

Turnabout

by Peggy Ehrhart

They'd always been "the girls," even though they were nearly seventy and everyone who'd called them that was dead now. Dorothy was the older, a heavy woman with a ponderous manner; her sister Jane was a few years younger, slim in a way that seemed vulnerable.

"Steak?" Dorothy raised her eyebrows as the waiter turned away. "Isn't that extravagant?"

"I'm paying for dinner," Jane said mildly.

No one looking at Jane would imagine that she made a habit of extravagance. Even the colorful scarf at her neck seemed chosen only out of an obliging wish to please any eye that might glance her way.

They ate in silence, except for an occasional pronouncement on Dorothy's part, followed by Jane's meek agreement. When the check arrived, Jane held it at arm's length near the candle's glow, the better to make out the waiter's dim scribbings.

"Why don't you wear your glasses?" Dorothy said. Jane didn't answer. She counted out some bills as Dorothy climbed to her feet, leaning on the table to pull herself erect.

"I'll bet you wish you'd taken my advice and worn a coat," Dorothy remarked as, buffeted by the chilly wind, they crossed the parking lot. Once they were settled in the car, she turned to her sister. "Did you call the moving company yet?" Jane shook her head no. "I've already had several calls about the apartment," Dorothy went on. "There's plenty of room for both of us at home, especially with mother gone. It's stupid to lose the rental income just because you want your own place."

Jane shrugged but said nothing. And she remained silent as Dorothy maneuvered the car through the quiet, tree-lined streets of the college town where their professor father had settled the family long ago. After about ten minutes, Dorothy pulled up in front of a woodframe house that had been

converted into apartments. It was a campus-town rental that he had shrewdly bought the year he got tenure.

“Why don’t you come up?” Jane said. “I’ll fix coffee.”

“I don’t mind,” Dorothy said, smiling slightly before her mouth settled back into the firm line, downturned at the corners, that was her customary expression. “By the way, have you been keeping track of what Alex is up to? He’s not all that honest and I hate to pay for work that’s not necessary.”

“Alex” was Alex Foster, the handyman whom the sisters had long employed.

“Don’t worry,” Jane said.

“I saw the posters in town advertising that play you’re in,” Dorothy panted as she followed Jane up the three flights of stairs that led to Jane’s attic apartment. “What on earth put that into your brain?”

“They needed somebody to play the grandmother. And it seemed like a chance to meet some new people.” Jane held the door open for Dorothy, who trudged across the small living room and lowered herself heavily into an armchair.

“What kind of people would you meet in a theater group?” Dorothy’s face puckered into a frown. But Jane didn’t notice the frown. She was furtively lifting the cuff of her jacket to consult her watch.

“I’d better get started on that coffee,” she said, vanishing into the kitchen.

She emerged in a few minutes, carrying not a coffee pot but a pistol, which she calmly aimed at her sister.

“What are you doing?” Dorothy said, looking more annoyed than frightened.

“I’m not giving up this apartment,” Jane said, her mild forehead creased in an unaccustomed frown. “Mother didn’t mind that I was living

here, and just because you're her executor, you don't have the right to make me move out."

"You're going to shoot me?" Dorothy said with a laugh. She heaved herself to her feet, lurched toward Jane, and grabbed for the pistol. But Jane held on, Dorothy panting and turning red as she grappled and tugged. The pistol twisted this way and that, pointing now at Dorothy, now at Jane. Finally, Dorothy repositioned her hands and gave one final jerk.

The pistol fired with a sudden crack, and Jane sagged to the floor. She twitched and flopped onto her side. An odd sound, like gargling, came from deep in her throat. For a second, Dorothy froze, her mouth twisted into a grimace. She threw the pistol down and scanned the room.

At that moment, there was a sharp knock at the door. Dorothy froze again, then stooped clumsily toward the pistol. The knock came again, more urgent.

Leaving the pistol behind, she tottered toward the kitchen. There, a door opened onto a small balcony and a narrow flight of stairs that served as a fire escape.

Dorothy jerked the door open and lunged outside, leaning heavily on the railing as she lowered herself onto the first step.

With a crack of splintering wood, the step caved in. She clutched the railing more tightly, but it too began to give way. For a second she teetered, trying frantically to retreat to the balcony. But before she could regain her balance, the railing sheered off completely. Still clinging to it, she toppled sideways and landed with a thump in the parking lot below.

Inside the apartment, Jane slowly sat up. She retrieved the pistol, which would have to be returned to the theater group's prop room, and tucked it into her handbag. Then she opened the door to admit Alex Foster. He greeted her with a smile and unplugged his Walkman from his ears.

"Exactly on time." Jane beckoned him in. "But I'm afraid we won't be able to go over the list of projects for tomorrow--at least not right away."

She led him through the kitchen to the fire-escape door. Together, they gazed down at the asphalt, where Dorothy lay in an awkward heap.

“You were right about the wood on that fire escape being rotten,” Jane said. “I mentioned it to Dorothy, but you know how she was. She always had to see things for herself.”

Peggy Ehrhart is the author of *Sweet Man Is Gone* (Five Star, July 2008), a mystery set in the world of blues and bar bands. Visit her online at www.PeggyEhrhart.com.