

Hartley's Friends

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Not content to dabble in real estate, Hartley Pigeon wanted to make a stab, to drive someone out, to take over an entire block of downtown property for himself. Just having more money than anyone else in town was no longer enough. Hartley wanted to own the better part of downtown. No one could stand in his way. It didn't matter what had to be done, who had to be destroyed, or how many payoffs had to be made. Hartley Pigeon wanted his name on the largest building in town, and he didn't care who he had to hurt to get it. Hartley should have dabbled.

Now he was dead, and the whole town knew who did it, yet nobody bothered to tell. Nobody came forward. Nobody offered a theory. Everyone talked about Hartley and his shady business deals, but none of them ventured a word about how he died. The secret was secure.

"'Good riddance', the tombstone ought to read!" said Art Bradshaw the baldheaded barber in Tom Hayes' shop. "That scoundrel would cheat his own mother if there was a three-dollar profit for him."

"I don't know," offered Parker Boggs waiting to get a shave. "He was really a pretty good sort, if you're fond of unscrupulous real estate dealers."

"Right!", Tom Hayes raised his voice so everyone in the shop could hear him plainly. "And I'm the pope," he said waving his barber's scissors in Parker's face for effect.

Everyone laughed, and the conversation turned to baseball.

Not since Nathan Sorensen took his own life in 1957 had the little town seen such a stir. Nathan lost his home because of Hartley Pigeon. Nathan built the house for himself and his wife Sheila after the War. When the plant closed putting Nathan out of work, Hartley offered to loan the couple money in exchange for a mortgage on the home. Without steady work and no pension to fall back on, however, Nathan was unable to make payments on time. Hartley foreclosed, and the couple moved to a one-bedroom apartment on Elmhurst. Sheila soon left. Nathan gave up. He was 56.

Hartley Pigeon was clearly murdered. The body was chopped into hundreds of small pieces and buried in his own backyard. He was clearly murdered, but the town didn't seem to care. They noticed, alright. They just didn't care. They talked about it for weeks. They talked about it at church. They talked about it on the job. They talked about it at little league ballgames on weekends, across the table at dinner, and at breakfast over coffee. They were glad he was gone. No matter how the tombstone read, "Good riddance!" was on everyone's mind.

After a few months, however, the story got old and interest turned stale. Hartley's murder was no longer news, no longer important. It wasn't long before people just stopped talking about it. Life goes on. Everyone agreed it was a good thing.

There was no investigation. No public inquisition or grand jury. The local State Attorney actually put it on the books as suicide, and Sheriff Wales signed off in agreement to make the formal record complete. The townsfolk, aware of the serious trouble that would follow them if they leaked the truth, agreed not to talk with anyone who didn't live in Keepsville (Pop. 3,835).

“One less meddler, if you ask me,” Tom Hayes said. “He never did anything but bilk people out of their money. He had it coming. I’m surprised he didn’t get it sooner. Why, I thought about killing him a time or two myself!”

Saying that, of course, was like commenting on the weather. Everyone knew Hartley had it coming. Everyone knew it was just a matter of time.

Widow Hawkins was homeless as a result of one of Hartley’s deals. He took her home by offering to refinance without telling the old woman of the balloon payment required by the small-print and, as everyone knows, only wealthy widows are prepared to meet balloon payments. Widow Hawkins was anything but wealthy, and Hartley knew it. When she couldn’t scrape together the cash he demanded when the balloon came due, he summarily kicked her out. She went to live with her daughter in Bridgeport. The daughter is a single mom with five kids who works as a waitress to make ends meet. Hartley sold the widow’s house to a traveling salesman.

Hartley totally destroyed the Stafford brothers who tried to get the old gas station started up again down at Chestnut and High Street. Hartley knew the soil was contaminated with oil and gasoline spilled by prior owners. Hartley knew the state would never allow the station to re-open. He took a down payment from the \$58,000 the brothers got from selling their mother’s home. He offered to help the boys further by taking a note for the balance and holding the mortgage, of course. When the boys couldn’t open the station because of state pollution controls, Hartley told them to keep fighting. He encouraged them to go to the capitol and complain to the attorney general. He urged them to go to the newspapers. Meanwhile, of course, the boys made payments of \$1,200/month until their money ran out completely. Hartley then took the station back and leased it to a young Italian couple as a neighborhood pizzeria. Dick and Bennett Stafford were ruined. They moved to Cleveland to work with their uncle in the wallpaper business, leaving behind the friends they grew up with and, of course, their lifelong dream of being Keepsville business owners pumping gas and doing minor automotive repairs.

