide at the shoulders. And then, the most unappealing part, she wore no makeup as far as I could tell. And no perfume that I could tell. In fact if I happened to get close to her which was rare, she had the faint aroma of boiled cabbage, none too enticing. Her face that was round, even broad, high cheeks of course, pushing up against her, yes, slit-like eyes by Caucasian standards, but a beautifully glistening darkish skin (not yellow as we all thought it should be), and a thin almost always tightly drawn mouth, out of which came, when she spoke, a deep and resonating voice. Again, not what one like me would have expected. All in all, this was a face and body that did not reveal to me, or anyone who was a “westerner” what she might be thinking, or reacting to whatever people or environment might be around her. I suppose, in retrospect, I am trying to say that she was kind of foreign, I hesitate to admit it, and not quite as human as we anglo-saxons.

In sum, she was someone to be reckoned with. Someone who could suddenly turn on you. Give snappy orders and commands. And when speaking in a meeting or conference or any other setting, she appeared not to look anyone in the eye. All of this taken as an indication of her ruthlessness, her lack of empathy. One might say, the perfect administrator, no doubt why she was hired as a Provost. So, given this admittedly jaundiced and cynical view I had of her, and maybe mixed with a little racism as well, I was not all that surprised that it was she who came up with the idea to demolish the School of Criminal Justice. After all, it was composed of just a little more than a dozen faculty and was founded upon the distinct policy of not offering a major in criminal justice to undergraduates. It was established and designed to be an elite graduate school.

If you are not familiar with academic institutions at all, the dozen faculty of the Criminal Justice school compares to the fifty or more faculty who inhabit the School of Education, for example, and similarly for the School of Arts and Sciences. So you can see why the School of Criminal Justice was an easy and logical target. Regardless of whether or not it was rated as number one by *U.S. News and World Report*.

But I bore you with these little details.

*

Provost Doctor Dolittle sat at her desk in a very large office, three times the size of a standard full professor’s office, and one entered it through a large anteroom that contained three desks with a secretary or assistant at each desk, each banging away on the latest Dell computer. And although the sounds of their keyboard did not match the clacking of their forebears the IBM selectric typewriter, they gave the impression that a lot of work was being done, all were very busy.

Colmes ignored them and led the way into the Provost’s office. And before she could welcome us, Colmes had already pulled up a chair for himself, and I followed suit as we sat across from her desk.

“Good morning,” spoke the Provost, laced with sarcasm. “What trouble are you bringing me today, Mr. Colmes?” The Provost delighted in calling him “Mister” rather than any of the other academic terms that recognized one’s status on the academic hierarchy. “And you, Mr. Hobson,” she said looking at me with a peremptory glance then back to Colmes, “I see that the two of you are still together.”

Colmes ignored the insinuation. Instead he pulled up a seat right beside the Provost’s desk and leaned into her, his face so close to hers one would have thought they were about to kiss.

“I will not allow you to demolish the School of Criminal Justice,” he growled. “I will not.”

“Mister Colmes. This is really quite an act. You, who has no authority or even any statutory reason to exist on this campus, deigns to tell me what to do with my faculty.”

I wanted to blurt out that we (I should say they) are not *your* faculty, but had learned that my place as a permanent graduate student was to watch only and to shut up. And the days of student protest were long past.

“I am aware of your dealings with the Department of Environmental Studies, Madam Provost,” announced Colmes as he leaned back, then stood up, raising himself to his lean six feet in height.

“And I am aware of your nosing about in faculty business,” the Provost quickly interjected. “I will be submitting a report to the President to have you marched out of this place. Besides, it is well known in academic institutions all over the United States that I am at the forefront of charitable work to rid us of animal cruelty and save endangered species. Of course I visit the Department of Environmental studies often. And I repeat, it’s none of your business. Now, get out of my office, both of you.”

I quickly and robotically stood up from my chair and turned to leave. Colmes, however, stood as erect as he could, his hands on his hips, chest pushed forward, as though he had just finished a marathon run.

“Thank you, Madam Provost. You have been most helpful. You have told me all I need to know.” He turned, slapped the top of her desk with his hand and said, “come Hobson. Our work here is done.”

