

# THE DEVIL AND THE DETECTIVE

John  
Goldbach







**THE DEVIL  
AND THE  
DETECTIVE**

**John Goldbach**

Coach House Books, Toronto

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first edition



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Published with the generous assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. Coach House Books also acknowledges the support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Book Publishing Tax Credit.

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Goldbach, John, 1978-

The devil and the detective / John Goldbach.

Also issued in electronic format.

ISBN 978-1-55245-269-1

I. Title.

PS8613.O432D49 2013

C813'.6

C2013-900218-9

*The Devil and the Detective* is available as an ebook:

ISBN 978 1 77056 335 3.

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‘Le grotesque des événements de tous les jours vous cache le vrai malheur des passions.’

– Antoine Barnave

‘By the next day the mastermind had completely solved the mystery – with the exception of locating the pearls and finding the thief.’

– from Buster Keaton’s *Sherlock Jr.*



# 1

**C**rime is law. Law is crime. That much is obvious. Interpret it however you like but it still holds.

Enough abstraction. Time for the case.

The phone call came in the late evening and the woman on the other end of the line was crying.

'Mr. James,' she said.

'Yes,' I said.

'I need your help,' she said. 'My husband. He's been murdered.'

'How did you get my number?'

'Martin Bouvert. My lawyer. He gave it to me.' She started weeping. 'Mr. James, please. I need your help. He's been stabbed in the chest. Gerald's been stabbed in the chest!'

'Calm down, ma'am. I don't even know your name.'

'Elaine,' she said. 'Elaine Andrews.'

Although it was late I was awake, or somewhat awake. I'd been reading a book on the couch and drinking whiskies. I was tired and groggy but still awake.



'Have you called the police, Mrs. Andrews? Where's your husband?'

'Yes ... I've called the police ... and my husband's in the living room, with a knife in his chest ... He's soaked in blood ... '

'When did you find him?'

'Just now, when I woke up. When I saw he wasn't in bed I called out to him and there wasn't an answer so I went to go look for him and when I found him he was downstairs in the living room, laid out on the couch, with a knife in his chest!'

'Where do you live?'

'Tower Street, 19 Tower Street. Please, come soon.'

'I will, Mrs. Andrews, but I'd like to ask you one more question ... '

'Yes ... '

'Why have you asked me to come so quickly? I mean, you haven't even talked to the police, or at least they haven't shown up at your home yet ... So why call me immediately?'

'I called the police first, and then my lawyer, and he told me to call a private detective. He gave me your number. He said you'd be discreet.'

'Are there things we need to be discreet about?'

'He just seemed to think it was a good idea. That's the doorbell,' she said. 'Probably the police. Come soon please ... '

After she hung up her phone I stood with mine still in my hand, listening to the dead line. I put the phone back on its mount and sat down on the couch and drank my drink. I wasn't sure why she was calling me, a private detective, before the police – although useless for anything other than exerting unnecessary force – even had a crack at the case. Something's fishy, I thought, without a doubt. Her lawyer was overly cautious, I thought,

sitting on the couch, whisky in hand, contemplating the case. The case of Mr. Gerald Andrews. Gerald Andrews, with his wife, Elaine Andrews, and a knife in his chest. Their names were so boring, so commonplace as to seem improbable. At the very least, I thought, groggy from the drink, Mr. Gerald Andrews's death, whether caused by murder or suicide or some freak accident, would bring considerable excitement to Mrs. Elaine Andrews's life. Elaine Andrews, who is this woman? I wondered, while sitting on the couch, shortly after she called me, shortly after the expiration of her husband, Gerald Andrews. They both had old people's names, but Elaine Andrews's voice sounded young, or at least not old. Under forty, I suspected, but I'm often wrong when it comes to guessing people's ages, especially over the telephone. There are a lot of things I get wrong when it comes to guesswork. I observe, and then I come to a conclusion, if there's a conclusion to come to, which more often than not there isn't. A lot remains unknown. Things change while you look at them. I better get dressed, I thought, sitting on the couch, so I finished my drink and took a shower.