Hartley Pigeon caused his share of grief in Keepsville. It seems he hurt everyone at one time or another. Nothing ever mattered but getting more money and more property. There was never enough. He wanted it all. It didn’t matter who got in his way. Whatever he wanted he took.

Now he was unable to trouble the townsfolk further.

Maude Jenkins offered an exultant toast at the Elks Club bar one Wednesday night soon after the remains were found, and the bartender gave out a free round of drinks to everyone present. A resounding cheer went round the room.

Up at the Pigeon mansion things were getting back to normal. Harriett, Pigeon’s wife of 20 years, wore black only to the funeral. After Hartley’s remains were securely in the ground and a substantial layer of dirt piled on top of his coffin, she turned to walk back to the station wagon with her son Amyl. She took the boy by his little hand and led him away from the grave with a decidedly peppier step. For a moment she looked like she was going to a party. Cheerier. Amyl tugged on her hand, urging her to hurry to the car, and the two of them set off in search of their new life ... without Hartley. As they reached the street, Harriett turned back for one last glimpse of the gravesite. A tiny smile twinkled at the corners of her lips. She never returned. No flowers were ever laid by the small headstone.

Hartley was never around much for Harriet or Amyl, anyway. He never took her out to eat. He never brought her flowers. He refused to go shopping with her, and when she'd return from town with a new dress and try it on for him, he'd merely murmur, "Yes, dear. Very nice," and go on reading the latest investment journals. He loved the Wall Street Journal more than his own family. He spent much more time with financial papers than he did with his son and wife.

Amyl had no model train layout in the basement. He had no tall tales to tell at school about weekend bear-hunting trips in the Ohio woods. There was no ham radio set in his room so he could talk with strangers halfway around the world. Amyl had his mom and the twins next door for playmates. That was it. Of course he was around other boys and girls at school, but they often taunted him because of his dad's notorious dealings. Now things would be different. Now things would be *much* different.

Sheryl Sorensen said it was a shame the way nobody cared about poor Hartley. She put on a pretty good show. She should. After all, she'd been secretly dating Hartley for years. He'd take her with him on business trips. They'd stay in the most expensive hotels and dine in the most pretentious restaurants. Neither she nor Hartley had any taste, however. They were out to be seen, to be noticed. Especially Sheryl. She read the menu from right to left. So did Hartley. To them more expensive was always better. Secretly Sheryl hated Hartley, but even more secretly she hated herself for being his mistress. He was no good. He wasn't even nice to her. But he had plenty of money, and he was able to give her, take her, buy her what she needed to fill the giant empty hole that once was her heart. Now that Hartley was dead, Sheryl tried vainly to save face by criticizing anyone and everyone who spoke against the man, but secretly she agreed with the others and wanted to speak out. But, of course, then people would know what sort of woman she really was ... as if they didn't already know.

Harriet had known about Sheryl and Hartley for years. Looking back she seemed to know from that very first night when Hartley returned early from a trip to Chicago. He was uneasy. He didn't kiss her the same. He didn't hold her in his arms like he used to. That was long ago when Harriet was pregnant with Amyl. As years passed, she watched her husband abuse the boy with careless indifference punctuated by occasional outbreaks of verbal hostility and violent physical attacks. Love became a forgotten dream. Hartley was her son's father. That she could never change. She would love the boy and do the best she could. Someday she knew, however, things would be different. Someday she knew she would be free.

When they finally found the remains of Hartley's body – actually it was Barkley the Winston's German shepherd next door who sniffed him out (a significant portion was in the distended tummy of the shepherd) – there was absolutely no evidence to help investigators prove who did the deed. No fingerprints were found. No shovel was ever discovered. No footprints in the mud next to the shed where the garden tools were kept. Nothing to give the slightest hint how Hartley ended up in so many pieces buried in two heavy black plastic garbage bags in his own backyard.

Why didn't the coroner just report the killing as "unsolved murder" instead of suicide? What if someone from the capitol should come to investigate? What if one of the townfolk spills the truth to the big city newspapers? Why take the risk of being a conspirator to murder?

“Hartley Pigeon’s father was my friend,” Doc Thomson the coroner explained. “Hartley senior was a fine man in this town. The only harm he ever did was to sire his worthless son,” the good doctor told others at Tom Hayes’ barber shop that day. “In a way, you might say, it’s no mistake to tag the death a suicide.”

“Yes,” Parker Boggs offered. “He did kill himself, didn’t he?”

“Yup!” Tom Hayes replied, and everyone nodded agreement.

No one ever again mentioned the German shepherd’s late night meal.

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