

Special Delivery

By Carlos E. Bravo

The door bell rang while Charlie was in the shower that morning. He faintly heard the electronic tones, one of those that play a tune that the user pre-selects. Charlie thought it was original to set it to play the “Mission Impossible” theme.

“Louise! can you get the door please” he screamed to his live-in fiancée.

He didn’t hear a response and, while shampooing his hair, he wondered who in the world would be at his door this morning. He didn’t recall having scheduled any repairmen and only a handful of his friends knew where he lived and no one he knew would come before calling on the phone.

He quickly toweled off the water from his body but his morning routine must not be interrupted. “Louise can attend to the door, and if it’s important she’ll call me” he thought to himself.

Charlie had an unwritten routine checklist of activities that must be completed every morning, the sequence of which could not be interrupted. Perhaps it was superstition or simply a result of his former military training and discipline in executing tasks in order, but whatever it was, it helped him prepare for the day. Every day for as long as he can remember once he wakes up, he would get the paper, sit down for breakfast while scanning the latest news and sharing them with Louise. He always called the news the “bad news” as, he argued, good news rarely make it to the paper. “People only want to read the bad stuff, the corruption of public officials, how the latest corporate crooks had been caught, and the latest crime wave afflicting Daytona Beach” he often said.

After breakfast came bathroom duty and a shower followed by shaving, tooth brushing and combing his salt and pepper hair. His bathroom was meticulously arranged, towels

neatly folded, toothbrush, shaver and other items placed in complete harmony and logical sequence.

Louise had her own bathroom next to his. The large country estate home had one of those “his and hers” bathrooms and that was one of the key features that sold him on the home. Louise’s side was impeccable and looked as if it was staged for a model home showing. Charlie often kidded that Louise was in a competition with him as to who was the neatest and most organized.

Charlie opened the front door and there it was. A large cardboard box with “UPS Special Delivery” scribbled neatly with a marker along with his name and address: Charles E. Adams, Adams Manor, Route 2, Daytona Beach, FL. The box was large and heavy. “At least a hundred pounds” he thought while trying to lift a side and wondering if Louise had ordered another of her surprises for him. His birthday was coming up next week and she had a tradition every year to regale him with far out gifts, yet things he had wanted but had one way or another refused to purchase. He always appreciated her perceptiveness in knowing what he needed which lovingly reminded him of how in tune their two lives had become.

One time it was a trials bike. Trials is a very popular European motorcycle sport but in the US it has not had the same following as say, motocross or freestyle. The object of motorcycle trials is to get the bike through an obstacle course without putting the feet down. Nothing displays motorcycle skills like trials riding. Trials blends the motorcycle and rider into a single unit that turns, climbs, jumps and stands still in some of the most awe inspiring riding over seemingly impassable terrain. Charlie used to be a pretty good trials rider during his youth and for the latter parts of his life he always had wanted to get back into the saddle.

Charlie wondered what could be in the box. He managed to get it into the house and after opening the top flaps with a box cutter he finds a wooden inner box. The inner box is cool to the touch and seems to be made out of unfinished pine, the same as standard shipping crates.

He went to his shop to retrieve a pry bar. The box lid had quite a few nails “must be to keep something that really wants to jump out”, he joked, frustrated at the silliness of so many nails.

Once opened all he saw inside was Styrofoam with smoke escaping through the gaps. It was the same cool smoke he had seen at countless “haunted mansion” rides in Halloween fairs and beach ice cream vendors “Dry ice”, he thought while removing the top foam layer.

Charlie instinctively jumped back and let a loud scream when he saw the contents. There in the box was what seemed to be the body of a woman neatly packed inside a plastic bag completely surrounded with chunks of dry ice. The eerie sight of the pale white skin showing through the clear plastic, fogged by the humid air colliding with its cold surface, and the whitish cool smoke brought him memories of a mystery movie. This was no movie, however, he told himself. “This is some morbid joke”.

Nervously, he cut open the plastic bag and saw more clearly. Indeed it was unmistakable, this was a real person. A very attractive woman; “Early 20’s”, he guessed. He touched the body as if to check for a reaction, a hint of life, something he already knew had escaped the body. “Not stiff, not frozen, just very cold”.