The water was hot, as always in my building, and the bathroom filled with steam. I stood in the shower, under the hot water, trying to sober up a little, thinking of Elaine Andrews. There was something strange about her voice. She sounded young, and maybe didn't sound sad, though she was crying, crying considerably, and she sounded scared. Of course she sounded scared, I thought, she'd just found her husband with a knife protruding from his chest on their chesterfield. Usually I would've thought *couch*, I thought, and wasn't that the word Mrs. Andrews, Elaine Andrews, used when she called? Didn't she say *couch, I found my husband on the couch with a knife in his chest*? I'm sure that's what she said, I thought, standing in the shower, in the steam-filled

washroom, under extremely hot water. Her voice sounded strange. Young, quite young, under forty, but perhaps under thirty, though I wasn't sure. Perhaps her voice sounded young because she was crying. Crying tends to be something young people do, or at least hysterical crying – older people don't cry hysterically, I thought. Babies cry hysterically, of course, because they are babies and not yet resigned to this world. Teenage girls, too, cry hysterically, though older people don't, I thought, or at least that's what I'd observed over the years, the years of my life, which aren't many, when considering the history of human life, so perhaps I'm just inexperienced when it comes to the hysterical tears of old people. Old people, the ones with dementia, them I could see crying hysterically, I thought, standing in the hot water of the shower. Mrs. Andrews, however, didn't sound old; on the contrary, she sounded young – she sounded young and sexy. Why sexy? What led me to believe she was sexy? Perhaps she wasn't, though something in her voice sounded sexy. Desperation? Was desperation sexy? Usually not, I thought. When a man seems desperate, desperate to get laid, for instance, that's when it never happens, unless of course he's willing to pay, but that's different. To be fair, it's not that sexy when a woman is desperate, or overly desperate, either – but Mrs. Andrews's desperation was different. She was desperate for me to help her. She was desperate for my services. She sounded like perhaps I could help her, that perhaps I was the only one who could, and maybe that's what I found sexy. Maybe she was still in her nightgown, I thought, or maybe that's what made me think she was so sexy sounding, that is to say, the possibility that she was still in her nightgown when she called. Or a silk robe, with nothing on underneath. But the police were on their way. She'd dress for the police, I thought. But when she found the body, the dead body of her husband, after she'd called out to him from their bed in the night, she was most likely scantily

clad, perhaps even totally nude. This young woman was perhaps totally nude, I thought while showering, when she found her husband laid out on the couch with a knife protruding from his chest. Or at least she was probably totally nude before finding him, when she was alone in bed. I thought about this for a few more minutes while I finished my shower.

When my cab pulled up near Mrs. Elaine Andrews's house – formerly Mr. Gerald Andrews's house, too – there were two police cars in the driveway: one a black-and-white squad car, the other a dark blue unmarked car of the same make and model. Mrs. Elaine Andrews, Elaine Andrews, Elaine, was standing on the porch, crying, dressed, wearing a tan raincoat. It looked like she was giving a uniformed officer her statement. She didn't see me right away, which was for the best. It gave me an opportunity to appraise the situation, to get a good look at the scene and observe everything before the knowledge of my presence corrupted things as they were. Elaine sniffled into a handkerchief while looking down at her shoes. The uniformed officer took notes in his notepad – something I never do till afterward – while she stood there crying; it didn't look like she was saying much. Nevertheless, he kept scribbling away, taking notes *in situ*. Perhaps, I thought, he wasn't only recording what she was saying; perhaps he was writing about what he was thinking about what she was saying, or speculating on why she wasn't saying anything when she wasn't saying anything, and when she was talking perhaps he was writing that down, too: *Why isn't she talking?*, he wrote, perhaps, I thought. *Is it because of her tears? Mr. Gerald Andrews, he wrote, perhaps, though unlucky to have been stabbed to death, was lucky to have been with such a sexy woman while alive – and she was, that is to say, sexy.*

There seemed to be movement in the house. The other officers, a couple of plainclothesmen, were stomping all over the crime scene. They were inside, examining the body, examining the wounds, dusting for fingerprints, and so on, I figured. I don't like that stuff. That's one of the reasons I'm a private detective. There are many reasons, actually. That's definitely one, though. I hate all that bullshit. Regardless. No one had seen me and the uniformed officer didn't seem to be getting anywhere with Elaine, so I decided it was time for me to make my presence known.