I followed my leader out and more or less had to trot to keep up with him.

*

Outside the Provost’s door, the secretaries were slavishly tapping away on their Dell computers or the occasional IBM Selectric. None looked up. Colmes looked at his watch, a massive contraption that covered the entire width of his wrist.

“I have one more important stop to make. Shall we meet up in my office in, say, one hour?” he asked as he looked down his nose at me. Then irrelevantly added, “a most unpleasant person, Hobson, I’m sure you would agree.”

“Who? I asked in feigned ignorance with a grin. “I don’t mind accompanying you. It will save me having to sit in my office staring at a blank page trying to come up with a dissertation topic.”

Colmes looked away. His mind was somewhere else. And typically, my joking around simply passed over his densely populated and rational brain.

“No need,” he said, “just looking up an old friend of mine in the biochemistry department.

This was his code for “mind your own business.” I shrugged and we each went our own ways. He to the biochemistry department, in a wing of the same department of environmental studies building. Me, well, back to my dorm apartment for a badly needed nap. I was naturally, well, I think so anyway, puzzled and annoyed that Colmes would not tell me what was going on inside his head, his thoughts and trial hypotheses of what line of attack we should take to save the School. Like a dog, I was forced simply to follow him around, at his heels in fact, never truly knowing why we were going in whatever direction. And, just as dogs get into a habit of behaviors, I too habitually followed Colmes around, though unlike a dog, it was not without question. A serious side effect of this animal habit was that, when my master was not there to lead me, I found myself often walking around in a kind of daze, not necessarily going in the original direction I intended. So at this moment, I suddenly found myself, not at my dorm apartment, indeed nowhere near it, but outside my office door right next to my master’s. What other choice did I have at that moment but to sit at my desk and make another attempt at writing an outline for my dissertation proposal. I sat, pen in hand, intending to jot down ideas, but none came. It’s possible I fell asleep, but in any case, I was much relieved when I heard the bang on my office wall and the professor calling out “Hobson!”

I quickly went to his office and pulled up the wicker chair to his desk.

Colmes looked at me with a slight glimmer of a smile. “Do you still have your little Mini Minor?” he asked.

“You mean my car?” I asked foolishly. After all, what else could it be?

Colmes did not answer, but just looked at me with an expression of amusement, perhaps even derision.

“I do,” I said. “Don’t know how much gas is in it though. Haven’t used it in a couple of weeks.”

“Then please get it ready. Tomorrow afternoon we are taking a trip to Voorheesville”

“Why there?” I asked perplexed as usual.

“Hobson, young man, you are so impatient.”

“I wouldn’t be if you would just keep me informed as to what you are up to. I’m only a research

assistant, but surely I'm a bit more than that to you by now? I mean, we collaborate, I mean, I don't want to suggest that we are equals, of course that would be silly. But it's not fair that you keep me in the dark for so long. I do my best to help you, and have done so for some time now and hopefully will for long into the future..."

My voice trailed off, and I looked down, embarrassed. Colmes looked across his desk to me. I thought he was even going to put out his hand and hold mine to reassure me. But he did not. Silly of me to have thought so.

"Hobson, young man," said Colmes his grey-green eyes staring right in mine (dark brown I think). "You are irreplaceable to me. I could never manage without you. My apologies for holding back. But you also know me. I do not like to expose my thoughts until I have the entire problem solved in my head. Then I share them. And I am very close to that now."

I looked down, thankful for the apology. Then looked up again. "Why Voorheesville?" I asked meekly. "What did you find out from the Provost that I did not?"

"Ah! Hobson. There you are. At last you have realized that you missed something there. Did you not notice the necklace she was wearing?"

"Well come to think of it, I did see it. Silver, I think it was."

Colmes smiled. "Ah Hobson! Very good. And were you not surprised when I leaned forward so close to her I could have kissed her?"

"Well, yes, I did see that, I was very surprised," I answered.

Colmes continued. "The necklace held a kind of medallion that on first glance I thought was the Caduceus of the medical profession. You know? The snake curled around a staff topped with the wings of an eagle?"

I nodded. There was obviously more to come.