The woman had a Hawaiian shirt and matching skirt. Colorful costume jewelry adorned her neck and wrists, and sandals with a rubber sole on her feet matched a handbag clutched by her hands. Three red dots adorning her chest, coagulated blood marking orifices that betrayed the reason for her death. Still shaken, he looked more carefully. Her face didn’t show any expression in particular, no anger or surprise, just large eyes staring into space, not unlike a manikin in a high fashion store. On the shirt’s pocket he saw the corner of a piece of paper. He pulled the paper and unfolded it.

What he read sent chills through his spine. He sat on the floor, dizzy and feeling the blood draining from his head, he read:

DO NOT CALL THE POLICE
YOUR GUN FIRED THE FATAL SHOTS

DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR GUN IS?

I AM WATCHING YOU

He stared at the note as if in a deep trance, unable to move. His head spinning, he felt hot, momentarily lost in the significance of the words he just read.

Louise’s scream broke him out of his stupor. He showed her the note without saying a word. “What are we gonna do?” she said, crying. “You MUST call the police!”

“Let’s think about this first” he said

“Who is she?” Louise asked

“I don’t know! damn it!” “This must be someone’s idea of a cruel joke or a very thought-out murder by a professional”

“How do we know what it says it’s true, that your gun fired the shots?”

“I misplaced a gun sometime ago...” He had many guns and remembered looking for his 9mm Beretta and not finding it. He used to store it inside his gun safe but it wasn’t there. He had assumed that it would turn up either in his car or in a drawer or cabinet somewhere in the house. He was often absentminded and misplaced keys, wallets and other items only to find them a few days later laying somewhere, so the gun’s disappearance did not worry him; Until now.

“So... it could be any other gun”

“I have a bad feeling, honey. Whoever wrote the note obviously knows my gun was missing... perhaps it was stolen, and now, after I have a freaking body delivered to me with a note saying it was my gun’s... Am I going to report my gun stolen?”

“How would it look?” he asked her as if she didn’t catch the conundrum he found himself in

“You are right... we need to think about this...”

“Let’s put her in the garage freezer for now...” Charlie decided

The chest was a large, commercial-type freezer that Charlie had bought some time ago to store excess food, mostly meats and frozen dinners that he would purchase in quantities taking advantage of special deals at Sam’s Warehouse. He removed a few boxed dinners and some bundles of meat and transferred them to the kitchen refrigerator.

He carefully lifted the body out of the box and carried it on his back towards the garage. The petite body felt slight, he thought. He carefully placed it inside the freezer, sitting her in a corner with the legs bent. He placed the hands on her abdomen and was surprised at how limber the body was. It was not frozen and rigor mortis had already set in and left. He tried to avoid the gaze from the open eyes while arranging the body in the freezer. He had tried to close them but they would refuse as if she wanted to watch him; it gave him a chill.

“How was it?” Louise asked him

“Alright I guess; I had to bend her legs and push her a bit here and there to fit inside but she freaks me out, I felt as if I was being watched”

That night they fretted over what to do. Neither of them could sleep and after staring at the TV through several shows saw the sun rise through the bedroom window. The next few days Charlie tried to forget the episode altogether and labored to maintain his normal routine. “It was a mechanism of self-protection by his sub-conscious mind,” a fact he recalled from his psychology classes at the Naval Academy. He was going through the phase psychologists called “denial” typical of post-traumatic stress syndrome, he thought. Soon he’ll be able to make a plan to dispose of the body. The following days, he and Louise carefully scanned the papers for any news of missing persons and were relieved when there was no one matching the dead lady’s description. It somewhat eased the urgency to handle the problem at hand.

Charlie hugged Louise, who was sobbing. “I love you so much my darling”, he told her. “We’ll come out of this one together, don’t worry, just need time to sort things out”

He remembered when he first saw Louise; she was the pretty cashier at the local Publix supermarket. He immediately knew her name from the white and green tag pinned on her blouse: “Louise”. After that, he used to make sure he picked her line every time he went there. She made him nervous and shy, her near perfect complexion was fit for a model, he thought. Many times he tried to ask her out but could not, his heart just seem to stop when she looked at him with those pretty blue eyes that captivated him. A mere “Thank you, sir” or “Have a nice day” from that Goddess’ lips were enough to cause him to blush and trigger daydreams. For months he knew she was the woman for him.

Years later, here they were, they had made a very happy life together with incredible compatibility. He often mentioned: “We are made for each other; I am the luckiest guy in the world!”