'Good evening, Mrs. Andrews,' I said, then, 'Good evening, officer.'

'Mr. James,' she said. 'I'm glad you've made it.'

'Is this a friend of yours, ma'am?' asked the officer.

'He's a private detective I've asked for assistance.'

Just then a police detective, Detective Michael O'Meara, a man I'm familiar with, came out the front door and joined us on the front porch.

'Well, well,' he said. 'Rick, to what do we owe the pleasure?'

'Mrs. Andrews called me and asked for my services.'

'You don't have faith in the police, Mrs. Andrews?'

'With all due respect, Detective O'Meara, my husband's just been murdered and I'm anxious that we get to the bottom of this as soon as possible. And, yes,' she said, like a pro, 'I have faith in the police but realize that you are underfunded and understaffed and thought that you'd appreciate all the help you can get. Besides, Mr. James has a very good reputation. Can we really say the same about the police department, Detective O'Meara?'

He stood speechless, as did the uniformed officer, who didn't write anything in his notepad, and I blushed from the compliment. O'Meara's a pain in the ass, if the truth be known, and deserved to be put in his place.

'If we're through for now, officers,' Mrs. Andrews continued, 'I'd like to talk to Mr. James in private. So if you'll please excuse us. Thank you for your help.'

'We can't leave the scene yet, Mrs. Andrews,' said O'Meara.

'Yes, though I can – can't I?'

'I don't see why not. We have your cell number.'

'Thank you, officers. Mr. James,' she said, 'let's go someplace else.'

'Sure,' I said. 'But I don't have a car.'

'That's all right. I do.'

'Have we searched her car yet?' said O'Meara to the uniformed officer.

'Yessir.'

'Then we're done for now,' said Mrs. Andrews. She turned to me and said, 'Let's go.'

'First, if you don't mind, I'd like to inspect the body.'

'You're not going in there, Rick,' said O'Meara. 'My men are working right now.'

'Right, so you're not going to let me see the body.'

'That's right, Rick.'

'Let's just leave,' said Mrs. Andrews.

'Listen to the lady, Rick – beat it.'

'All right, O'Meara. This is low, though.'

'Bye, Rick.'

I sat shotgun beside Elaine Andrews as she drove her black BMW fast. The dashboard looked like it belonged in the cockpit of an airplane. The seats were black leather. They were comfortable, the car was comfortable. For a moment I wondered why I don't drive. Is it because my mind wanders? Is it because I know that if I drove that's how I'd die, behind the wheel of a car? This car,

though, made me rethink my driver's licence, or rather my lack thereof. The night was dark. It was a little after midnight. The bare tree branches, too, were darker than the night. They hung over the road and looked like they were going to sweep the windshield like the brushes at the carwash, I thought, while we drove fast along the dark road to a destination unknown. I hadn't asked where we were going. It didn't seem to matter, as she drove her BMW fast along the dark road with the black branches. Mrs. Andrews looked at me, then back at the road ahead. She was younger than forty, I thought, though it didn't matter. She might even be younger than thirty. What I knew for certain was that Gerald Andrews was older than her, significantly older – sixty, at least, I thought – and very wealthy, and I could tell that simply by their possessions, what little of them that I'd seen, and by the way they lived in general: the house, the cars, the furniture, the front porch. The voice on the phone, when she first called, though altered by tears, still didn't match the person sitting beside me, not hysterically crying but driving. The voice, the woman, they didn't match up, I thought, though I'd hardly heard her talk, except for over the phone. She broke the silence.

'Will it affect your solving the case, not having seen the body?'

'I don't know.'

'It was terrible,' she said.

'Where are we going?'

'For a drink. I need a drink.'

'Okay, but where?'

'A small bar, not far from here.'

The talking stopped.