"Well, when I leaned forward into her to get a closer look at the necklace, I saw that it was not a Caduceus, but two snakes coiled around a human body arms spread out as though on a cross."

Colmes looked at me as though expecting me to ask what that stood for, but I just sat, my mind stuck as though covered tightly by a lid of some sort. I couldn't think of an answer. And Colmes did not continue. A tense silence had descended upon us.

This was too much for me. I could not sit in one place for long in the best of circumstances, but now this silence, I also could not take. I stood up abruptly and the wicker chair fell backwards behind me.

"But Voorheesville?" I persisted.

Colmes smiled with great satisfaction. "As soon as I saw that necklace I went back to Cecilia and asked her to check out whether the Provost has a frequent visit to any place off campus. But more important, to check out all the student clubs."

"And?" I asked, thoroughly involved.

"Seems that she goes often to the village of Voorheesville, and the repeated entries in her diary, as I now recollect say 'town meeting Vhs.' "

"So maybe she lives there," I said, unconvinced of its relevance. "But anyway, what does this have to do with her wanting to demolish the School of Criminal Justice?"

Colmes pursed his lips, his sign of impatience. And I admit, he needed to have plenty of patience, once I got attached to a line of thinking, I couldn't let go.

"She does not live there," said Colmes, almost sighing.

"And the student clubs? What could they possibly have to do with the Provost and the eradication of my School?" I persisted, now well aware that I had adopted a tone that was typical of my mentor: interrogation ad nauseam. But Colmes simply ignored me and continued with his own line of responses.

"She founded a student club called φίδι, which is Greek for 'snake'!" Colmes pushed back in his chair

and stood.

“No kidding!” I exclaimed, jumping out of my chair. “What does a snake club do and how is it relevant to our case?” I asked with a stupid grin.

Colmes returned to his chair, and leaned back tapping the tips of his fingers together, indicating that he was finished with me and that I should stop with my impudence.

“Thank you Hobson. It will be a pleasant trip to the foothills of the Helderberg mountains and we can have a classic American lunch at the Voorheesville Diner on the way.”

“I’ll get the car ready and see you tomorrow,” I said grumpily. “Let’s hope it will start,” I called out over my shoulder as a kind of parting jab.

*

I had planned at the time to rid myself of my old Morris Mini-minor. To be honest I could not justify the expense of owning and maintaining it, given that I used it so rarely. In any case, I had always preferred to walk wherever I needed to go on campus, and off campus sometimes a bicycle, weather permitting, to the shopping center for occasional items for personal use. In fact, I kept it solely for Colmes’s use (he contributed to its upkeep) for those occasions when we needed to travel to places that could not be reached easily by train or bus. Later when Uber emerged we found it much more convenient, and certainly more comfortable than two fully grown adults squeezing their bodies into such a small space.

Owning a car on campus was, quite frankly, a nuisance. One had to have a parking sticker, could only park in designated places which were always a long way from the dormitories or offices, fine when the weather was warm and the winds calm, but a version of Dante’s hell frozen over, in the depths of winter. Thanks to Colmes, though, I did have a coveted special parking permit that allowed me to park the car in many more spaces than were available to regular students. However, the cars were naturally kept outside, there being no need of an underground or covered garage since the campus grounds were extensive, having been built, so I was told, on land that was previously a golf course. The result was a campus, supposedly designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, that took up pretty much the whole area of a few square miles, most of the green of the former golf course transformed into concrete and bitumen, though dotted with many young trees planted in rows all over, and as yet too small to make much of a splash of green to compensate for the black of the parking lots. As it happened, I was later to be relieved of the nuisance of owning a car, but that is another story, indeed another case.

It was a beautiful day, late spring, when I reached my car, drove up to the podium and parked in a special parking lot. I had taken a big risk and not checked the day before that the car would actually start. Normally I would have, but I think that I was still annoyed with Colmes’s refusal to reveal to me why we were going to Voorheesville. But that’s Colmes, I know. I should be used to it, but I was not, and still am not.