The stress of knowing what’s stored in the garage was taking a toll. They had lived a fairly private existence but now, every ring of the telephone, every car driving by the front road was a reason for alarm. He could not take the words of the note away from his mind, “I am watching you”. He procrastinated on taking any action in disposing the body. It had now been three weeks since the fateful box was delivered to their front door, and despite Louise’s insistence he refused to bury the body in the property. “Someone might see us, darling and that would be the end. We must be so careful. Besides, sooner or later someone might find it, be it now or sometime in the future; It cannot be buried here...”

“Let’s take it in the car and dump it in the swamp” Louise implored

“Sweetheart, if my gun really fired those shots... Someone out there did this and they can connect me as the note says – you read it yourself. I am not thinking straight and am

afraid if we act too hastily we are bound to make a mistake, a mistake that cannot be reversed...”

“I understand, but I hate the fact that our quiet life has been invaded, something... somebody is in our garage and we don’t seem to be able to do anything about it.” Louise begged.

“Tell you what... By now I don’t think anyone is looking for her... She’s OK in the freezer, and for as long as we don’t let anyone in the garage, we’ll be alright... I just need some time to think.”

“How long?” she asked

“Soon, darling, soon. We’ll think of something. The key is not to act emotionally, that is how things fall apart...”

Charlie thought that perhaps they should go on a trip; it might take some of the stress off and help them decide on what to do. A few days away from the house should help.

He had owned a sailboat for several years; an avid sailor during his young years in Annapolis he never missed a chance to test his mettle with the ocean. When he moved to Florida he brought his prized Swan with him. His “boat” as he used to call it was more of a luxury yacht. A Swan 47 with impeccable finish and luxury accommodations for seven was considered by many the ultimate sailing yacht for single-handed sailing. Its cleverly designed rigging layout required no additional crew and the whole ship could be operated by a single experienced sailor.

“Let’s take the boat for a few days; it will help clear our minds... We could go down to Palm Beach and perhaps cross to the Bahamas. Remember the wonderful time we spent in Peanut Island last year?” he said hoping to convince her.

“Yeah, that was nice...” she smiled

“OK, done. Don’t worry... be happy mon...” he said in a mock Jamaican accent, getting her to smile again.

“It’s nice to be back on the boat” she eagerly said while watching Charlie load the supplies.

“Yeah...” deep in thought, he could not help worry “What if someone breaks into the house? What else does this bastard know about me, Does he know we are here?...” his head spinning through different plots and possibilities.

“If only I could find the damned gun...” he mumbled, knowing full well that the problem at hand was more complicated than just finding his gun.

“What?” she asked

“Nothing honey, just thinking out loud...”

They left Ponce Inlet right before noon. “In the open ocean at last! Damn, I miss this” he said.

While he was busy setting the sails, a low pressure system located less than a thousand miles southeast was bringing heavy rains over the Dominican Republic. The system was turning into a Tropical Depression, helped by the summer heat and humidity. The National Weather Service had not issued any warnings yet but was closely watching its development.

The day was spectacular, clear skies and the bright sun gave a magical sparkle to the blue ocean. “Look... Dolphins!” Louise cried

He set the sails to take full advantage of the wind. The puffed-up Genoa was a powerful driver combined with a finely tuned Main Sail. Charlie prided himself in taking the last fraction of a knot out of the wind; seemingly unimportant minute adjustments to the sheets and travelers added another quarter knot to the boat. They were doing 8 knots, a respectable speed, he mused.

Charlie estimated that they would be at the Lake Worth Inlet in another 20 hours or so, he explained Louise that they would take turns at the wheel, but that he would set up the autopilot for her while taking three-hour long naps in the cockpit. “If you see anything out of the ordinary, just wake me”, he told her.

The trip was uneventful and soon they were negotiating Lake Worth Inlet, the gateway to Palm Beach. Lake Worth was actually a fresh water lake until Henry Flagler opened it to the ocean in the early 1900’s and it later became part of the Intracoastal Waterway system.

They anchored in the clear waters of Peanut Island with a view of the Inlet and the large vessel traffic. The 86-acre island is a longtime local favorite. Charlie had the opportunity to visit it back many years ago when it housed a Coast Guard station. Years later, following a massive redevelopment project, the island was better than ever. There were

small docks, campgrounds, picnic spots, a brick footpath around the island, bathroom and shower facilities, swimming beaches, a snorkeling area, and even a museum and a former presidential nuclear fallout shelter from the Kennedy era.

