

THE BIG BODY

*A Flash Mystery Based on Actual Events*

By Johnny Worthen

Norris and Gettler walked together down the narrow stairs to the basement apartment of the tenement. A pale policeman met them at the door. He looked ill, the smell and stain on his uniform suggested that he had been inside already.

As the higher ranking medical examiner, Norris took the lead and squeezed past the officer into the cramped space beyond, Gettler a step behind.

It was a single room apartment; bed, stove, table, chairs. Gin bottles and coffee cups. Boxes of clothes and sundries, old boots and tools in a wooden tray. And blood. Blood everywhere. Bright red gore dripping from the table, pooling on the floor, staining a sheet someone had thrown over what Norris knew must be the corpse. A handful of bloody knives lay scattered beside a saw beside it.

“A neighbor saw this mess through that.” Gettler pointed to the narrow window high on the wall. It was a frosted window that looked out onto the street. If it had been clear, it would have given the occupant a mesmerizing view of passing people’s shoes and ankles.

Norris stepped over the body and examined the window sill. He saw chipped paint on it. “This window was painted shut,” he said. “Old paint by the looks of it. Hasn’t been opened in years.”

“Well, it was open yesterday when the nosey neighbor looked in and brought us here,” said Gettler.

“Yesterday?” Norris looked back at the blood, the bright red blood.

“Yesterday morning in fact. You’re getting here late.”

Norris touched a pool of blood and pill-rolled it between his thumb and forefinger, feeling for consistency. It was old blood, but still so red. He wiped his hand on a handkerchief. He picked up a gin bottle and smelled it. Strong, cheap, pungent, and gone.

Two half-full coffee cups sat on the small, scratched table. On the ancient gas-stove a chipped blue enameled coffee pot lay on its side. Brown residue around the burners showed where it’d been spilled and not been cleaned up.

“The constables set up a stake-out.” Gettler referred to a notebook. “Our perp, Frank Travia, returned in the afternoon and then went about sawing up the corpse, taking pieces and putting them in a bag. We nabbed him when he left the building literally red-handed. He’s on ice back at the station.”

“What’s his story?”

“He ain’t saying a word,” said Gettler. “Not that he could. He’s a foreigner. Barely speaks English at all. Neighbors say he’s a loner, works on the docks sometimes, otherwise a near shut-in. Real paranoid type.”

Norris felt a breeze blow through the window and draft out the door. The sentried policeman kept his back to the room.

“We have witnesses—police witnesses, that saw him cutting up the body. We also found a guy who says he saw Travia tossing a bag into the river. We’re looking for that bag. I suspect we’ll find the legs in that one. We caught him with the arms and head.”

Norris pulled the sheet off the body and looked. It wasn’t much of a body. It was a torso. The appendages had been removed but not the clothing. Bloodstained, worn and blood-splattered, a floral-patterned blue dress covered the woman’s private parts. She had been a large woman, close to three hundred pounds, Norris figured.

“The deceased is Tanya Plovtsky. She lived in an apartment upstairs. She’d visit Travia from time to time. Sometimes they’d be heard arguing, sometimes they’d be heard grunting, if you know what I mean. They were drinking buddies. Looks like their last little soiree turned out bad.”

Norris shifted around the body so the meager light from the tiny window could shine upon it. He knelt and examined it closely. He wasn’t imagining it. The skin was pink. Bright cherry pink.

Gettler put his notebook away, straightened his hat, and shoved his hands in his pockets. “You really didn’t need to come down here, Norris. This one is cut and dried. We got the guy. He’s for the gas chamber.”

Norris chuckled. “No problem at all.” He stood and flexed his shoulder trying to work out a kink he’d had all day. “I have a pretty good idea what happened here,” he said. “Your man didn’t kill her.”