I walked up the steps that led to the podium, the noise of its central fountain echoing back and forth from the huge towers of concrete dormitories at each corner of the campus that looked down from their location. In spite of everything, the warmth of a spring day caused my feelings of resentment towards my mentor to subside and by the time I reached his office were transformed into excitement and anticipation.

Colmes met me at his office door. He nodded, a slight frown on his face, then we walked quickly together down the tunnel then up the steps to the spring day that awaited us.

“Ah, Hobson!” breathed my mentor, “at last a spring day that we can enjoy, though a pity it is so late in spring.”

I wondered whether Colmes had been out of his office-come-apartment at all. His face was pale from not enough sunlight, I always thought.

We reached the car and I held open the door as Colmes struggled a little to get his rather wiry long body curled up enough to squeeze into the passenger seat. I hurried to the other side, climbed in and pressed

the starter button and to my great relief the little engine sprang to life. I drove out on to Western Avenue and we were away, on our route to Voorheesville. And once we got off the busy Western avenue into the bright green fields of small farms and deep greens of apple orchards, Colmes gave a little cough, and I knew that at last I was going to learn something of our case. Though it was not until we passed, on our way through the fringes of the little village of Voorheesville, a dilapidated old church, once bright white, now with paint peeling off, long grass and weeds growing all round it.

“Slow down a little,” directed Colmes, “after we have had our brunch, that is where we shall find the solution to our case.”

I slowed the car to a roll, a bit of a challenge with a stick shift, requiring a lot of manipulation of the clutch.

“It looks deserted to me,” I said. “Are you sure that’s it?”

“Do not doubt me, Hobson. It is indeed. According to the Provost’s diary entry, they meet in this former old Methodist church every Saturday afternoon, 1.30 pm.”

Colmes raised his hand and pointed. “Keep on going. The diner is just a few hundred yards ahead.”

I drove on and sure enough there was the diner, a small village diner, one with only a few tables, most customers sitting up at the counter. And on entering, to my surprise, Colmes was greeted by the manager-come-waiter-come-cook as an old friend.

“Hello Professor. Here on a Saturday? You want the usual?” he asked with a friendly smile.

We took up our places at the counter and were quickly served a cup of coffee each in well-worn heavy mugs.

“Yes I’ll have the usual, thanks Rudy,” said Colmes, clearly very much at home.

“Could I have the menu?” I asked timidly.

The cook slid a sticky laminated menu across the counter.

“I recommend the hash browns,” smiled Colmes.

“Is that what you’re having?” I asked, trying to read the menu quickly.

“No, I’m having my usual lunch. Coffee and an order of fries.”

“That’s it?” I asked, querulously.

“Yes. Before I lived off campus, many years ago, I rented a little house in this township and came here for breakfast every morning,” muttered Colmes, as though he did not actually want to answer me. This was quite a revelation. I had been working for him some years now, and never thought of him having a life outside the campus.

“I’ll just have bacon and eggs,” I said, trying to toss off this revelation as nothing special. I was about to ask him when that was, but the cook interrupted.

“Right you are,” called the cook. “Eggs over easy or what?”

“Oh, er, easy will do,” I said, then wished I had said hard.

“Coming right up.”

I turned to Colmes. “Now,” I said, twisting myself around at the counter so that I could look straight into his pallid face, “why are we here, exactly?”

“Now! Now! Hobson,” Colmes grinned as his order of fries came sliding across the counter. He picked one up between thumb and forefinger and gobbled it down, his mouth open trying to cool the hot morsel as he chewed it. “You remember the snake we looked at in the department of environmental studies?”

“An Aussie tiger snake,” I replied, “how could I forget that?”

“Well, I’m sure that there are other snakes involved. You remember the lab assistant said there were rattle snakes in the annex and in particular the Timber rattlesnake?”

“I don’t understand. Involved in what?” I asked impatiently.

“Come! Come! Hobson. You can do better than that! The Provost, of course!”

“You mean....”

“The necklace, Hobson. Her necklace,” pressed Colmes.

“You mean....she’s a snake collector?”

“With a snake necklace like she has, don’t you think it would be something more than a collector?” asked Colmes, impatiently. “The cross, Hobson! The cross!”