Although Peanut Island appears to be a well-forested natural island, it is in fact a manmade pile of dredged sand from the inland waterway created over the past 80 years. It got its name from a peanut factory that at one time was to be built there. They spent a few days anchored there enjoying the sights and exploring the island.

While they were enjoying their romantic getaway, the storm was given a name by the NWS, “Tropical Storm Betty” and the first of several warnings were issued for the North East coast of Florida. Charlie had maintained a close watch for the developments of the storm and, he figured, it would hit land several hundred miles north of them, it would not affect the Palm Beach area much, but it would be wise not to head back north for a few days until it dissipated.

**BULLETIN - IMMEDIATE BROADCAST REQUESTED
SPECIAL MARINE WARNING
NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE MELBOURNE FL
422 PM EDT**

THE NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE IN MELBOURNE HAS ISSUED A SPECIAL MARINE WARNING FOR THE COASTAL WATERS FROM FLAGLER BEACH TO DAYTONA BEACH OUT TO 20 NM. UNTIL 915 PM EDT

AT 417 PM EDT...NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE DOPPLER RADAR INDICATED A THUNDERSTORM...PRODUCING STRONG WINDS OVER 45 KNOTS 10 MILES SOUTHWEST OF FLAGLER BEACH...OR ABOUT 8 MILES WEST OF ORMOND-BY-THE-SEA. THIS STRONG THUNDERSTORM WAS MOVING NORTHEAST AT 10 MPH.

THESE THUNDERSTORMS WILL LIKELY PRODUCE WINDS OVER 45 KNOTS AND LOCALLY ROUGH SEAS. SMALL CRAFT...ESPECIALLY THOSE UNDER SAIL SHOULD MOVE TO A SAFE HARBOR IF POSSIBLE.

He heard the report several times later that afternoon on the weather band. The areas affected were 200 miles north of them but the forecast for the Bahamas looked good, though, and they decided to make a go to West End. “It’s only a 10-hour sail, at most. We’ll clear customs in West End and sail towards Great Sale Key for a few days of diving and frolicking...” he told her, smiling.

Charlie woke up early the next morning, tenderly kissed Louise on the forehead and went on deck. He lifted anchor before dawn and by the time she popped her head through the companionway the boat was already well under way. “Good Morning sleepy head...” he said.

The tail of the storm brought strong winds which combined with the Gulf Stream current gave the boat an exciting ride. The 8-foot swells with occasional breakers were exhilarating to Charlie. The boat would slow to a crawl while climbing a mountain of water and then surf down the other side with a burst of speed. Charlie watched Louise sitting in the bow seat laughing and giggling to no end. Then she stood up, to Charlie’s immediate consternation. He screamed “Stay down!”, but she could not hear and seemed totally unconcerned. She spread her arms like Rose Dewitt in the movie Titanic and stared at the ocean ahead. A moment later, she turned to see him, smiling as a child showing a newly learned skill to her parents “look at me Daddy...”

“Watch Out!” the words came out too late. She fell backwards when the boat hit a rogue breaker that Charlie saw only a second before. He immediately turned into the wind to douse the sails and pressed the Man Overboard button in his GPS to track his position. His movements were robotic and efficient, testament to his training. In a few minutes, the sails were down and the engine was on. Charlie knew that the first 15 minutes were the most important in rescuing a fallen crew member.

The storm hit land exactly where Charlie predicted, bringing heavy rains to a wide area and toppling a few trees, but nothing major. Power to several Counties was lost as usually happens in Florida after any major storm, but was quickly restored a few hours later. When the power was restored to Adams Manor, a single 20-year-old breaker, A General Electric 30-amp model that can be replaced for nine dollars at the local Home Depot decided to retire from service. It tripped after feeling an undesired surge of electric demand. The circuit of this little device was connected to a wall outlet in the Garage which until then provided a flow of electrons giving life to a chest freezer as it had for many years.

The Coast Guard helicopter found the sail boat within 30 minutes of Charlie’s frantic call on channel 16, “May Day... May Day... Crew Overboard... sailing vessel Kahuna, Position Two-Six degrees Three-Six point Five-Eight North, Zero Seven Nine degrees Three-Six point Niner-Eight West...” A rescue diver was lowered from the helicopter to help Charlie and coordinate the search from the boat. Charlie’s adrenalin rush which had

enabled him to quickly act in the initial search for Louise was now draining away, a cold fear replacing it as his mind started facing the inevitable. The sunshine of his life was gone, swallowed by the unforgiving ocean.

