

DEATH IN SPRINGTIME

by Joshua Mertz

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BENJAMIN FRANKLIN KILLED BY LIGHTNING

It comes as sad news that on June the 10th, Inventor and Statesman Mr. Benjamin Franklin, late of Philadelphia, died horribly via an errant bolt of Lightning. Mr. Franklin flew a kite of his own making into the perilous storm that has lingered over our city in an attempt to capture Electricity, of which Lightning is composed, into a Leyden jar that he might study its frightening power.

According to the account of his son, William, a bolt of Lightning struck the kite and traveled down the string, causing his father to scream in pain, his hair to stand on end and St. Elmo's fire to leap from his head to the kite string. This was followed by another bolt of Lightning which struck Mr. Franklin directly and incinerated him on the spot. In the wake of this terrible incident the Governor has ordered Flags to to be lowered to half-mast and Church bells rung at Eventide.

Accordingly, the Governor has banned any experiments concerning Electricity, calling it a public danger. The Governments of the surrounding Colonies and all European nations are expected to emulate this action.

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LOS ANGELES, 1953

I had forgotten to wind the car. I always wind it when I get home, but I'd had a lot on my mind: my ex and I had argued in our lawyer's office for over two hours. She wanted to start a business — a nail salon — but banks won't give a woman a loan and I told her for the thousandth time that I was in no position to co-sign. Naturally I was in a fuddle all the way home and forgot to wind the aging Chevrolet. So there I was the next day with a dead mainspring and somewhere to be. An important somewhere. One that meant money. Cursing myself for my negligence, I went back inside to phone my client and tell them I would be late. It was a potential murder case, the kind of thing that always has decent money attached to it. But I had forgotten to wind the phone. Double cursing myself, I turned the phone over, popped the handle out, and wound the damn thing up. It was an old phone and the spring made a clicking sound as I turned

the handle. Soon I would have to call a springsmith to work on it. Either that or buy a new one. I ran the cost/benefit through my head as I cranked the spring, but the numbers kept adding up to zero. Pretty much like my bank account.

Setting the phone carefully back into its niche, I fished my notepad out of my pocket and called the number scrawled on the back. It rang five times before someone answered. The butler, I presumed. Cold and imperious.

“Goldfarb residence,” he intoned. “May I ask who’s calling?”

“Yeah. Lenny Griswald. I’m calling to tell you I’m running a little late.”

“How late?”

I glanced at my watch. It probably needed winding too. “Half an hour at least.”

“I will inform Mr. Goldfarb.” I could feel the phone’s earpiece icing over from his tone. Before I could say anything else he hung up. Rather than slamming the receiver down in frustration, I placed it gently back on the hook. It was, after all, an old phone. Before I left I made sure to wind the swamp cooler. Its spring was getting old too. I left it on low, hoping it would make the apartment somewhat livable by the time I got back.

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It was late spring in Los Angeles and the heat was hiding behind cotton candy clouds, waiting for its chance to cook the City of Fallen Angels to a golden brown. But it was still May and the sky between the clouds was that beautiful blue LA is famous for. I drove with the windows down, enjoying the spring air and listening to Jo Stafford on the record player singing about jambalaya as I headed toward Beverly Hills.

Irwin Goldfarb, president and owner of Goldfarb Spring and Clockworks, lived in the hills above Beverly Hills. The house was your standard mansion: a circular driveway looping past a perfect lawn, tall cypresses running along the property lines, and a faux Roman fountain with cherubs spouting water at an unsmiling naked lady. There was a wide area for parking and I pulled in beside a sporty red Jaguar belonging, I presumed, to the Goldfarb girl. She was known to be a real pistol, the kind red sports cars are made for. The sedate green Mercedes Benz next to it was undoubtedly her father’s.

I rang the doorbell – musical chimes, Brahms or something – and waited for quite awhile. Maybe Jeeves was out in the garden serving tea and had to clean up before he answered the door. Maybe they were trying to be intimidating, a power play to put me in my place. I don't intimidate easily. Eventually a tall, gangly, stone-faced butler answered the door and stared ice cubes at me. I handed him my card.

“Lenny Griswald to see Mr. Goldfarb.”

Mr. Stone Face took my card, glanced at it, then motioned me to enter. “Wait here,” he said and disappeared through a side door. Whoever designed the foyer had seen a lot of Hollywood movies: marble floor, expensive side tables, curved staircases on either side sweeping up to a wide balcony. I could almost hear the director yelling “action!”

Eventually the side door opened, the silent butler acting as a doorstop. I gathered that was my cue to enter and strolled into a very large library sitting room. One wall was covered with bookshelves from floor to ceiling, and it was a damn high ceiling. Two people sitting in overstuffed chairs watched me enter: a rotund older man and a younger woman wearing a red jacket, undoubtedly his daughter. I allowed myself an inner snicker of irony at this casually opulent family; they manufactured the springworks that helped run the world, yet I'd bet my bottom dollar that they had never cranked even a single mainspring.