“Oh, now I see. She’s a snake worshipper. But so what? What has this to do with her wanting to demolish the School of Criminal Justice?”

“My goodness, Hobson. It must be too early in the morning for you. The cross, Hobson, The cross tells us what she is up to, or, should I say, might be up to.”

“So you’re not sure yourself?” I asked, hoping in some way to bring my mentor down to my level.

“These are deductions I have made from what flimsy evidence we have so far. But as I have repeated to you often, Hobson, I only draw final conclusions as to the solution of a case once I have collected the evidence. We do not have sufficient evidence yet. But after today, hopefully I will have the evidence that will convince the Provost that destroying the School of Criminal Justice is not a wise thing for a person in her position to do.”

Having reached a point at which I more or less knew as much about the case as did Colmes, we whiled away the time chatting with each other and the cook. I came to value this time very much, in retrospect. Away from campus, away from the confines of Colmes’s office, I felt a kind of personal freedom and one of almost true friendship with Colmes, the “true” part of it being that we were equals, perhaps not intellectually, though even there I began to feel at least his equal in many ways, that I could match him intellectually in other respects, especially when we were chatting without there being any “secret knowledge” that Colmes was holding back. From that time in the diner, I slowly came to realize that we were in fact friends, equals, respectful of the other’s desires and outlook on life. We both had our disabilities and recognized them. His disability—his genius which I certainly did not have—was nevertheless matched by my ADD disability. We were, you might say, a “perfect couple,” without the accoutrements that I am sure you have already imputed to us.

Colmes took care of the bill leaving a generous tip. We decided to leave the car at the diner, and walked the few hundred yards down the road to the old church. We could already see in the distance that there were now several cars pulled up outside the old church, including a small passenger van. I thought I could hear the sound of music or singing.

“You hear that?” asked Colmes, whose hearing was amazingly acute as was his sense of smell. In fact all of his senses were way more acute than mine, or of most people. “It is the half-chant-half singing style of the Pentecostal Charismatics sect, and if I am not mistaken, the Franciscan charismatics,” observed Colmes, his anglicized accent standing out.

By now we had reached the old church and stood out front, listening intently. The voices were many. The singing high pitched, suggesting, observed Colmes, that there were many students in there as well as adults. Notice that. He did not consider students to be adults (and I admit I more or less agree with him).

“So are we going to stay outside or what?” I asked in my impatient manner that must annoy Colmes constantly.

“Indeed not! Indeed not!” exclaimed Colmes.

He led the way down the path overgrown with weeds, to the front entrance and when we got to the door, rickety and almost falling off its hinges, he reached into his tweed jacket and pulled out a small camera. The door creaked a little when opened, but the noise of the singing and chanting drowned it out. We stared down the aisle and saw one person dancing around, seemingly shuddering and shaking, as snakes hung precariously over each of her outstretched arms. Colmes looked across at me with a knowing stare. Yes, I acknowledged, she was aping the necklace, the cross and the snakes. And further, the ‘she’ was none

other than the Provost, her dumpy little body writhing, twisting, bouncing and shaking all together, the snakes dangling, not doing much at all, and probably rattling, though if they were, the noise of the singing drowned it out. And once I took my eyes off the Provost, and scanned the congregation of some twenty or so, I observed that it was composed almost entirely of undergraduate students, more or less equally boys and girls, and in retrospect, for at the time I had taken no notice, diversities appropriately represented.

Now comes the fun part. Colmes handed his camera to me and nodded towards the Provost and whispered, take as many pictures as possible, of everyone.” Then Colmes stepped into the aisle and began—I know it’s hard to believe for such a tightly bound person as Colmes—to shake and wobble and dance in time with the Provost, gradually making his way up front. Some of the students recognized him, others did not, but were no doubt a little concerned, especially the girls, to have an aging male joining them in their, one might say, vulnerable condition, their bodies subject to the timeless gaze of the *other* (my apologies for lapsing into the current jargon of the social theorists of academia).