The next few days were a foggy haze to Charlie; he participated every minute of the search, which was officially called off after four days. After the search was called off, he chartered a fishing vessel to continue searching for her. The fruitless search lasted several more days before even Charlie gave up. She was gone and there was nothing else he could do about it.

Several days later he arranged for his sail boat to be ferried home by a Captain. He had no desire to be near the boat. He rented a car and drove home.

A week after the storm, Floyd Becker, employee of “Green Prairie Lawn Service” was finishing picking up tree branches and other debris from the Adams estate. While walking past the garage door, an overwhelming smell burned through his nostrils. “A dead squirrel? perhaps a possum?” came to his mind. He looked around for any signs of dead little creatures but soon realized the smell came from inside. “Oh... Mr Adams will be really upset if he comes back and finds some critter had crawled in and died in his garage.” He tried looking through the windows and all he saw was a yellowish clear fluid oozing out of the bottom of a white chest freezer.

Floyd thought about calling a neighbor but remembered how private Mr. Adams was; he would never have allowed anyone the keys to his home. Yet, he felt it was his responsibility to do something; “Poor Mr. Adams has been absent for over a week...” Floyd hated the thought of him coming home to this stench. “I’ll pry open the window and clean-up... Mr. Adams would certainly appreciate the effort”.

The window was surprisingly easy to open with a screwdriver. Floyd lifted it and the smell hit him with an overpowering punch. He crawled in and immediately opened the large garage door. “The smell seems to come from this puddle here...” he said to himself after looking inside, more clearly now, that the sunlight had invaded the room. He touched the yellowish liquid and when he brought his finger up to his nose he gagged, almost threw up right there. He ran outside for fresh air. When he came back, he saw the chest freezer again and realized the power must have gone off and the food was rotten.

He puked right after opening the freezer.

When Charlie drove up the Adams Manor driveway the first thing he saw was the yellow police lines around his home. Several police vehicles were crowding the driveway and he could see at least 20 people walking around the grounds. Some looked up and pointed at him, he could not hear what they were saying.

“Oh, well...” he said, too distraught to even care. His life was already over when the keeper of his heart sank in the blue ocean.

EPILOGUE

A week later...

Sheriff Gonzales made the announcement to the press in a special gathering arranged haphazardly on the Adams Manor lawn: "I have an announcement to make", he indicated.

"We have positively identified the body of the lady found in Mr. Adam's home"
"The lady had been dead for quite some time; The Volusia County Coroner estimated at least four years..."

"Four years! didn't the body look as if she had died only a few days ago?" a reporter asked

"All indications point that the body had been stored in a chest freezer all this time"

"Her name was Louise Melchor, a former cashier clerk at Publix. She had disappeared while on a honeymoon trip to Mexico along with her newlywed husband, Mr. Anthony Guzman, her high school sweetheart"

"Have you found Mr Guzman's body as well?" Asked one of the reporters

"No, we have reopened the Guzman case. The Mexican government had conducted an investigation at the time, four years ago, and their findings had been accepted by the families. Those findings are now being questioned as it seems the newlyweds never set foot in Mexico."

"But the couple was declared kidnapped and murdered right before registering in their hotel in Puerto Vallarta, how does that fit?" the reporter asked

"The bodies were never found as you know. We are looking into the Mexican government's official that closed the case. It seems that after retiring from his position, he moved to a waterfront estate purchased by a Trust controlled by Mr. Adams and there might have been some items overlooked in their investigation"

"How did Ms. Melchor die?" another reporter asked

"Ms. Melchor had been shot several times and we found a weapon in her body. The gun was a 9mm Beretta registered to Mr. Adams. Ballistics tests confirm this was the murder weapon"

"IN her body?"

"It had been sewn inside, right next to her stomach." "We found it during the autopsy"

“That is all I have for you, further announcements will be made as they are released for publication. Thank You”

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Carlos E. Bravo is a Private Investor after semi-retirement from a career in high tech starting, growing and merging several businesses. He is an avid sailor and flies WWII aircraft in his spare time.

