

THE CASE OF THE MOVING APO'STROPHE

Rain pounded the windows of Mercy Grammer's office. The private eye sat in his dank, tiny office surrounded by stacks of papers, books and half-eaten pastrami sandwiches. The sandwich remains were a matter of principal. Although he could never finish a whole sandwich from Goldblatt's Deli, he begrudged paying \$3.99 for a half sandwich when a whole was only a dollar more. That's the kind of guy Grammer was. Always looking for a deal, even if it wasn't in his favor. He was 42 years old, and looked every day of it. His rugged good looks were framed by unkempt black hair and a perpetual five o'clock shadow. Fashion was not a concern for Mercy.

The brown slacks hanging around his waist were a fraying sack of trouble on the road for the next big case. Yellow stains on the armpits of his loose pinstriped shirt were further evidence of his fierce determination to pursue the truth at any cost. He might have smelled like old meat and

perspiration, but his reputation for crime solving was impeccable.

It was 8:23 p.m., and Grammer was putting in another long night at the office. Of course, every night was a long night at the office now that it doubled as his home since his wife kicked

him out eight years before. Flashes of lightning shocked the pages of the *Woman's World* magazine he was reading. He found the personal stories of tragedy and triumph offered up by

readers to be helpful in his assessment of the kooky dames who frequently called him hoping he

could prove their husbands were stepping out on them. He also enjoyed the recipes. Some of his

wife's best dishes were inspired by that rag. Ah, to taste Marion's creamed corn and spam pie just

one more time.

A crash of thunder shook him from his daydream and he threw the magazine to his desk in revulsion at his weakness. Longing for lost love and a tuna-rhubarb casserole wouldn't get him any closer to the fleabag motel where Jimmy Skapinski was doing the naked pretzel with Delores Duke. He needed to take the photos for Mrs. Skapinski, but kept forgetting to buy film. "Pepto Bismol, foot spray, FILM!!" he wrote on a greasy Goldblatt's napkin. Suddenly a loud knock on the door jarred him to his feet.

"Yeah," he said impatiently.

"Mr. Grammer?" a timid, yet sultry voice replied.

Another broad looking to stick it to her cheating husband, he thought. "We're closed for the evening, ma'am. Regular shopping hours are nine to five." Such wit.

"Mr. Grammer, please!" she begged.

Mercy edged his way around his desk, squeezed past the file cabinet, and opened the door.

"Come in, sweetheart," he called. "Waddya need?"

"What's that smell?" she asked, her lip curled in disgust.

"The landlord had the place sprayed for bugs," he replied matter-of-factly.

"But it smells like bologna or--"

"Whaddya need, toots? I ain't got all night.

"My name is Louise L'Amour," she said softly.

Her platinum locks cascaded around her delicate shoulders and tickled her slinky red dress as she slid into a grimy, tom chair, She was a knockout if ever he'd seen one. Who would step out on a dame like this, Mercy wondered.

"Your husband is the one who's nuts for cheating on you, doll face," Mercy said, as suavely as possible, scooting his sagging pants onto the edge of his desk.

"Someone's trying to drive me insane," she said with a tremble in her voice.

Mercy's eyebrows raised and his pants shifted slightly. "Really?" he said nonchalantly, as he

quickly grabbed the *Woman's World* and clutched it over his lap. Looking down and seeing a

smiling dame's face and the words, 'Ten Ways To Please Your Man', he slammed the magazine back onto his desk, face down. "So, what's the story?"

"I'm a writer, Mr. Grammer. Someone keeps breaking into my files and changing the punctuation in my writing to make it incorrect. I edit and edit, and the next day, grammar atrocities reappear in my work. It drives me insane!"

"Intriguing, Mercy said, gazing at her ample, quaking bosom.

"I came to you because I heard you're the best in the business. Also because you are a tired cliché, and being a trite, transparent character myself, I thought we'd work perfectly together."

"Indeed," he replied, flicking his cigarette to the floor and twisting the ball of his foot into it.

"Tell me more about it while I take a swig from this fifth of bourbon that I keep in the bottom drawer of my desk. Would you care for a hit?"

"No, thanks. There's not much else to tell. I work all day on a story, making corrections as I see them, then I go back and edit the piece at the end. I put it away in my file cabinet, lock the drawer, and when I return to it the following day, it's riddled with errors. There is no way I could miss all those mistakes. What's even more disturbing is that errors appear that I would never make. Errors I can barely bring myself to describe." She paused for a moment and rubbed her brow with beautifully manicured fingertips. "It's, it's..."