And there was music somewhere, a portable keyboard. I searched for its source and found it away to the side in an alcove in which many years ago there was probably an organ or piano. At the keyboard was our acquaintance from the Environmental Studies department, and in a glass case on a stand at the side of the keyboard, was the tiger snake lying in a coil, its head probing this way and that, who knows what it was looking for, or whether it was the noise that was driving it a little crazy. For a moment the pianist looked up and caught a glimpse of Colmes or maybe me, no matter. The effect of it was that she suddenly stopped playing and quickly the singing faded out, the occasional voice lingering on. And with the music gone so was the dancing.

The Provost was aghast, to say the least. I sneaked around the side to the alcove and snapped a couple of photos of the pianist and then Colmes as he approached the front, still kind of jiggling, his arms out to the side, mimicking the dancers who stood staring, dumbfounded.

Still jiggling, Colmes turned his face up to the heavens, through the old oak beams of the roof rotting away, aged and weary as they were, some even broken, and cried, “Oh Saint Francis Keeper of God’s precious animals! We offer you the venoms of our Timbers that you will know us when we meet thee!!”

The Provost, struck dumb for a brief moment, her arms outstretched to the sides, her entire body in the shape of a squat, though slightly corpulent cross, stood transfixed as Colmes danced towards her. The congregation of young students gawked and heaved great sighs of consternation, all wanting to laugh at the sight of a middle aged male dancing so ineptly, lacking grace, knees knocking each other, a wobbling eyesore, but a mockery of the deep religious joy that all had been promised by their fearless leader, the Provost. Anticipating some kind of calamity, the pianist turned back to her keyboard and began playing again, possibly a hymn that may have been ‘Onward Christian Soldiers.’

“Stop it blasphemer!” yelled the Provost, “stop the music!” as she leaped forward, waving her arms, forgetting the snakes dangling over each of them. And Colmes, fearless, kept coming. A clash of the titans was inevitable. No matter. I was busy taking photographs as directed.

Then the most horrible thing happened. In fact many horrible things happened all at once. The students bolted out of their pews, shouting at Colmes, and chanted, “kill the sinner! Kill the sinner!” And the Provost stopped momentarily crying, “No! No! No violent protesting, you know the University’s respect for our guidelines.”

Then the worst came. I had dropped the camera after being shoved by a couple of students. I leaned down to retrieve it, and to my horror saw Colmes’s head bang down on the floor right by my hand as I reached for the camera.

“Colmes!” I called. “Distinguished Professor Colmes!” I called again foolishly thinking that calling him with his full title would garner more attention or whatever. I didn’t know what I was doing. But I did snap some more pictures, and just in time to get a good shot of a rattler slithering out of the leg of Colmes’s

pants. "Colmes!" I called again.

I struggled to turn him on to his back. His eyes flickered. He tried to lift his head. "My hand!" he whispered. "Quick!"

I crawled across his body and reached for his right hand that was closed. His other hand I saw was open. I prized open his clenched hand and there fell out a small syringe. "Hurry!" called Colmes in a whisper that frightened me. "One minute left!"

I grabbed the syringe, flipped off the cap and plunged it into his neck. Why I chose his neck, I don't know. It just seemed to be the biggest bare piece of flesh available. I threw the syringe away and felt his neck for a pulse. I couldn't find it, though I probably didn't really know where to look. Then I was knocked forward and fell beside the comatose body of my mentor.

"You evil no-good-bully!" snarled the Provost who had pushed me over Colmes's body with her foot. "Perhaps now, you have at last found your proper place!"

Indeed. I thought. It seemed so. My mentor was dead! And, in my somber opinion. The Provost had killed him!

On the brink of collapse myself, I was about to cry, "someone call an ambulance." But remember, in those days, there were no mobile phones, so in order to call an ambulance someone would either have to drive to the nearest telephone box, or knock on a neighbor's door and ask them to call. I decided on the latter. I would run down to the diner. But that was easier said than done. The student worshippers were running this way and that, the responsible ones trying to find the two snakes that had by now found comfortable places in the many nooks and crannies of the old wooden church. Others, though, if they were not howling and wailing on their knees (foolish if the snakes were still around) asking for mercy or whatever else, were pushing against the Provost who remained dumbstruck, leaning over Colmes's lifeless body, her shoulders pushing against my head as I tried still to feel for Colmes's pulse.