The bar was small indeed, and long like a railway car, though it was wider. It was dark, too, except for a small yellow electric

candle with a red plastic shade on the tabletop and dim white Christmas lights surrounding the bar. I ordered a double Scotch, neat, and Elaine said, '*La même chose, s'il vous plaît,*' for the waitress was French. Elaine was truly beautiful, I thought, looking at Elaine. She looked like a film actress, one from the sixties, a brunette, though I couldn't remember her name. We drank for a few minutes without saying anything, though Elaine didn't seem uncomfortable. Elaine seemed okay – happy, most likely, to be out of her home, where her husband's dead body still lay, I thought, or at least it was still there when we left her house. The Scotch was good and it was strong, not watered down in the slightest. No one gave any indication of recognizing Elaine Andrews but I suspected she frequented the bar. It seemed like she found this dark bar, with its few patrons, a relaxing atmosphere, which I found it to be, too. The music was soft and hard to make out but sounded good nonetheless. The drinks smelled strong and warm. Despite the fact that I was on the job, I was having a good time. It'd been a while, as long as I could remember, since I'd sat across from a beautiful woman, one who looked like a foreign film star from the sixties (she was foreign, the film star I was thinking of), drinking fine single malt Scotch neat. The drinks smelled good and the music was nice and Elaine looked radiant and it felt good to have company, for I hadn't been on a case in a while, and I'd just been drinking, reading and working on my old case notes at home for weeks, maybe even months – for as long as I could remember. We were both hesitant to speak. Eventually, she spoke first.

She started by asking me questions, questions about detective work (how long had I been a detective? what makes someone choose that sort of career?, et cetera), questions about my personal life (was I married? did I live alone?, et cetera), and I answered her questions in an attempt to put her at ease, with



the hope that she'd start talking, too. I told her that I lived alone and that I'd never been married. I told her that I'd taken an interest in detective work from a young age – from a young age I'd thought about my future detective work, my cases, my chronicling, my solving, when there was something to be solved. I talked mostly, while she asked the questions, and we drank a few more drinks. Slowly, I started slipping in questions, too: 'When did you meet your husband?' I asked. 'Where did you meet him?' I asked. 'How long were you married?' I asked. 'What did he do for a living? That is to say, how did he come about his considerable wealth?' She answered the questions as they came – some curtly, some extensively – but she kept asking me questions, too. She said she'd met her now-dead husband, Gerald, six years prior to his death, in a resort town out west, where she'd been working as a ski instructor for about two years. She gave him a lesson, she said, and he invited her out for a drink, after the lesson, and she said sure, she said, and they had a drink at the chalet and she said she found him charming, witty and self-assured. I sat up straighter when she said *self-assured*, then felt embarrassed. She said that he wasn't aggressive, though she knew he wanted to sleep with her. She said, although she'd never dated a man his age, or even kissed a man his age, she felt curious about him, even though he was older. 'Younger guys get boring,' she said, and I simply nodded. 'They're selfish and often idiotic,' she said. 'They guard their time jealously, and then waste it on inanities.' Much of what she said hit a nerve, or at least made me tense up a little. She said that it was nice to have a drink with someone who had his life together – or seemed to – and she was referring to the time she'd first met Gerald, when she had had drinks with him at the ski chalet, after his ski lesson, not to having drinks with me, in the narrowish bar, after her husband's murder. If it was murder, which it of course most likely was.

They were married quickly, about four months after they met, in a small chapel in the mountains, outside the resort town where she'd worked. She'd quit her job as soon as they got serious, she said, which was about two weeks after the initial ski lesson. At that time, she said, six years ago, Gerald had just acquired a company that made plastic bottles from recycled materials, a company he sold, shortly after they were married, for a substantial profit. That's what Gerald did, she said: 'He bought companies that were in trouble, he invested in them, then sold them for profit.'

'In the six years you two were together, can you tell me some of the companies he owned?'

'Sure,' she said. 'But he wouldn't always own the companies outright. Often he'd invest with a group of investors, though sometimes, occasionally, if it was a small company, or a restaurant or something, he'd be the sole investor.'

'Would the investors he went in with always be the same group of people?'

'Often, but not always. There were a few, though, whom he worked with often.'

'I'll need a list of those names.'

'Sure,' she said.