"Easy there, toots. Take your time," Mercy whispered assuringly as he chewed on a toothpick.

"It's the apostrophes!" she blurted, and hunched over, sobbing dramatically.

Mercy watched, hypnotized, as her delicious bazoombas rose and fell spasmodically.

Those were some sweet, sweet melons. "Yeah?" he muttered distractedly.

"Apostrophes disappear from possessives and contractions, then reappear...Oh God, I can barely say it," she sobbed. "They reappear on plurals!"

"God, no!" Mercy gasped, shocked out of his ogling by the horror of such a revelation.

"It's a crime worse than murder, in my opinion. It's the slow, painful killing of the English language."

"It's a sign of the times, Mr. Grammer. It speaks volumes about our education system," Louise said indignantly. "I see these mistakes everywhere. On signs, on menus..."

"I know, honey, I know. If I see the phrase 'Hamburger's on Monday's' at one more

diner, I think I'll go ballistic."

"So will you help me, Mr. Grammer? Will you make this torture end?" She gazed into his eyes hopefully.

"I'd do anything for a dame built like you, but this punctuation crime...I'm doing it for me. And I'm doing it for the good ol' U.S. of A."

"Thank you, Mr. Grammer! Thank you so much!"

The following night, around 11 o'clock, Mercy found himself on the doorstep of Miss

L' Amour. She lived in a detached bungalow on the north side of Hollywood. She was a writer,

alright. This part of town was crawling with them. Like most in her line of work, she wrote at home,

making an office out of a spare bedroom.

"Come in, Mr. Grammer," Louise said coyly as she opened the front door.

A persian runner carpet led Mercy over her dark wood floors into the living room.

Candlelight

danced in every corner of the room. Plants hung from the ceiling and wound their firm, thick

leaves seductively around the bare window frames. A red velvet couch, flanked by two white

velvet chairs, invited Mercy's drooping, thin pants to nestle into its soft, plush cushions.

"Bourbon?" she asked, holding the neck of the small bottle daintily between her thumb and index finger, swinging it playfully.

"Please," said Mercy eagerly. He was going to need it.

"Do you smell something?" asked Louise, "Like pickles or--"

"I hit a skunk on the way over," Mercy said quickly.

"I don't think that's it. It's more like..." she began sniffing vigorously, seeking

the odor.

"What's your schedule like," Mercy asked, hoping to distract her.

"I usually go to bed around midnight," she said, handing him a glass.

"I think you should stick to your normal routine so as not to arouse any suspicions in our friend," said Mercy. "You know, if you need to take a shower or get into your nightie..." his voice cracked and trailed off. He cleared his throat and began again with conviction, "When you're ready, we can hide in the office and wait for the dirty rat."

"Sure thing, Mr. Grammer. Let me slip into something more comfortable."

Mercy gulped the rest of his bourbon and sat nervously on the edge of the couch. 'Okey dokey!' he tittered.

A few minutes later, Louise emerged from the bedroom. Mercy couldn't believe his eyes. She'd made herself comfortable, alright. She stood in the hall wearing a pink, furry rabbit costume.

"I find the idea of being a bunny very soothing," she said plainly. "I can take the headpiece off, if you prefer."

"Oh, er, whatever works for you," said a shaken and confused Mercy.

"I'll take it off. It gets really hot." She lifted the goofy bunny head from her shoulders to reveal the same stunning face, although it suddenly seemed slightly less attractive to Mercy.

They walked into the dark office and crouched behind a large oak desk. They barely talked for nearly four hours. Louise meticulously picked and stroked the fur on her suit, quietly humming "Little Rabbit Foo Foo". Mercy tried to ignore her. Suddenly, a creak came from the window.

"Sssshhh!" warned Mercy. "Someone's coming!"

In the darkness, Louise and Mercy could see a dark figure dressed in black and wearing a cape.

"What the... ?" Louise whispered confoundedly. Mercy pressed his hand against her soft, warm lips.

"Quiet," he whispered.

The intruder turned on the flashlight he carried and inserted a key into the file cabinet lock. He opened it with quiet deliberation and pulled out a stack of papers.

"Whered he get the key's?" Louise pondered aloud.

"What?;" asked Mercy incredulously. "Your making no sense!..."

"Your not! either;"

"What's going on?; W ere talking like a couple of crazy's!"

"You're punctuation is all whacked out! Its torture to hear these word's!"