"For Christ sake, get back!" I cried, forgetting where I was. My call was greeted by angry voices of "blasphemer!" "go to hell where you belong" and I felt the crowd pressing down even more. Now I understood why first responders always said when they arrived at the scene of some incident, "get back please, give us room to breathe!"

I had now been crouching for some five minutes and my bent legs were beginning to cramp. I twisted my body around so that I could speak directly to the Provost, whose face now was inches from mine. Her breath smelled like boiled cabbage, no mistaking it. Taking my hand off Colmes's neck I muttered, "Please, you better get an ambulance," then added, "unless you want to call the cops."

The Provost at last came to her senses and managed to stand up, elbowing her way to an upright position. She looked around her wailing worshippers, then down at Colmes. Anger boiling in me, I was about to yell, again, "for Christ sake call an ambulance," when I felt a tug on my arm, which quickly turned into a strong pull.

"Help me up," whispered Colmes, "an ambulance will not be necessary."

I looked down, and there was Colmes now sitting up. I grasped his outstretched hand with both mine and he managed to stand, a little groggy, his face haggard and pale from want of blood. His apparent return from the dead had an immediate effect on the wailing congregation. Like wind in the willows, their collected gasps of awe spread throughout the old church. The Provost now stood, her hands on her hips.

"I think I'll call the police," she said, querulously.

"That won't be necessary, Madam Provost," muttered Colmes. He squeezed my hand, a silent and rarely offered communication of friendship. In response I grinned and nodded as I looked at him expectantly.

Colmes continued. "Yes, and thanks for administering the antidote. You are wondering where I got it." He smiled just a little with smug satisfaction.

"Not only that, but why you knew ahead of time that you would need it," I said.

He smiled yet again, superior and much pleased with himself. "I will leave it to your fierce intellect to deduce that for yourself."

I stepped back. Annoyed of course. I had just saved his life and he was already treating me like some pathetic student. But then he tugged lightly on my sleeve. "You got lots of photos, I hope, especially of the snake biting me. But of everything."

"Indeed I did. All of it." I replied, though it was half a lie. I may have missed the snake biting him. It all happened so quickly.

In the meantime, the Provost had induced her congregation of students to quiet down and they sat cross-legged on the floor looking down, pondering the significance of this incredible demonstration of God's presence. Colmes approached her.

"And now a minute of silent prayer, after which we will sing a calm hymn, that we sing at the end of every meeting," announced the Provost as she looked over at the naturist-come-pianist at her keyboard, who nodded her assent.

The Provost approached Colmes warily. "So now, what is it you want, Mister Colmes?" she asked with a touch of belligerence, though nervously awaiting what she knew was to be his *coup de grâce*.

Colmes stood up as straight as he could, still a little weak at the knees. He turned first to me. "The camera, Hobson, please."

I fumbled in my pockets and finally produced it.

"The evidence is on this camera. Including my death, caused by your careless and foolish snake worshipping..."

The Provost interrupted. "We don't worship snakes, Mr. Colmes, we simply dance with them. In these troubled times, ruled by Marxist driven student protest, how else could I attract so many students to get close to Jesus Christ?"

"I need not enter into such a silly debate with you. The fact is that you almost killed me, and that you risk the lives of our students every time you meet, which I assume is every week. Your job is on the line, Madam Provost."

"What is it you want, Mister Colmes?" snarled the Provost.

"You know what I want. Leave the School of Criminal Justice alone. Cease and desist. If you do not. You will go down with it." He waved the camera in the air. "I have all the evidence I need."

The Provost's mouth, a small one at that, contorted into an awful look of a mixture of fear and disdain. For a moment I thought she was going to burst out into tears. But instead, she nodded a silent assent to Colmes, then turned to the pianist and cried in a shaky voice, "Our closing hymn, please."

The keyboard sprang to life, tuned to a sweet melodic cadence and the worshipers sang along:

"All things bright and beautiful,
all creatures great and small,
all things wise and wonderful:
the Lord God made them all."

I am not one hundred percent sure, but I would swear that I saw Colmes's lips moving, singing along with the congregation, as we quietly walked past them and out the rickety front door.