The man stood and shook my hand. He had a firm grip. “So pleased to meet you, Mr. Griswald. I'm Irwin Goldfarb.”

“The pleasure is mine,” I replied, all warm and Beverly Hills formal. “I have one of your mainsprings in my Chevrolet.”

“And this is my daughter, Evelyn.” He gestured at the woman seated to his right: brunette, nicely put together, more handsome than gorgeous, tastefully expensive clothes and an air of assuredness. Evelyn Goldfarb probed me with cool eyes and a slight smile, but said nothing. I smiled back.

Goldfarb sat and so did I. He pursed his lips. “We have a situation,” he said, looking me in the eye. “There's been a murder.”

I put on my poker face and gazed at him silently for a long moment. I like to do this. It often rattles the client and gets them talking. Not Goldfarb. He looked back at me, cool as a cucumber. His daughter too.

“So who got killed?” I asked.

“Bill Nesmith. Three days ago, Friday evening. Smart man. Personable. Ran our materials acquisition department. Top flight metallurgist. I liked him a lot.” Goldfarb looked down, shaking his head. “The night watchman found him. Terrible.”

“I need the details.”

Evelyn spoke up. “The mainspring on his car blew out.”

“Rare, but it happens,” I said. “Boings the car off the road, if I remember correctly. Did he hit the side of the building or something?”

She paused, her stare cold and heavy. “The spring blew up through the floor and he was... eviscerated.”

I frowned. “You say the mainspring blew *upward*? That’s not how they’re supposed to work.”

She pursed her lips. “This time it did. The poor man was killed instantly.”

“This absolutely does not happen with our mainsprings,” Goldfarb interjected. “In the one in a million chance of failure, they’re designed to blow out through the bottom of the case. We’ve never had anything like this happen before.”

“And that’s why you think he was murdered.”

They both nodded solemnly.

“Lieutenant Webster recommended you,” Evelyn said. “Said you get things done. He referred to you as ‘smooth.’”

“Smooth as a Cadillac mainspring, as I like to say. I used to work with Hank in Homicide. I guess I’ll have to slip him a bottle of Johnny Walker for the recommendation. Did he give you a police report?”

“I insisted,” Goldfarb said. “It says the cause was ‘mechanical failure.’ How am I supposed to believe that?”

“Hank has always had a creative streak. I’ll need a copy of that report.”

“Raymond will get you a copy.” He nodded at the butler, who silently strode from the room. “Will there be anything else?”

“I’d like your permission to speak to people at the plant.”

“I’ll have a notarized letter in your mailbox by this afternoon.” He steeped his hands and returned my hard gaze. “The police have been helpful, but they seem to be, uh...”

“Incompetent?” I offered.

“I was going to say to say something less inflammatory, like ‘dismissive.’”

“Yeah. They gather a few facts and, if they don’t have anything like a big juicy set of fingerprints or a signed confession, they just push the case to the back of the line.” While we waited for Raymond the Butler to return with the report, I took out my notebook and jotted stuff down while Goldfarb talked about Bill Nesmith. Family man, two kids, tract house in Norwalk. He’d been with the company for going on five years. No drinking or wanton women. Reliable. An eight-to-five man.

Goldfarb leaned forward, hands clasped between his knees. “I’m a good judge of character, Mr. Griswald. Bill was a stellar man. Kind, generous. An honest man; I can tell that sort of thing. He had a solid marriage. I can tell that too.” He sat back in his chair, brow furrowed. “Bill was definitely murdered.”

At that moment Raymond leaned over my shoulder and handed me a copy of the police report, his face the usual slab of oak. “Thanks, old chap,” I grinned, putting on a slight British accent. His miniscule nod was more snub than acknowledgement.

I turned my attention back to Irwin Goldfarb and gestured with the police report. “You think this was actually a murder and you’re hiring me to find the murderer, yes?”

“Yes,” he replied.

I slid into my spiel. “Homicide’s a hundred and fifty a day plus twenty-five per diem. Five-day minimum starting today, which means that if I get your guy in three days, you still pay for five. Covers my ass.” I glanced at Evelyn. “Pardon the the French, ma’am.” No reaction. I continued. “I get half in advance and a bonus if I find your man.”

“If it *is* a man,” Evelyn put in.

“If it’s a man.” I winked at her, then turned back to Goldfarb. “If at any time you are dissatisfied with my work you can cancel. I’ll have my secretary type up a contract and send it over.” I didn’t have a secretary—I barely had myself—but I always threw that in to give my image a little meat.

Evelyn Goldfarb smiled a cool smile at me. “Your standard contract.”

“Most of my work is finding lost daughters and cheating spouses. Those contracts are cheaper. This is a homicide.”

Irwin Goldfarb and his daughter stood and I followed suit. He extracted a substantial wallet from his back pocket, counted out ten hundred dollar bills, and handed them to me.

I lifted my eyebrows in mock shock. “Keep the change?”

The ghost of a smile crossed Goldfarb’s lips. “Just find the killer.”