"It's happening to both of us! What kind of power's doe's this guy have over us?" Mercy yelled as he leapt from behind the desk and turned on the light.

"Freddy!" Louise gasped in astonishment.

"That's right; Louise!;" said the slight little man in black, "Freddy! from college!"

"Community college," Louise interjected.

"So we meet again, sweetcake's" he said smarmily.

"What's with the cape: and the drawn on mustache?" she asked, " And what the hell is happening to our punctuation: Were practically unable to communicate?."

"Im fixing you'r punctuation for you: you fool! And the cape makes me seem more sinister, no?"

"Your a freak; Freddy. Now quit messing with my punctuation? Your driving me crazy;?!;!!...;?!"

"Alright, alright. Just had to get that last one in," he acquiesced.

"You two know each other?" asked Mercy.

"Yes," said Louise. "We took a writing class together years ago. Our class published a collection of our stories entitled the *Erudite Parasol*. Freddy was the editor, but he did such a terrible job, I had to replace him at the last minute."

"How does he have a key to your file cabinet?" asked Mercy.

"The school was getting rid of the cabinets, so I took them. As editors, we both given the keys," replied Louise. She turned to Freddy. "So you've been trying to get back at me by messing with my punctuation, is that it?"

"But my punctuation is fine! You're wrong!"

"Actually Freddy," said Mercy confidently, "you're wrong. It's all right here." He tossed a book entitled *Basic Grammar* onto the oak desk. "Let's go over what you should have learned in third grade, buddy!"

"I'm telling you, Mr. Grammer, it speaks volumes about our education system," said Louise passionately.

"You're telling me, doll face," he responded. "Alright buddy," he turned to Freddy, "correct these sentences."

The three of them huddled around the book and read the following exercise:

Placing apostrophe's on plural's, while eliminating them from contraction's and possessive's is a common error committed by moron's. It speak's volume's about our education system.

"Fix it!" screamed Louise. "Hurry! It hurts!"

Freddy grabbed the book and hunched over in the corner of the room. "Give me a minute, OK?" he asked sheepishly.

Twenty minutes later, he slowly returned to the desk. "I think I've got it," he said cautiously. He handed Louise a sheet of paper which read:

Placing apostrophes on plurals, while eliminating them from contractions and possessives is a common error committed by morons. It speaks volumes about our education system.

"Perfect!" cried Louise with delight. "Now don't you feel better?"

"Yes, I do. I finally understand how to use an apostrophe. It's so simple. If you take two words like 'do' and 'not' and you stick them together as one word, you indicate the missing letter,

in this case, 'o', with an apostrophe, forming the word 'don't'. If you make a noun possessive,

you add an apostrophe and 's' to the noun. For example, a bunny suit belonging to Louise becomes Louise's bunny suit. The tail of the suit becomes the suit's tail. The stains on your friend's shirt become--what's his name?"

"Mercy Grammer," said Mercy.

--become Mr. Grammer's pit stains. And finally, when there is more than one of something, you simply add an 's' or an 'es' to the noun, depending on the spelling of the word. One shoe or two shoes. One cat or two cats. One Budweiser or two Budweisers. The rules apply to proper nouns, too.

"Congratulations," Louise beamed. "I hope this will bring an end to your break-ins!"

"I'm on the right path now, thanks to you guys," smiled Freddy.

"Thank you, Mr. Grammer! I knew you'd come through for me!" gushed Louise,

"The pleasure was all mine, toots," replied Mercy proudly.

The three shared a group hug and decided to go to the all-night diner for pancakes and coffee.

"Maybe we can discuss starting a *new* project together, now that I'm educated!" Freddy said eagerly to Louise.

"Maybe we can!" she replied, smiling widely.

"And maybe I can share some more bourbon with you later on," Mercy said, raising an eyebrow at Louise and smiling devilishly.

"Probably not," she replied curtly.

Freddy in his villain cape, Mercy in his filthy, baggy clothes, and Louise in her bunny suit between them, joined hands and strolled toward the diner.

"Hey, I've been meaning to ask," said Freddy as they entered the restaurant, "do you guys smell something?"

"No!" Louise and Mercy said in unison, flashing each other a knowing smile.

Mercy paused in the doorway of the diner to admire the sunrise over the City of Angels.

This is going to be a great day, he thought. Then he turned his gaze to the chalkboard at the entrance and read:

Monday's: Chili and Burger's Night!

Friday's happy Hour: Budweiser's are half price!!

ask your Server for today's Special's!