She told me about the bottle plant, the flour mill, the sawmill, the restaurants, the ice cream cone factory, the tire factory and all the other different types of businesses that Gerald had invested in. He was very rich, she said, richer than he let on – and he didn't live frugally, I thought, from what I'd seen, even though he didn't live in a mansion. It was a nice house, though, a good size, not too big, and the location was excellent. They had two BMWs in the driveway, too, but Elaine said Gerald could've easily afforded a fleet of BMWs, and I imagined that, a fleet of BMWs ...

She said, 'Can I tell you something, Rick?' And I said, 'Sure,

but my name's not Rick.' I told her that the R. in the R. James Detective Agency ad stood for Robert, and Elaine said that she hadn't seen the ad, and that she'd called me Rick because Detective O'Meara did. 'O'Meara's an asshole,' I said. She agreed. I asked her what she'd wanted to tell me and she started telling me a story that Gerald, her now-dead husband, told her when they met.

They were in the lodge, sitting by a roaring fire, drinking expensive XO cognacs. It was snowing outside and getting darker but the snow kept things light. Gerald, after many drinks, while holding Elaine's hand, said to her, *Elaine, I'll tell you something my grandfather told me, shortly before he died of lung cancer. He said to me, she said he'd said, 'Gerald, take what you can get! Don't end life in the negative. You want to outdo your grandfather – and your father – because you want to be in the green, not the red, when all's said and done,'* she said he'd said. Gerald told Elaine that his grandfather had told him that morality's a lie, through and through, and simply an impediment to man's success. Gerald said that he thought his grandfather was harsh but that much of what he'd said was true. *'Weak people, people who stand to lose something, try and convince you that it's wrong to do whatever it is that might hurt them,'* she said he'd said. *'That's how you know you're a threat, if people tell you that what you do can't be done – that's when you know that you're getting somewhere!'* she said he'd said.

'Gerald's grandfather, his father, Gerald – they were warriors,' Elaine said, 'for better or for worse.'

'For example?' I said.

'Gerald read people well, for example, and would have nothing to do with them if and when they tried to use him or cheat him. He wouldn't directly confront them, necessarily, but he'd have his revenge. Success. He made a lot of money. Same with his father. Same with his grandfather. *De père en fils.* But Gerald

made more money than either of them.'

'Did you ever see Gerald behave aggressively toward anyone?'

'Many times,' she said.

'Tell me about one.'

Elaine said that an old business associate, whom she refused to name, had made a deal, buying a small company, telling the seller that Gerald was in on it – so, trading on Gerald's name, though he had no intention of telling Gerald. Anyway, she said, Gerald knew but played dumb, and then never let that guy in on a deal again, cut him off completely, and made sure others did, too, and basically ruined the man's life. Elaine dabbed at her eyes. The bar was almost empty but no one was pushing us to leave. We kept ordering drinks but Elaine said she didn't want to talk about Gerald anymore, or his business affairs, which weren't that interesting, she said, though he travelled a lot for work. I asked her about her childhood, where she grew up, though she answered only what she wanted to answer. Her maiden name was Jefferies. Elaine Jefferies. She grew up in a small rural town, surrounded by other small rural towns, which together made up quite a large county, a county she didn't get out of much, but while living in said county, she said she covered every square kilometre. She loved the open spaces. She said it was beautiful, especially when the clouds' large shadows drifted across the golden wheat fields. Her childhood was on a farm, though her father worked in town, too, as a pharmacist, and they kept livestock. Her teenage years were wild, she said, a lot of drinking, some drugs, a lot of sex. Her grades were always good, though, and she went on to university, for three years, and received a BA. She'd studied history and French. It was nice to get away from home, she said, but she didn't want to go on in school. And then she moved out west, and after two years, she met Gerald Andrews.

'And you know the rest,' she said.

'I don't know anything,' I said.

She was beautiful, without a doubt. I didn't want to ask questions about her husband or her former lovers. To some extent, I was jealous of her husband, even though he was dead. I told her we didn't need to talk about case-related stuff anymore. I told her that I realized she must be exhausted. She thanked me. We decided to have one more drink, then call it a night. She must've dropped me off at home. I woke up, on my couch, fully clothed.